Preface

On 21 July 1916, Private Arthur Thomas, a soldier with 1st Australian Division, went into the trenches near Pozières on the Somme. 'We have reached the pit in the theatre of this great drama . . .' he recorded in his diary, 'and we are feeling fascinated by the terrific ordeal ahead of us. The sky for miles in a semi-circle round us, is a blaze, and the colours of the rainbow from star shells illuminate the heavens, and the earth rocks and trembles from the sickening concussion, nothing less than the average imagination of hell.'[1] After journeying from Melbourne, via Egypt, Thomas had arrived on the Western Front, the decisive theatre of the First World War, where the armies of four great powers – Germany, France, the United Kingdom and, from 1917, the United States – fought in some of the bloodiest battles of the twentieth century, including the Somme, Verdun, Ypres and the Meuse–Argonne.

Thomas's reaction to what he saw, terrified yet awestruck, was typical of those who witnessed, at first hand, that cauldron of war: a bubbling, fermenting experiment in killing that changed the world. The Western Front would become synonymous with stalemate and mass slaughter, with indecisive, attritional struggles amid a tortured landscape of barbed wire and mud, while inspiring some of the most important works of literature of the twentieth century, including Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* and the haunting poetry of Wilfred Owen, killed in November 1918. In Britain at least, the legend of the Western Front has become deeply embedded within the social fabric. Of the 764,000 British Great War dead, almost 85 per cent were lost in France and Belgium.[2] This enormous sacrifice, far greater than any previous (or subsequent) conflict, has never been forgotten and has formed the main component of a story of futility and folly that continues to influence social attitudes towards the war to this day.

This book is intended to be the first of a three-volume history of the First World War. Subsequent volumes will concentrate on the Eastern Front (including Italy and the Balkans) and the wider war (the struggle in Africa and the Middle East), but I have chosen to begin in France and Belgium. Although each theatre of war clearly influenced and impacted upon the others, being linked together by the movement of fleets or the pull of railways, the flow of people or the transfer of money, I wanted to focus on each part of the war in turn. Each had its own set of heroes and villains, rogues and knaves. They came with their own environmental challenges, whether it was the mud of Flanders or the mountains of the Carpathians, the deserts of Arabia or the tropical grasslands of East Africa. And each front had its own internal dynamics that were unique enough to warrant their own full narrative, unbroken by diversions into secondary theatres or subsidiary activity. It is this distinction that makes this history different, allowing the full course of the war to emerge as it appeared to those who fought it. Together the three volumes will tell the story of the Great War; that shattering, cataclysmic moment of the twentieth century, when an old order collapsed and a new age was born, terrifying in its possibilities.

My aim throughout has been to write a narrative history of those four and a half years; to tell the story as closely as possible, without burdening the text with abstract theorizing or lengthy commentaries on differing interpretations (of which there are many). Instead, I have tried to bring readers closer in so that they might see the war, sit beside the main characters, and form their own judgement. It has been written primarily through the lens of those senior commanders who fought the war at what modern militaries refer to as the 'operational level'. Politics clearly intruded on this domain, and the struggle on the home front to manage resources and maintain domestic content was crucial to the war effort, but my main focus has been on those fighting generals who were faced with the reality of modern warfare in all its horror and complexity. How they tried to deal with it, how they succeeded or (more likely) failed to do so, is at the heart of this book.

For years these men have been characterized as 'donkeys' or

'butchers': unfeeling military aristocrats fighting the wrong kind of war, unable to adapt or change to the new realities unfolding on the battlefield. The truth was a much messier picture of trial and error, success and failure, with each promising development followed by an equally effective counter-measure. On the Western Front, the onset of trench warfare in the autumn of 1914 meant that the Allied powers of Britain and France had little choice but to attack. So they mounted a series of major offensives, each bigger than the last, to break up the trench network and return to mobile warfare in the hope that, once it had been restarted, Germany could be defeated and France liberated. Into each offensive they poured their manpower and deployed their technology in ever-increasing amounts, only to see their efforts thwarted and the blood cost rise ever higher. In response, Germany dug deeper trenches, widened and expanded her defensive networks into ever more labyrinthine fortifications, and counter-attacked whenever possible. It was only in 1918 that maturing weapon systems, new tactics and fresh manpower allowed the front to be broken, manoeuvre restored and a decision finally reached.

All the commanders struggled in this maelstrom, trying to cope with a war that had shattered their lives as much as any other. They were not, as is so often portrayed today, unapproachable men of iron, devoid of humanity or warmth. They were human beings with families – some of whom would be terribly damaged by the battles they themselves directed. Ferdinand Foch, one of the great heroes of the war, would lose his only son in the first weeks of fighting. Another French general, Noël de Castelnau, had three sons killed in action. Erich Ludendorff, who led the German armies to their shattering defeat in 1918, found out that his stepson had sustained fatal injuries in a plane crash several days after launching a vast new offensive. Generals were not even safe themselves. Contrary to the myth of the 'chateau general', hundreds of general officers would be killed or wounded during the war; shot by snipers, caught by shellfire, or succumbing to disease and ill-health brought on by the effects of ceaseless campaigning. Few European families were untouched by the Great War, and its commanders were no different.

The armies that these soldiers had to lead were unprecedented in

their size and possessed of weapon systems that were dazzling in their power and lethality. Although many of the most recognizable technologies of the First World War had their origins in earlier years (quick-firing field artillery had been pioneered in 1897; Hiram Maxim's machine-gun patented in 1883; and powered flight invented in 1903), it was the Western Front where they were refined and developed into brutally effective killing machines. They took their place alongside the wholly novel inventions of poison gas (first introduced in 1915) and tanks (debuted in September 1916), giving the war in the west a revolutionary quality that was not always true of other theatres of war, whether in Eastern Europe or the Middle East. It was in France, wrote Major-General Jonathan Bailey, former Director General, British Army Development and Doctrine (2002–5), where the 'modern style of warfare' was born. By 1917, battles were being fought in three dimensions with artillery and air power playing a central role in the planning and execution of operations. This 'indirect-fire revolution', which allowed for the targeting of enemy defences, command and control facilities, and reserves, in depth, transformed warfare into something entirely different to what it had been in 1914.[3]

It was crucial to be able to tell this story from the perspectives of all the main protagonists: Germany as well as France, Britain and the United States. Although I wanted to keep the text as neutral as possible, it soon became apparent that the efforts of the French Army had been consistently overlooked in much of the writing on this period. Apart from the legendary defence of Verdun in 1916, the role that France played in the war is still largely unfamiliar to English-language audiences. With the largest of the Allied armies (on the Western Front) from the first until the last days of the war, the French Army took on the lion's share of the fighting, often leading the way with many of the technological and tactical developments that created this 'modern style of warfare'. If this book can contribute to a wider recognition of France's sacrifices and the undoubted tenacity and inventiveness with which she fought, then a much more balanced and fair assessment of the respective contributions of the Allies to the victory of 1918 can be made.

Writing this interwoven narrative was dependent upon a wide range of sources, beginning with the official histories and collections of documents published after the war: the fifteen-volume *Der Weltkrieg* (compiled by the German Reichsarchiv between 1925 and 1944); Sir James Edmonds's *Military Operations. France and Belgium* (published in fourteen volumes between 1922 and 1947); and the multi-volume French official history, *Les Armées françaises dans la Grande guerre*. They have their flaws, but all contain an enormous amount of factual material that helps to provide some order and coherence to the almost non-stop fighting on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918. The appendices included with the French official history also contain thousands of pages of documents, letters and reports that can be mined by the historian. Although the United States never published an official history, a seventeen-volume collection of selected documents on the history of the American Expeditionary Force (*United States Army in the World War, 1917–1919*) ensured that the enormous contribution that the doughboys made towards ending the war has not been forgotten.

The Western Front has been the subject of a substantial and growing body of scholarship and I am indebted to the legions of historians who have studied crucial aspects of it. The works of Elizabeth Greenhalgh and Robert Doughty were constantly by my side as I navigated the experience of the French Army and its epic struggles at the Marne and Champagne, Verdun and the Aisne. I am indebted to Greenhalgh's detailed biography of Foch, her general account of the French Army at war and her scholarly investigations into the nature of the Allied coalition. Doughty's *Pyrrhic Victory. French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* also provided a thorough assessment of how France fought the war. For the opposing side, special mention should be made of Jonathan Boff's *Haig's Enemy. Crown Prince Rupprecht and Germany's War on the Western Front*; Holger Herwig's *The Marne, 1914*; and Robert Foley's *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun*, which I found to be essential in understanding German strategy and operations on the Western Front.

The staff of numerous archives and libraries, both in the United Kingdom and overseas, have never failed to produce what was

requested of them, and I would like to thank the National Archives of the UK; Imperial War Museum; British Library; Bodleian Library; Canadian War Museum; Library and Archives Canada; Australian War Memorial; Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg; Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania; and the Library of Congress, Washington DC. Particular gratitude must go to the team at the Hobson Library in the Joint Services Command & Staff College, Defence Academy of the UK. I am also grateful to Dr Tim Gale and Dr Jonathan Boff for reading through the manuscript; to Daniel Crewe and all at Viking; Dan Gerstle at Liveright; Peter Robinson; and my literary agent, Jon Wood. Finally, to my family, thank you for providing me with all the love and support that I could ask for. This book is dedicated to my son, William, who was born shortly after the manuscript was completed and whose growing presence in our lives added an extra incentive to finish on time.

NL
Cheltenham, England
April 2020

Prologue

'An act of hostility'

Shortly before seven o'clock on the evening of 2 August 1914, there was a flurry of activity at the Belgian Foreign Ministry in Brussels. Herr von Below-Saleske, the German Ambassador, handed an envelope to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Jean Davignon, marked 'Very Confidential'. Inside was a document that would shatter the peace of Europe: 'Reliable news has been received by the Imperial Government to the effect that French forces intend to march along the line of the Meuse by Givet and Namur. This information leaves no doubt as to the intention of France to march through Belgian territory against Germany . . . It is essential for the self-defence of Germany that she should anticipate any hostile attack.' Should Germany be forced 'for her own protection, to enter Belgian territory', this should not be considered 'an act of hostility'. On the contrary, if Belgium adopted an attitude of 'benevolent neutrality', then Germany would evacuate her territory as soon as peace was declared and would pay for any damages caused. If, however, Belgium attempted to obstruct German troops or deny them free passage, she would be left with no option but to consider her as an enemy. 'In this event, Germany can undertake no obligations towards Belgium, but the future regulation of the relations between the two states must be left to the decision of arms.'[1]

The dramatic events in Brussels were the result of an unparalleled crisis in European diplomacy that had been sparked off by a brutal assassination in Sarajevo five weeks earlier. On 28 June, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, had travelled to Sarajevo to inspect the empire's restless southern dominions, but was shot and killed by a deranged Bosnian gunman, Gavrilo Princip, who had links to a Serbian nationalist organization, the Narodna Odbrana ('National Defence'). The murder brought to a head the rivalry between Austria and Serbia that had been festering for

decades. An ultimatum had been delivered to Belgrade on 23 July, warning Serbia that unless she suppressed the 'subversive movement' that had carried out the assassination and engaged in various 'acts of terrorism' against Austria, then she would have no choice but to 'put an end to those intrigues, which constitute a standing menace to the peace of the Monarchy'. Serbia swiftly agreed to the majority of Austria's demands, only to baulk at the request for an inquiry to investigate the conspiracy, staffed by Austrian appointees, as being 'a violation of the Constitution and of the law of criminal procedure', which was enough for Austria to recall her Ambassador and begin preparations for war.[2]

The system of alliances that criss-crossed Europe now began to activate: the Central Powers of Austria–Hungary and Germany versus Serbia and her erstwhile protector, Russia, who, in turn, was allied to the Republic of France. As Austria readied herself to invade Serbia and settle the 'Balkan question' once and for all, her main ally, Germany, would march in support. For Germany, this meant following the 'Schlieffen Plan', the latest in a series of operational schemes that had been developed by Count Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the General Staff between 1891 and 1906. After examining Germany's situation at length, Schlieffen concluded that in the event of a European war, she must be prepared to concentrate almost her entire strength in the west, leaving just a handful of corps to stave off the expected invasion of East Prussia by the Russian Army. Fearing a two-front war, Schlieffen wanted to take advantage of a slow, lumbering Russian mobilization to defeat France within a matter of weeks. This would take the form of a wide sweep through Belgium and the Low Countries, outflanking the heavily defended Franco-German border and bringing about a decisive battle somewhere east of Paris. Once this had been completed, Germany could deal with Russia as she saw fit.

Albert I, King of the Belgians, knew what was at stake. Thirty-nine years old, with piercing blue eyes and a ruddy complexion, he had assumed the throne in December 1909 under the shadow of impending war. He assembled his Cabinet ministers at 9.30 p.m., just as the sun was going down, the buildings glowing pink in the twilight. He reminded

them that the meeting 'was called together less with the object of deciding what reply should be given' than of 'impressing the responsible leaders of the nation with the gravity of the situation which would be brought about'. The war, he prophesied, would bring about 'a character of violence undreamed of by them' and be a 'terrible trial' for the country. With that they drafted their response, while appealing to Great Britain and France for help in resisting the invasion. The German note was a 'deep and painful surprise' and 'a flagrant violation of the law of nations' that could not possibly be justified. Belgium was, therefore, 'firmly resolved to repel with all means in its power every attempt against its rights'. There would be no 'free passage' for the German Army.[3]

War was now inevitable. Germany declared war on France on the evening of 3 August; France responded within hours. With Europe's cities becoming more restive – a combustible mix of cheering, patriotic crowds and sullen bystanders – Europe's leaders scrambled to justify their positions. In Berlin, the Imperial Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, addressed the Reichstag at three o'clock on the afternoon of 4 August and confirmed that Germany's troops had already occupied Luxembourg and 'perhaps' had entered Belgian territory. 'Gentlemen, this is contrary to international law', he admitted, rather candidly. 'Although the French Government declared in Brussels that it would respect Belgium's neutrality as long as the opponent did so, . . . we knew that France was ready for the advance.' Bethmann Hollweg insisted that they had to move to forestall a French offensive on the lower Rhine. 'Thus we were forced to ignore the justified protests of the Governments of Luxembourg and Belgium. The wrong – I speak openly – the wrong that we are thus committing we will try to make right again as soon as our military goal is reached.'[4]

At the French Parliament, the Prime Minister, René Viviani, read out an address by the President, Raymond Poincaré: 'France has just been the object of a violent and premeditated attack, which is an insolent defiance of the law of nations.' Expressing confidence in her army and navy, Poincaré insisted that France had 'Right on her side' in the coming struggle and would be 'heroically defended by all her

sons; nothing will break their sacred union before the enemy; to-day they are joined together as brothers in a common indignation against the aggressor, and in a common patriotic faith'. France would march again, defending her soil while supporting the efforts of the Russian Army on what would soon become the Eastern Front. Poincaré then reminded his listeners that France would also be aided by the 'loyal friendship of England' – which alongside the other major powers of Europe had been a co-signatory to the 1839 Treaty of London that guaranteed the neutrality and independence of Belgium.[5]

The war may have originated in the Balkans, but a sense of unfinished business hung over the main participants in the west. Germany would use the war as an opportunity to knock out a dangerous and implacable rival, while France was committed to avenging the humiliation of 1870, when Prussian forces had defeated the armies of Napoleon III's Second Empire in a series of bloody set-piece battles. When the German Empire was proclaimed in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles in January 1871, uniting the German states under Prussian leadership, it marked a sea change in the European balance of power. France, now the Third Republic, lost the eastern province of Alsace and most of Lorraine and was forced to pay a vast indemnity of 5 billion francs – a sum reflective of her new, reduced status as the second power on the Continent. But France never forgot her 'lost provinces', and the call to recover them was a persistent refrain in the years leading up to 1914.

A strange restlessness was upon everyone as they waited for what would happen next; a feeling only heightened by a smothering summer heat that lay like a blanket over Europe. At the American Legation in Brussels, Brand Whitlock, the US Ambassador, met Herr von Strum, the Secretary of the German Legation, on the afternoon that war was declared. Strum was 'nervous, agitated, and unstrung', with dark rings around his eyes that revealed how little he had slept the past week. 'Tears were continually welling into his eyes, and suddenly he covered his face with his hands, leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, an attitude of despair.' And then finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he spoke:

'"Oh, these poor, stupid Belgians!" he said. "Why don't they get out of the way! Why don't they get out of the way!"'

Whitlock, standing in front of him, said nothing. With that, Strum stood up and wiped away his tears, and they parted with a handshake. The German delegation left for Berlin that evening.[6]

PART I

‘War is not like manoeuvres’

Liège to the Second Battle of Champagne (August 1914–November 1915)

1. 'A vision of Attila'

The task of achieving German victory was the responsibility of Schlieffen's successor, the 66-year-old Colonel-General Helmuth Johannes Ludwig von Moltke. Moltke's name was an illustrious one (he was known as 'the younger', to distinguish him from his legendary uncle, who had led Prussia's armies to victory in 1866 and 1870), but his appointment had been received with little cheer, many critics putting it down to his close friendship with Kaiser Wilhelm II (whom he had served as aide-de-camp for many years). Too sensitive for a Prussian officer, there was always a strange, languid softness about Moltke. Balding, with a pronounced paunch, jowls hanging over the stiff collar of his uniform, he was a highly cultured individual who was an uneasy fit within the 'blood and iron' traditions of the Great German General Staff. A lover of music and fine art, spirituality and esoteric wisdom, Moltke lacked those essential qualities that truly great military commanders possess: robustness and an ability to think twice as fast as any opponent. His outlook was also darkened by a bleak pessimism about Germany's future – a belief that unless she fought now she would be crushed by Russia and France in a future war. 'We are ready, and the sooner it comes, the better for us', he wrote on 1 June 1914 – barely four weeks before the assassination of the archduke.[1]

If the German Army was to advance rapidly, then it would need to take the chain of frontier forts that lay along the eastern edge of Belgium. Whereas Schlieffen had planned to invade Holland as well as Belgium, giving his troops ample room to deploy, Moltke insisted that Holland should remain neutral as a kind of 'windpipe' through which Germany could access the outside world.[2] Because of this, the German right wing had to push through a narrow corridor around the city of Liège. Situated in a wooded valley along the River Meuse, it was at the centre of a complex web of roads and interlocking railways that served this part of Europe. As the gateway to the Belgian plain, Liège's

strategic significance had long been recognized and a series of twelve forts had been constructed between 1888 and 1891 that ringed the city like the hours on a clock face. Each fort was an equilateral triangle, made of concrete, and defended by a wide ditch strung with barbed wire. Inside the fort were machine-guns and armoured cupolas, which housed howitzers that constituted their primary armament.

For King Albert and the Belgian people the situation seemed irretrievably gloomy. The country was in no shape to resist the oncoming invasion. Comprising fewer than 120,000 regulars in just five divisions, the Belgian Army was ill-trained, short of artillery, lacking in modern communications equipment, and all too reliant upon fortress troops of between thirty and thirty-five years of age that were, as one observer put it, 'of absolutely no military value'.[3] Together they could not hope to win any large-scale action against the might of the German forces then massing behind the border, but they could delay them, interfere with their plans and prove their mettle. Given the political necessity of neutrality, as late as 3 August Belgian forces had been scattered across the country to cover a variety of multiple invasion routes by the British, French or Germans (to be deployed against whoever should breach their neutrality first). With the expiration of the German note, Belgian troops were swiftly concentrated, with 3rd Division heading to Liège where it would soon encounter the six reinforced brigades of General Otto von Emmich's X Corps.

Emmich's task was simple. He had to seize the city in a lightning *coup de main*, allowing the German right wing to begin its long march towards Paris. His men reached the outskirts of Liège on the evening of 4 August and ran into Belgian troops barring their way; the defenders taking cover behind quickly improvised barricades, thickly forested with rifles. A proclamation was hastily read out, signed by Emmich, which repeated the German Government's claim that France had already entered Belgian territory. This was a lie – at that moment French troops had been ordered not to go within ten kilometres of the frontier – but it was an essential one if Germany was to try to justify her plan of campaign. Emmich demanded that German troops be allowed to pass. If they were given free passage, he promised that the Belgian people would be spared the 'horrors of war'.[4]

German planners had assumed that there would be no more than 6,000 defenders in the city, but instead they found a far more numerous and stubborn opponent than they had anticipated, which would cause the first and most crucial delay to Schlieffen's iron timetable.[5] The commander of the garrison at Liège was Lieutenant-General Gérard Leman, a 63-year-old former instructor at the Belgian War College. Stern-faced with deep-set eyes, and possessing an unbreakable sense of duty, Leman commanded about 30,000 troops and had been told by King Albert to 'hold to the end'. He ordered his men to dig in, throwing up lines of defences to link the forts together and hurrying up supplies and ammunition to withstand a siege. But there was little time. On the following morning, 5 August, a bearer waving a flag of truce took another message to Leman (who had set up his headquarters in the old citadel in the city centre) and, once again, requested that German troops be allowed to pass. But the Belgian dismissed it with a curt wave of his hand. He was not interested in parleying with the invader.[6]

German attacks were immediately ordered against the eastern ring of forts – Fort d'Évegnée, Fort de Fléron and Fort de Barchon – preceded by heavy artillery fire, but the first waves collapsed in a welter of blood and confusion. The attackers came on in thick columns, marching as if in peacetime, right under the muzzles of Belgian riflemen until they were cut down in droves. Although a party of German troops was able to infiltrate the city centre, led by an intrepid staff officer, Erich Ludendorff,[7] the fortresses held out for another ten days. The last telephone communication between Belgian HQ and the garrison was on the morning of 6 August, when a harassed telephone operator whispered, 'The Germans are here' before the line went dead.[8] The forts had not been designed for 360-degree defensive operations and were weaker on their interior sides. They were also no match for the super-heavy guns that Germany and Austria–Hungary had been building and which were being rushed up to the front. On 11 August, the components of four massive weapons had arrived in Belgium and were being readied for deployment. Two 420 mm M-Gerät howitzers (nicknamed 'Big Berthas'), capable of hurling a 2,000 lb shell up to nine kilometres, and two 305 mm Škoda siege

mortars were brought within range of the forts and on the following morning, 12 August, they opened fire.[9]

The sound of these enormous weapons, with their high-angle fire plunging down upon their targets, was akin to an express train, an ominous rumbling, turning to a demented scream as it got closer, before ending with a shattering explosive crack. One by one the forts fell; their cupolas caving in with clouds of concrete and brick dust, snuffing out hundreds of lives in the choking darkness. At Fort de Loncin, Leman and his dwindling band of men held out until 15 August. Conditions inside the fort were almost indescribable. The cacophony of sounds – guns of all calibres, the thud of metal on concrete and brick, and the shuddering of high-explosive shells – went on hour after hour. Inside the crumbling walls, along dimly lit corridors stinking of dust and cordite, Leman did what he could. By then most of the other forts had either surrendered or been destroyed, leaving Leman's detachment desperately trying to keep resistance alive. The general's legs had been crushed by falling masonry, but he remained at his post, driven around on a makeshift automobile. A further bombardment by the much-feared 'Big Berthas' brought the matter to a swift conclusion, and by the morning of 16 August tattered white flags were seen waving from the last two emplacements still in Belgian hands.

As for General Leman, he was extremely fortunate to survive the bombardment. Most of his garrison had been consumed in a vast explosion that ripped through the walls of the fort after a shell had struck its magazine. 'It is impossible to describe the appalling results of that explosion', recorded a Belgian survivor; 'the entire middle-part of the fort collapsed in a stupendous cloud of flames, smoke and dust.'[10] When Leman regained consciousness, he was greeted by Emmich, who offered a few words on the gallantry of his men. Leman smiled and thanked the general, before muttering an old joke, 'War is not like manoeuvres.' Then, remembering something, he began to unbuckle his sword, which lay twisted by his side, to offer it to his conqueror. But Emmich refused to take it. He leant in close to the general and whispered in his ear:

'To have crossed swords with you has been an honour.'[11]

It might have taken slightly longer than anticipated, but the German war plan could now be unleashed. The road was open to the heart of Belgium.

The French Chief of the General Staff (who was appointed Commander-in-Chief on the outbreak of war) was Joseph Jacques Césaire Joffre, a 62-year-old engineer who had spent much of his career out in France's colonial empire. Joffre was a heavy-set and paunchy figure, with thick, wavy grey hair, broad-brimmed eyebrows and a *grande moustache*. A contemporary described him as 'more massive than elegant', adding that 'His short neck and broad shoulders give to his personality an appearance of greater strength than distinction, but his *bonhomie* and kindliness of manner add a real charm, an irresistible fascination, to the face of a clever, a strong, a kind, and, above all, an essentially manly man.'[12] He may not have been the most spectacular or flamboyant officer that the French Army ever produced, but in France's fraught political landscape, riven with class and anti-clerical prejudice, this pragmatic, strong-willed man seemed to fit. He was not political or religious enough to arouse suspicion, was competent, and had the gift of knowing when to speak and when to remain silent. He was appointed Chief of the General Staff in 1911.

The French war plan had been issued in February 1914 and was the product of multiple authors, multiple compromises and enduring strategic difficulties. France, with a smaller population than Germany, and a markedly inferior economic strength, had to find a way to win, or at least to do enough damage to the Kaiser's armies until her ally, Tsarist Russia, came to the rescue. The result was Plan XVII, the latest in a series of deployment schemes that provided for the concentration of France's armies along her eastern frontier. France deployed 1.3 million men in five armies: three along the Franco-German border, stretching all the way from Belfort to Longwy, and then another two to the northwest. Once they were in position, Joffre would 'develop' attacks in two directions: on the right between the Vosges and the Moselle below Toul (to recover the 'lost provinces' of Alsace and Lorraine); and the second, to the north of the line Verdun–Metz. These attacks were intended to seize the initiative,

unbalance whatever German forces were nearby, and – particularly in the case of Alsace–Lorraine – 'assist the removal of that part of the population . . . that has remained faithful to the cause of France'.[13]

The left flank would be crucial. Holding the northernmost part of the line was General Charles Louis Lanrezac's Fifth Army, which lay between Hirson and Sedan along the wooded Franco-Belgian border. Lanrezac had once been darling of the French Army, a protégé of Joffre's who had lectured at the École Militaire and gained a reputation as a bright and original thinker. There his martial bearing and sparkling wit were perfectly at home; but now, in the white heat of command, he began to lose his nerve. After being alarmed by a stream of urgent intelligence reports from Belgium, he visited the French High Command – GQG (*Grand Quartier Général*) – on 14 August and told Joffre that he suspected the Germans were making a major flanking movement in the north. If this was the case, then he would need to redeploy immediately, shifting to the northwest, or risk leaving his flank wide open. After returning to his headquarters, Lanrezac was handed further evidence that the German right wing could comprise as many as eight corps and four cavalry divisions. 'This information,' he wrote to Joffre, 'which came to my knowledge after our interview, seems to indicate the threat of an enveloping movement carried out by very considerable forces on both banks of the Meuse.'[14]

The possibility of an attack through Belgium was hardly unsuspected by the French military, but the full scale of what the Germans were attempting was never truly grasped, either by Joffre or by his closest advisers. Germany would *not* violate Belgian neutrality. Schlieffen's plan was *probably no more* than elaborate disinformation to mask a thrust into France, and there was *simply no way* that Germany would have enough troops to deploy in strength north of the Meuse. But so what? Even if Germany wheeled right and placed the bulk of her combat power in Belgium, then it must surely leave her weak in other sectors? Joffre fired a short telegram back to Lanrezac dismissing his concerns: 'I only see advantages to the movement you are talking about. But the threat is remote and its certainty is far from absolute.'[15] Joffre's focus was elsewhere. He had issued 'General Instructions No. 1' on 8 August, outlining his intention to 'seek battle, with all his

forces united'. He was planning two quick thrusts across the border to gain the initiative, give France an early victory, and coincide with a planned Russian offensive on the Eastern Front. First Army, on the extreme right, would push towards Sarrebourg, while on its left Second Army would head for Sarrebruck (Saarbrücken). Lanrezac would have to wait.[16]

The march began on 14 August. For five days two French armies advanced eastwards, cautiously at first, watching as the German rearguard melted away in front of them, leaving abandoned villages in flames, and using their artillery to harass and slow down the French columns. It was here that the French first came up against the impressive firepower that German corps could deploy, with 77 mm, 105 mm and 150 mm guns outranging French artillery and keeping the attackers at arm's length. By as early as the second day, the commander of Second Army, General Noël Édouard Curières de Castelnau, confirmed that his army was engaged in a 'battle of attrition' that required 'certain procedures similar to those in siege warfare'. Each position had to be conquered successively, with the 'widest use' of trenches, fortifications and shelters, although he was at pains to stress that this did not mean 'that we abandon the idea of an offensive'.[17] Yet even a few days' campaigning was enough to reveal the dangers of France's offensive war plan. 'The troops, infantry and artillery, have been sorely tested', reported Second Army on 15 August. 'Our artillery is held at a distance by the long-range artillery of our enemy; it cannot get close enough for counter-battery fire. Our infantry has attacked with élan, but they have been halted primarily by enemy artillery fire and by unseen enemy infantry hidden in trenches.'[18]

The German commander in this sector was Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, one of Germany's most senior royal generals. He commanded Sixth Army and had been instructed to draw the enemy into a 'net' before mounting flanking attacks that would devastate the French advance. This was in line with Germany's plan to concentrate her strength on her right wing, doing just enough to keep the French engaged until the main blow could be struck from the north. This was well understood, but the further the French pushed, the more anxious Rupprecht and his staff became, particularly when they

began to suspect that they had the edge over their opponents. They were also concerned lest the war end before Bavarian troops had a chance to do more than just retreat. Rupprecht asked for permission to counter-attack, and after a series of heated discussions with Moltke he was finally given permission to do whatever he thought right, having been warned that he 'must bear the responsibility' for what happened.[19] His troops went forward on 20 August, stunning the French with the ferocity and vigour of their assault. The result was a rout. By 23 August, First and Second Armies were retiring, in bedraggled columns, back to their start line, having gained no ground, but with a lasting respect for the power of their opponents.

As the French war plan began to fragment, Joffre kept up a furious round of meetings. On Sunday, 16 August, he met Field Marshal Sir John French, the British Commander-in-Chief. French was sixty-one years old. A decorated cavalryman whose epic ride to relieve Ladysmith during the South African War had made him a hero throughout the empire, he was physically brave, but small in stature and possessed of a nervous, irritable temperament. When he was angry – which occurred all too often – his cheeks would redden, his eyes would narrow, before his fist would come banging down on the table, scattering attendants in its wake. The French President, Raymond Poincaré, who met Sir John in Paris, was unimpressed with the English commander. 'He is a small man, quiet in manner, with nothing particularly military in his appearance, except that he looks you straight in the face; his cheeks and chin are closely shaved, his moustache is grey and rather drooping.' He 'speaks our tongue with great difficulty'.[20]

Joffre did not share Poincaré's opinion of Sir John – having a more charitable assessment of his strengths as a commander – but it was a worrying example of how hard the British commander would have to work if he was going to operate closely with Britain's allies. At that moment, an expeditionary force of two infantry corps (each comprising two divisions) and a large cavalry division – about 100,000 men in total – was being ferried across the English Channel to take its place on the French left around the fortress city of Maubeuge. Joffre hoped to launch a major offensive on 22 August, but Sir John insisted that he could not deploy any earlier than 24 August. Joffre explained

his campaign plan and urged Sir John to get his men into the line as quickly as possible. His knowledge of German deployments in Belgium was, he admitted, 'so lacking in precision that I could not give any exact form to my intentions'. He did, however, want to mount a 'general action' somewhere north of the Sambre, where the British would be able to attack 'the outer flanks of the German forces, taking them if possible in reverse'. Sir John promised to do what he could.[21]

Notwithstanding the frustration at GQG and in Paris at the seemingly unhurried pace of British mobilization, the despatch of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to the Continent had been a swift and smooth undertaking. On 6 August, two days after Britain declared war on Germany, a Council of War had been held at 10 Downing Street chaired by the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith. It was decided to send the expeditionary force to France, although the newly appointed Secretary of State for War, Field Marshal Earl Kitchener of Khartoum ('K of K'), only agreed that four divisions (plus a cavalry division) would sail – leaving two remaining at home to protect against invasion.[22] Kitchener, a rigid, authoritarian figure infamous for his centralizing tendencies, suspected that a swift and decisive victory, by either side, was unlikely, so he had no desire to throw everything he had into the ring at the present moment, despite urgent appeals to do so from Paris. This caution was reflected in the instructions he gave to Sir John. While 'every effort must be made to coincide most sympathetically with the plans and wishes of our Ally', Kitchener made it clear that 'the numerical strength of the British Force and its contingent reinforcement' was to be 'strictly limited' and the 'greatest care' must be exercised over it.[23]

This delicate balancing act, of supporting his ally, but only up to a point, would constantly play on Sir John's mind as he readied his divisions to take their place in the line. He met Lanrezac on 17 August and found him to be an encouraging and impressive figure. 'Lanrezac appears a very capable soldier and struck me very much by his sense and decisiveness of character', French noted in his diary. Lanrezac also appeared uncharacteristically confident, professing that they were now on the brink of a great victory so close to the site of Waterloo! It was only later on, after they parted, that their relationship began to

crumble. Under the pressure of the great retreat, each man accused the other of being unreliable and leaving them unsupported. Lanrezac was unimpressed by the sight of French stumbling over his language, while Sir John looked down upon Lanrezac's 'superior education' as a former War College professor, a position, he noted sourly, which had 'given him little idea of how to conduct war'. From this moment onwards, Anglo-French cooperation on the most crucial sector of the front would be dogged by mistrust and misunderstanding.[24]

The speed with which Joffre launched offensives may have surprised the German High Command, but any concerns had evaporated by the time the right wing was ready to begin its grand enveloping movement. Germany's armies had now concentrated. For the past two weeks, hundreds of trains had been rattling westwards every day, crossing over the Rhine and disgorging crowds of bewildered, excited and nervous young soldiers, newly clad in their grey woollen tunics and stiff leather boots. They were swiftly organized into companies and battalions, regiments and brigades, divisions and corps, to make up what was, by common consent, the most formidable military organization in the world. By 17 August seven vast armies had been formed, lined up from Strasbourg all the way to Düsseldorf, comprising thirty-four corps (including eleven reserve corps), ten cavalry divisions and seventeen reserve (*Landwehr*) brigades, with a total strength of 1.6 million men. Just 250,000 were left in East Prussia to guard against the imminent Russian invasion.[25]

Hopes were high that the decisive action of the war was now just weeks away. His spirits waxing as the moment drew nearer, Moltke wrote to his most senior officer in the field, General Karl von Bülow, the 68-year-old commander of Second Army. With his distinctive head of closely cropped white hair, Bülow was one of the most decorated soldiers in the empire, with Prussia's highest award, the Order of the Black Eagle, pinned on his chest. 'I am writing you just a few words to express my satisfaction that you will be the leader by whose hand the first major decisions will be made. As soon as our armies have completed their deployment, we can form up. The order for this will be decreed by His Majesty. It was thanks to God that the

adventurous coup on Liège succeeded under the leadership of General Emmich. He carried it off well. The unanimity of our people is impressive . . . Now there is only one goal, victory!'[26]

Apart from Moltke, Bülow's most important relationship would be with General Alexander von Kluck, the commander of First Army, the largest (and arguably most important) of the German armies in 1914 – a 250,000-man battering ram that would deploy on the right wing and lead the attack. A fierce individual whose face would sometimes freeze into a terrible-looking scowl, Kluck had a habit of carrying numerous personal weapons, a sidearm or even a rifle, that he would wave in front of him, giving off an air of barely controlled aggression. 'No one seemed to dare approach him', wrote a terrified French civilian, Monsieur Fabre, whose house was requisitioned by the general during the campaign. 'He had a truly terrible air. I had a vision of Attila.'[27] On 10 August, Kluck issued his first orders, instructing his men to hold themselves in readiness to go forward. When the word came, they would cross the Meuse and then push past Liège towards Brussels. The concentration of so many troops in such a congested area required the tightest of discipline and the best of organization, so Kluck warned his officers: 'Great demands will be made on the marching power of the troops.'[28]

German military headquarters – including the Supreme Army Command, *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL) – departed Potsdam for Koblenz on the morning of 16 August, with the Kaiser and his entourage, including Moltke, seated in comfortable carriages as the German countryside slipped by. Everything passed off smoothly, apart from a momentary delay when Moltke's wife, Eliza, boarded the royal train with her maid after asking to accompany her husband. Such an unusual arrangement – Eliza and her maid were the only women on the train – caused consternation among the ranks of the General Staff and increased the mutterings against Moltke, who, it was said, had suffered a period of ill-health, perhaps even a breakdown. The truth was that he was already ailing and had clashed with the Kaiser on 1 August over whether the German war plan could be activated against Russia and *not* France. When Moltke told him that this was impossible, Wilhelm shot back: 'Your uncle would have given me a different answer!'[29]

It was not until 18 August – a day after OHL opened at Koblenz – that First, Second and Third Armies of the German right wing were able to go forward. In Kluck's First Army, four full-strength corps, followed by another three reserve corps, skirted past Liège and, in the blazing sunshine, marched west. To the south, Bülow's Second Army did likewise, heading for the fortified city of Namur, which was reached on 20 August and, like Liège, would require the attention of the super-heavy guns. Baron Max von Hausen's Third Army moved, in echelon, to the south through the Ardennes aiming for the Meuse between Givet and Namur. The sight of three German armies on the move was breathtaking. Endless grey columns of infantry, raising clouds of thick brown dust, followed by an enormous baggage train, crept across the landscape to the strange and unnerving sound of thousands of boots crunching over the roads and the continuous jangling and banging of rifles and bayonets, mess tins and helmets. 'Looking ahead and back the column stretched out of sight in both directions like some gigantic snake threading its way through the landscape', remembered one German soldier.[30]

The march made pressing demands on the men; endless miles under a burning August sky, passing villages that once teemed with life, now haunted by hushed groups of old men and women, those who could not flee, staring at their conquerors as they passed by. Moving such an enormous number of men, horses, guns and supplies required intricate organization. First Army used three main routes. Each would be used by two corps, placed under a commanding general who was responsible for making common arrangements for accommodation and food.[31] They made impressive progress and, apart from the occasional desperate rearguard action, the Belgian Army could only watch helplessly as its country was overrun. After the fall of Liège, King Albert's remaining divisions had withdrawn to the line of the River Gette (one division being sent to garrison Namur), before retreating behind the defences of Antwerp. Brussels was entered by German troops on 20 August – the day of Rupprecht's counter-attack in Lorraine – and soon afterwards Namur came under heavy bombardment, with howitzer and mortar shells screaming over the town. By 24 August most of the forts had been either disabled or destroyed and

the garrison evacuated, luckily escaping to French lines before the city was engulfed by the seemingly irresistible tide of German forces.

In order to ensure close coordination between the three armies of the right wing, Moltke subordinated Kluck to the commander of Second Army, Bülow, whom he regarded as his most capable general. Kluck, who brimmed with aggression, found subordination to Second Army a tiresome distraction and he would increasingly come to see Bülow as a drag on his success. The command situation was further complicated by the poor communications that would bedevil Moltke's armies. Inexplicably, OHL had only one radio transmitter, with a range of just 300 kilometres, and although relay stations were opened as the armies advanced, delays were common and messages were often sent *en clair* because it took too long to encode them. Crucially, there was no radio communication between First and Second Armies, the result being that they tended to fight their own wars, with little reference to the other's plans.[32] It was another indication of how the 'friction' of war was beginning to affect Germany's attack, which was already showing signs of strain and frustration that would drive German soldiers to terrible acts of murder and desecration.

The march through Belgium was punctuated by shootings and burnings as rumours of guerrilla fighters – so-called *franc-tireurs* – spread through the German Army. Men, already exhausted after a week of long marches, easily became prone to thinking that behind every corner lay teams of snipers and arsonists, or inside every home awaited cruel Belgian housewives eager to mutilate their wounded. Men, of all ranks, were understandably nervous about marching so far through enemy territory, and the intense pressure to cover more and more miles meant that no delay could be tolerated. The centre of Louvain, the great medieval university town (which housed King Albert's headquarters before he left for Antwerp), was burnt on the evening of 25 August after shots were fired (although they seem to have come from German units). Over the following days, Kluck's men ransacked the city, rounding up suspects and shooting terrified civilians, the air full of scraps of burning paper; all that was left of one of the great libraries of Christian civilization, now just a sad collection of 'blackened walls, stone columns, and the glowing embers of books'.[33]

It was not just in Louvain where German soldiers lost control. Since the early days of August, there had been scattered incidents of violence against Belgian civilians and soldiers. Visé, one of the first towns to be occupied, was torched on 16 August after rumours swept through the streets that shots had been fired. Six hundred houses were burnt and twenty-three inhabitants killed in the ensuing reprisals. At Aarschot, where Belgian soldiers had held up the Germans for several hours, twenty captured soldiers were executed and their bodies thrown in the river. Other areas of Belgium also bore the brunt of a calculated desire to subdue and dominate. The city of Dinant, which was reached by troops from Hausen's Third Army on 23 August, was the scene of one of the worst massacres of the war when 674 Belgian civilians were murdered in a brutal series of outrages. After French battalions had made a fighting retreat through the town and blown up the bridges over the Meuse, German soldiers took their revenge, burning houses, deporting civilians and murdering about 10 per cent of the population in a matter of hours.[34] Schlieffen's clear road through Belgium was now becoming a slaughterhouse.

Undeterred by the setbacks in Lorraine, Joffre was now ready to unleash his main offensive. In the French centre, Third and Fourth Armies (commanded by Generals Pierre Ruffey and Fernand de Langle de Cary respectively) would push northeast towards Arlon and Neufchâteau, hoping to catch Germany's northern wing in the flank. GQG estimated that Germany had no more than six corps and a handful of cavalry divisions in the Ardennes region, and so assumed that French forces would enjoy a significant advantage. But French intelligence was mistaken. The Germans were not weak at all. On the contrary, there were two armies in this sector (Fourth and Fifth) that could boast ten corps plus a series of *Landwehr* brigades devoted to defensive duties. They were also backed up by forty-two batteries of 105 mm and 150 mm howitzers – 'twice the heavy artillery of the French' – which, in the words of one French officer, gave their infantry 'an armour of steel: they scarcely have to show themselves to walk into positions rendered untenable by their guns'.[35]

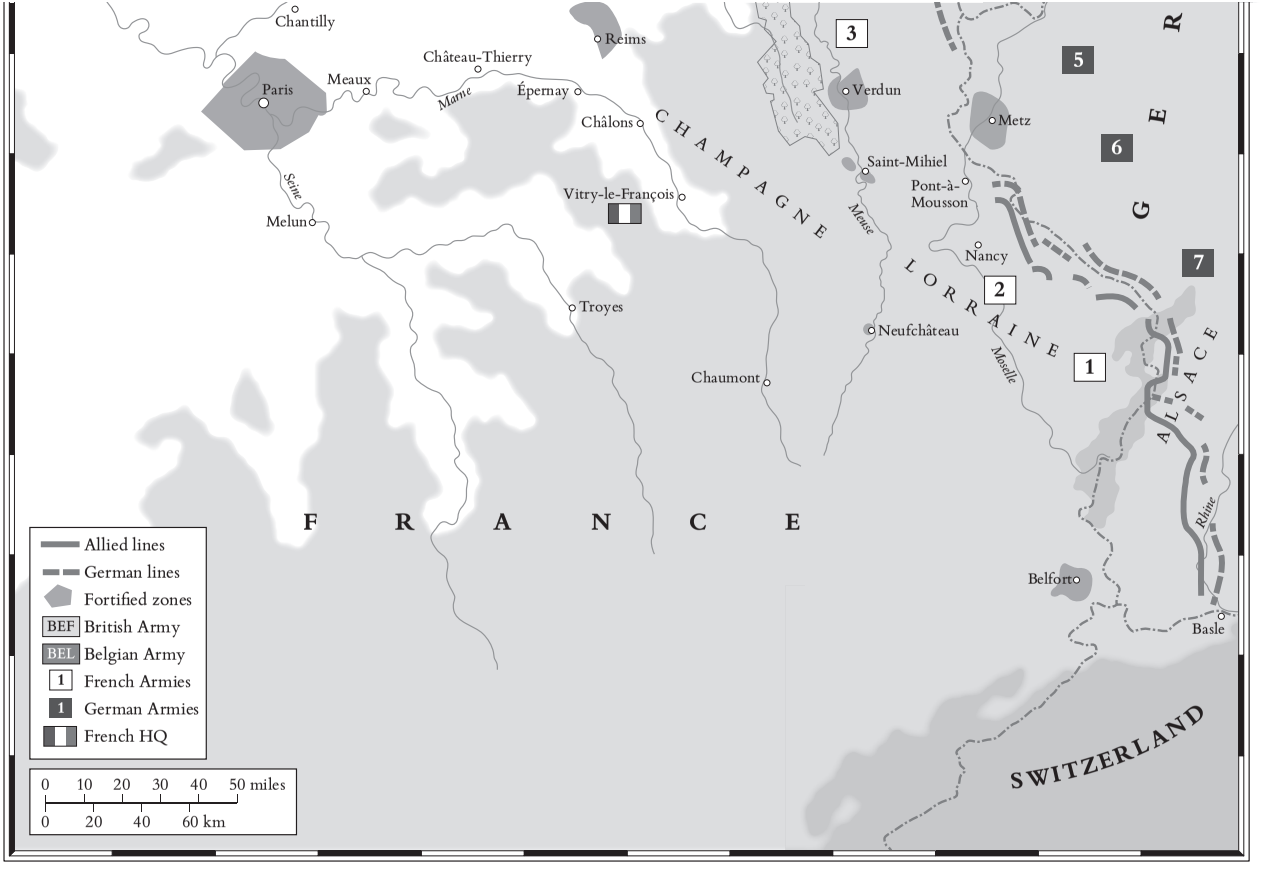
22 August dawned with a heavy grey mist that hugged the ground

and masked the thousands of troops, on either side, that were marching towards one another. By the time the fog had burnt off and the heat was rising through the tangled woods, a series of bitter and continuous battles began to spark into life right across the line; hundreds of confused, sometimes chaotic skirmishes that produced terrible carnage and left the peaceful, verdant Ardennes landscape shattered by heavy fire. 'From the unknown country beyond the hills came the terrific noise of battle', recorded an awestruck Frenchman; 'the rattle of musketry and the roar of machine-guns, like great rollers being sucked back on a pebbly shore, and the thunder of artillery enveloping and uniting all these noises into a single voice like that of a storm in mid-ocean, with heaving, crashing waves, deep, thudding undertones and the shrill whistle of the wind through the surf.'[36]

Joffre had placed great hopes in Langle de Cary's Fourth Army being able to deliver a thunderous blow at what he thought was the weakest part of the German line. Instead there was only a shattering defeat; a tragedy so awful that it resulted in the collapse of Plan XVII and the loss of thousands of soldiers, including some of France's best troops. The forests of the Ardennes were terrible places to fight. Hills and valleys rapidly exhausted marching infantry; thick woodland prevented proper observation and reconnaissance; and narrow roads resulted in units becoming strung out and vulnerable to ambush. Fourth Army was advancing north, with each corps marching forward in parallel, slightly in echelon of each other (like 'a staircase falling away to the south and east'), leaving their right flank exposed to attack.[37] With little coordination across the army and poor knowledge of the enemy, when French units met strong German forces, they quickly found themselves in trouble.

The price of these mistakes was ultimately paid for in French lives. In just four days – 20–23 August – perhaps as many as 40,000 Frenchmen were fatally wounded, most of them in the killing grounds of the Ardennes, which was littered with French dead, clad in their colourful red and blue uniforms. The worst day was 22 August with 27,000 dead. This was, as one authority later put it, 'the climax of the horrors of 1914'.[38] Some of the worst fighting was at Rossignol, where the elite Colonial Corps became engaged in a life-and-death struggle against


The Battle of the Frontiers, 22 August 1914
NORTH SEA
UNITED KINGDOM
NETHERLANDS
N
W
E
S
Zeebrugge
Ostend
Bruges
Dunkirk
Calais
BEL
Antwerp
Roulers
Tielt
Ypres
FLANDERS
1
Lys
Boulogne
Saint-Omer
Hazebrouck
Armentières
Courtrai
Scheldt
Avesnes
Brussels
Rhine
Béthune
Lille
Tournai
BELGIUM
2
Maastricht
Lens
BEF
Mons
Douai
Arras
Namur
Meuse
Liège
Bonn
Doullens
Valenciennes
Huy
Abbeville
Maubeuge
Spa
Bapaume
Cambrai
Dinant
3
Ourthe
Somme
Albert
Le Cateau
5
Givet
Amiens
Péronne
Saint-Quentin
Oise
Guise
Hirson
Ardennes
4
4
Montdidier
PICARDY
Noyon
La Fère
Charleville-Mézières
LUXEMBOURG
Beauvais
Laon
Sedan
Compiègne
Aisne
Soissons
Stenay
Moselle
GERMANY


Chantilly
Reims
Château-Thierry
Paris
Meaux
Marne
Épernay
Châlons
CHAMPAGNE
Verdun
Metz
Saint-Mihiel
Pont-à-Mousson
Seine
Melun
Vitry-le-François
Meuse
Nancy
LORRAINE
Troyes
Neufchâteau
Moselle
Chaumont
ALSACE
Rhine
Belfort
Basle
SWITZERLAND
FRANCE
GER
3
5
6
7
2
1
Allied lines
German lines
Fortified zones
BEF British Army
BEL Belgian Army
1 French Armies
1 German Armies
French HQ
0 10 20 30 40 50 miles
0 20 40 60 km

the German VI Corps. The French commander, General Jules Lefèvre, was convinced that there were only a handful of cavalry patrols ahead of him. Instead he encountered German soldiers, well entrenched and deployed in strength, so he launched attack after attack, wave after wave, only to see his men mown down in huge numbers. There were 'swarms of bullets', recorded one account, 'mostly slaughtering the officers, easily recognizable by the gold stripes of their kepi, and stopping all charges with the bayonet . . . men fall by the dozen, under the blows of an invisible enemy, every time they try to throw themselves forward'.[39] Even worse, later in the day, Lefèvre's men were outflanked and, in places, surrounded – cutting them off from neighbouring units despite desperate efforts to break out. By the end of the day the Colonial Corps was shattered, suffering over 11,000 casualties.[40]

French commanders could do little to stop the unfolding disaster. Langle de Cary was at his headquarters at Stenay – over thirty miles from the front – and had little idea of how poorly his army was faring. In any case, with only despatch riders and the civilian telegraph network at hand, he had little chance to influence the battle had he chosen to do so. 'Modern battle, with its large number of soldiers engaged in combat and the extent of the battlefront, can no longer allow a commanding officer to go on to the battlefield, or go and see the ground for himself', he complained. The first news came in around noon. Progress was slow and both XVII and the Colonial Corps had been surprised by 'skilfully concealed' machine-guns in the woods. The nature of the terrain meant that there was little point in Langle de Cary's leaving his headquarters. 'I would have been lost in the woods!' he noted years later. 'But what a day of anxiety! . . . Given the constant bad news, I needed not only to maintain composure, but to show my officers, all those who approached me, this self-mastery a leader must have in critical moments.'[41]

Things were little better in Ruffey's Third Army to the south, which was advancing towards the towns of Longwy and Virton. Running into the German Fourth Army, which was well dug in and waiting for them, French troops tried, in vain, to forge ahead. The result was a series of heavy tactical defeats as German artillery punished French divisions badly, leaving fields strewn with dead, mangled

bodies; battalions shattered under fierce fire; and thousands of wounded men streaming back from the front. That night Ruffey despatched a brief telegram to Joffre: 'The attacks yesterday failed solely because the ground in front of them had not been prepared first, neither by artillery nor infantry fire. It is essential that the infantry should never advance without the attack having been prepared first by the artillery, which should then be ready to back it up. Bayonet charges cannot be permitted in the conditions that have prevailed for most of the time until now.'[42] By 24 August both Third and Fourth Armies were in full retreat.

The acid test of combat had revealed a whole series of problems, at all levels, with the French Army. Although France could mobilize almost as many men as Germany, this was only because she conscripted a higher percentage of her manpower, who tended not to be as well trained or as well led. Germany had a deep pool of experienced NCOs, while French regiments had longstanding problems with the recruitment and retention of sufficient officers and other ranks, leaving many units lacking initiative and drive in combat. Moreover, Germany's General Staff had been lauded as the finest in the world for decades, but it was only in 1911 that France had something comparable when the position of Chief of the General Staff was given full authority to prepare the army in peacetime as well as in war. This was a welcome development that streamlined command in the French military, erasing an old law that had prevented the concentration of too much power under one individual, but whether it was introduced too late remained to be seen.[43]

Lower down the army, other problems were evident. French cavalry had an unfortunate habit of staying in the saddle too long, wearing out their mounts and frequently arriving on the battlefield exhausted and unfit for action. The infantry were brave but raw, often unable to accomplish relatively simple tasks and lacking in tactical sophistication. Reconnaissance was poor or non-existent, and when attacks were made, too often they were pressed without sufficient artillery support and in an uncoordinated, haphazard fashion that resulted in appalling losses. In terms of infantry weapons, the mainstay of the French Army was the 1886 Lebel bolt-action rifle,

which compared poorly with the more reliable and quicker-firing Mauser Gewehr 98 issued to German infantry. While the Lebel held eight rounds in a tubular magazine (compared to the five-round magazine on the Mauser), it was cumbersome to reload and tended to result in varying accuracy as the rounds were fired off. Even the celebrated canon de 75 Modèle 1897 quick-firing field gun – the famous 'French 75' – had significant shortcomings. Although it could achieve remarkable rates of fire, up to six rounds per minute, showering enemy troops with a rain of lethal shrapnel, its flat trajectory was limited in hilly country and its shell was not heavy enough to destroy field fortifications or trenches. When the war solidified, France's chronic lack of heavy artillery proved a significant disadvantage and one that would take years to rectify.

As fighting raged in the Ardennes, attention switched to the French left wing. By 20 August, Lanrezac's Fifth Army had executed a swift, if exhausting, march north to meet the oncoming German advance and found itself occupying an exposed salient in the southwestern corner of Belgium. The commander of Fifth Army could not make up his mind whether to attack (as Joffre had ordered) or whether to await the oncoming storm. He waited for forty-eight hours, keeping his subordinates in the dark and weighing up the dangers of fighting on the north or south bank of the Sambre.[44] 'Up till now the sensation in General Lanrezac's entourage had been of sailing swiftly and strongly forward with a firm hand on the tiller', recorded one observer; 'but now it seemed as if the sails of the ship were flapping in the wind. There was a curious atmosphere of hesitation.'[45] In the absence of a firm French attack, it was left to Bülow to seize the initiative, which he did on 22 August, launching a series of thrusts across the river, hoping to coordinate them with an attack from Third Army, which was advancing on the Meuse. Suddenly coming to his senses, Lanrezac authorized counter-attacks to drive the Germans back, but it was too late. Unless something miraculous happened, there was no way that Fifth Army could hold.

Elsewhere, 23 August was a day of heavy fighting out to the west as Kluck's First Army crashed into Lieutenant-General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien's II Corps of the BEF, which had taken up positions along the

languid green waters of the Mons–Condé Canal the previous evening. Reports of German troops in the vicinity had been coming into GHQ (General Headquarters) with growing urgency, and Sir John French (who visited Smith-Dorrien's headquarters that morning) was unsure how to proceed, noting that II Corps was in an isolated position and had to be prepared 'for any kind of move, either in advance or retreat'.[46] In the end, the enemy settled the matter. By ten o'clock, Smith-Dorrien could hear the rumbling sound of small arms and artillery fire coming from the canal. At that moment, Lieutenant-General von Quast was moving his IX Corps up, assuming that there was nothing much in front of him, perhaps a thin screen of cavalry that would fire a few shots before galloping off. Instead his corps collided with regular British infantry who were in no mood to let them pass.

The Battle of Mons was an encounter battle – two armies colliding into one another – with one struggling to deploy in enough strength to maintain its momentum while the other hung on grimly against a numerically superior opponent. Fighting continued for most of the day as the German columns gradually forced their way over the canal against heavy fire. Smith-Dorrien's men gave a good account of themselves; pouring volley after volley into the attackers. 'The Germans came out of their trenches in mobs because their game was to rush up by their numbers, but we took steady aim and mowed them down . . . as soon as one line went down on came another like bees', reported one British soldier. 'Line after line kept coming on and taking cover behind their dead, but the nearest they got to our trenches was about 200 yards, yet that was near enough . . . Our officers told us to keep up a rapid fire and we did, it was poured into them.'[47] But as the day wore on, and the full power of the German attack began to be felt, the British were left with no choice but to break off contact as darkness fell. Their morale, however, burnt bright as they slipped away 'full of confidence in their superiority to the enemy', as Smith-Dorrien put it, and proud of the 'rapid and accurate rifle-fire' that had kept the enemy at bay. 'It was this rifle-fire, and the fog of war so thick on both sides, which were the outstanding features of the day', remembered the II Corps commander.[48]

As the British fought off the Germans at Mons, twenty miles to

the east the position of the French Fifth Army was beginning to crumble. Lanrezac knew that the British were in action, but was little inclined to give them assistance, perhaps fearing that, if he did so, he would leave himself vulnerable to a counter-stroke. On the afternoon of 23 August, detachments of Hausen's Third Army finally crossed the Meuse and were making their way towards the village of Onhaye, which would have uncovered Lanrezac's right rear. Fortunately, a furious bayonet charge by men of 51st Reserve Division threw the Germans back. At his headquarters in Philippeville, Lanrezac decided that a retreat was now inevitable and drafted the order to withdraw. 'I am deeply worried', he wrote.

> It cannot be said that my fears are groundless, because, however great the danger may appear to me, it is still even greater, for the enemy is everywhere and far more numerous than I believed. Charleroi is not far from Sedan [the decisive French defeat in 1870] . . . To flee in the face of the enemy is not glorious, but to act in any other way would be to condemn my army to total annihilation, making it impossible for our French forces to recover from the general defeat they are now suffering all along the front from the Vosges to L'Escaut. An immediate retreat is vital; I am resolved to order it.[49]

The Allies were on the run. That was the impression at OHL as report after report came in of German victories right across the line on 23 and 24 August. In the Ardennes, Crown Prince Wilhelm's Fifth Army reported 'total victory' on the afternoon of 23 August, with the 'capture of thousands of prisoners among them generals and very many enemy guns'. Within hours Third Army wired that the enemy on its front were 'in complete retreat' and it was in pursuit of them. On 25 August, the Adjutant-General, Hans von Plessen, met with the Chief of the Operations Section at OHL, Lieutenant-Colonel Gerhard Tappen. After discussing the movement of the armies and digesting the latest reports, which once again predicted an imminent German triumph, Tappen was convinced that the end was near. Perusing the maps that were pinned to the walls, he turned to Plessen, took off his steel-rimmed glasses and smiled.

'The whole matter will be settled within six weeks.'[50]

2. 'To the last extremity'

'One must face the facts', wrote Joffre in his report to the War Ministry on the morning of 24 August. 'Our army corps, in spite of the numerical superiority which was assured to them, have not shown on the battlefield those offensive qualities which we had hoped for from the partial successes obtained at the beginning . . .' Given the reverses that they had suffered, French troops would now return to the defensive and wear out the enemy as best they could, while waiting for the moment to counter-attack.[1] The same day, Joffre sent a note to his army commanders bringing to their attention a number of worrying tactical problems that had been identified in recent operations, particularly the need for 'intimate combination' between infantry and artillery. Simply relying on the bayonet and high morale to take ground was no longer enough. Unless attacks were properly coordinated, French bravery would be in vain.[2]

Joffre spent the day at his headquarters sorting through the wreckage of Plan XVII. News of the defeat in Lorraine was particularly hard to bear. When Joffre received reports confirming that French troops had been driven back, his eyes seemed to dim slightly; for a moment it was as if his heavy frame would buckle under the weight it was bearing. But then a glint of light. A liaison officer arrived, still dusty from the road, and explained that the retreat had been conducted in good order, that the men's morale was still high and that they would be ready to fight again in a day or two. Instantly, Joffre recovered his sense of poise.

'Wel, now I am at peace', he told one of his staff officers later that night. 'I know that I shall have a good weapon to fight with.'[3]

Joffre, who at times seemed so stolid, so big and unimaginative, had one quality, above all others, that was now required. *He did not panic*. He kept going. He kept playing the game. 'General Instructions No. 2' was issued the following day (25 August) and marked his first

major response to the disappointments of Plan XVII. 'Having been unable to carry out the offensive manoeuvre originally planned, future operations will be conducted in such a way as to reconstruct on our left a force capable of resuming the offensive by a combination of the Fourth and Fifth Armies, the British Army and new forces drawn from the east, while the other armies hold the enemy in check for such time as may be necessary.' Joffre had previously discounted the possibility of a major German move through Belgium, but now he could focus on little else. Like a chess player moving pieces across an enormous board, he began to redeploy his order of battle, taking corps from his right and moving them to his left, where they would form a new army massed around the city of Amiens and able to strike into the German flank.[4]

While Joffre's thoughts on a possible counter-attack (or what he called a 'general battle') began to coalesce, he needed enough time for his armies – particularly Lanrezac's embattled Fifth Army – to withdraw in one piece, without getting caught out or surrounded by the enveloping German right wing. Third, Fourth and Fifth Armies were ordered to continue their retreat, but ensure they remained in contact with each other and mount 'short and violent counter-attacks' to keep the enemy off balance. But as Joffre surveyed his maps and read the latest reports, one thought nagged at him: *Lanrezac*. The Fifth Army commander may have been right about the threat from the German right wing, but Joffre had detected more in his subordinate than just a prudent desire to safeguard his men. On the contrary, the French Commander-in-Chief smelt fear and indecision, and on the Western Front they could be fatal. He was also anxious about the state of the BEF and knew that he would need wholehearted British support in the next few weeks; something that might not be forthcoming if Lanrezac remained in post.

Day after day the retreat went on. After breaking contact at Mons, the BEF headed southwest, skirting either side of the forest of Mormal towards Le Cateau, while Fifth Army fought a series of running battles with Bülow's Second Army. Both British and French armies managed to avoid being encircled by their adversaries, but it was a perilously close affair for troops already exhausted by days of endless

marching under a blazing sun. On the evening of 25 August, Major-General Edmund Allenby, the bull-headed commander of the British Cavalry Division, galloped up to see Smith-Dorrien and told him that unless he could resume his retreat early next morning, Kluck's men would be 'upon them before they could start'. The nightmare scenario of being caught by the enemy and destroyed in detail was a real possibility, and for Smith-Dorrien and his men, harassed beyond measure, tired and hot, coated with the dust of days of marching, an urgent decision was now required. Sir John had ordered the retreat to continue, but Smith-Dorrien was not sure it could be done. He spoke to one of his divisional commanders, Major-General Hubert Hamilton – a cheerful and brave old colonial soldier – who admitted that because many of his men were still straggling in they would be in no state to resume their march the following morning. Faced with disaster, Smith-Dorrien did what any natural soldier would do: he stood his ground and fought back.[5]

Once the early-morning mist had cleared away the following day, 26 August, Kluck found II Corps holding a line of shallow defences along the Le Cateau–Cambrai road. Without waiting, he pushed his divisions on, only to be met with the same heavy rifle fire, and this time British guns deployed forward, firing over open sights. The British held on until the late afternoon, but on this occasion casualties were heavier – 7,812 as opposed to 1,571 at Mons.[6] This was perhaps the closest the BEF would ever come to being overwhelmed. Yet somehow Smith-Dorrien's men escaped, eating the dust of miles of road, and leaving their opponents with a lasting respect for their skill as soldiers. 'The battle-field was a terrible sight', remembered a German NCO who stormed the village of Caudry that day; 'everywhere dead and wounded, and littered with equipment of every kind . . . The prisoners show that it was a well-tried adversary that disputed with us the honours of the day, veteran colonial troops, wearing the Egyptian medal, powerfully built men of splendid appearance and well-equipped.'[7]

Throughout those desperate days of retreat, much was revealed about the French Army and much of it had been disappointing. Yet there were signs of encouragement. First and Second Armies had

made a fighting retreat from Lorraine, keeping the Germans at bay and holding a line of wooded hills known as the Grand Couronné outside the city of Nancy, from where they stubbornly refused to budge. With his right flank now more secure, Joffre began to move more and more units eastwards – taking advantage of the French railway network to shuttle troops across his front and give him the advantage where it mattered. Crucially, Joffre's left wing was now becoming stronger as Sixth Army, commanded by General Michel Joseph Maunoury, was forming in and around Paris. Joffre had originally intended to fight at Amiens, but the speed of the German advance meant that he had to deploy his reserves further south. Maunoury, a graduate of the École Polytechnique and a veteran of 1870, was now headquartered in the French capital trying to wield a collection of reserve divisions and North African troops scraped up from every possible direction. Joffre ordered him to 'act offensively on the enemy's right wing' and resume the offensive 'in the general direction of the north-east'.[8]

Through the test of battle began to emerge a cadre of competent officers, those who had shown a remarkable ability to get results against what seemed like fearful odds. Ferdinand Foch, a Gascon from Tarbes, was commander of XX 'Iron' Corps, which had fought in Lorraine, and was quickly gaining a reputation as a fierce, aggressive and capable general. He was promoted to take charge of a new army, the Ninth, which was formed from elements of Langle de Cary's battered command. Another rising star was Charles Mangin, a Brigadier-General from Lorraine, whose counter-attack at Onhaye on 23 August had swept the Germans back to the Meuse (and thus saved Fifth Army from a possible envelopment). The man who had ordered the attack was Louis Franchet d'Espèrey, commander of I Corps, who was deeply impressed by Mangin's irrepressible spirit: 'I arrived just as our foes were fleeing under cover of nightfall. The flames from the burning village lit up the dark and I saw Mangin waiting for me, smiling, victorious, impassive beneath the hail of bullets fired by the retreating enemy. I can see him still; the fiery glare of those deep-set eyes, that determined jaw struck by an iron bullet at Diena [part of French West Africa]; I can still hear that quiet yet

commanding voice which has launched so many irresistible attacks.' Franchet d'Espèrey was adamant that Mangin's presence on the battlefield was irreplaceable. He had 'shown his worth and all the qualities which made him an exceptional commander were evident – clear understanding of the situation, swift decision-making, indomitable courage and especially an indefinable charisma, that intangible power which emanated from his very being and made lesser men bow down before him'.[9] Joffre would need men like these in the coming weeks.

As if expecting an imminent end to hostilities – a hunter creeping in closer for the kill – OHL relocated forward to Luxembourg on 29 August. German headquarters was now billeted in a drab schoolhouse, smelling of chalk dust and mothballs. 'We have neither gas nor electric lighting, just dull kerosene lamps', wrote Moltke (in a letter to his wife). 'So the report that arrived today from our armies brightened things up for me all the more.' He went on:

> In the west, the Second Army under Bülow reports that a complete victory has been won against five and a half French corps. We are all living together, that is my men and me, in the Hotel de Cologne, which has a German proprietor. It is not very nice, but one has to make do when in the field. It's not a matter of whether one has it better or worse. I am glad to be here and not at the court. I feel quite ill when I hear the talk there. It is heart-breaking how clueless his lordship is about the gravity of the situation. There is already a certain sense of jubilation, which I will hate for as long as I live. Now, I will continue to work with my good people. For us there is only the serious business of doing our duty and none of us is in any doubt about how much there is still to do and how difficult it will be.[10]

Moltke had issued a general directive several days earlier outlining how he saw the rest of the campaign proceeding. All active French corps had been engaged and had 'sustained heavy losses'; their reserve divisions had likewise been 'severely shaken'; and the Belgian Army was in 'a state of complete disintegration'. It was anticipated that the French armies, now in 'full retreat', would try to buy time for the Russians to advance further, while reconstituting as much manpower

as they could. Accordingly, the German armies were to 'advance in the direction of Paris', moving forward as rapidly as possible 'so as not to allow the French time to re-form and organize new resistance'.[11] Given that they were on the cusp of a historic triumph, Moltke authorized the transfer of two corps from his right wing to the Eastern Front. With East Prussia menaced by two Russian armies, OHL was increasingly nervous about the threat from the east, and with victory over France apparently imminent, they could probably be spared. It would prove to be a decision of enormous, and fatal, consequences.

At his headquarters, Moltke waged a lonely, almost monastic, struggle. He surveyed the maps that lay in piles on improvised tables. He read the situation reports. He chatted to his staff. Every evening he dined with his wife, when they were served plain, stolid food with an occasional glass of Rhenish wine. In sharp contrast to Joffre, who could rely on good interior lines and a host of fast drivers, Moltke was inactive and slow-witted, as if he was directing the war under water. The tradition of allowing subordinates freedom of action – what was known as 'directive command' – was deeply rooted within the German Army, and in 1914, with the distances involved, it left Moltke isolated and unsure if and when to intervene. It also left his army commanders to sort it out for themselves: Kluck, who bristled at his subordination under Bülow; Hausen, whose Third Army kept up a slow and cautious pace; and Rupprecht, champing at the bit to seize Nancy. Because, at this crucial moment in history, Germany's vast armies – now deep into France – were too far away to direct or recall.

The spectral figure of Count Alfred von Schlieffen loomed large over the German Army as it marched towards the Marne. The former Chief of the General Staff had died in January 1913 after serving as head of the German Army for almost fifteen years. His operational design had been based upon a massive flanking movement that would turn France's defences. 'The essential element of the entire operation', he had written in 1905, 'is a strong right wing, the formation of which will help to win the battles and allow the relentless pursuit of the enemy and bring defeat to him again and again.'[12] Yet Moltke always felt that amendments would need to be made to the plan, so as the

campaign progressed he began to alter it. The decision to mount an offensive in Lorraine on 20 August was one of the first diversions from Schlieffen's emphasis on the right. Moreover, when a group of reserve brigades became available, Moltke sent them to strengthen Rupprecht's Sixth Army. Indeed, as the advance unfolded, Moltke began to fantasize about the prospect of a double envelopment, with the right wing pinning French forces, before his central armies snapped the French Army in two. The march through Belgium was, for Moltke, 'not an end in itself, but only a means to an end'.[13] Yet this crucial modification to Schlieffen's grand design was neither shared nor understood by the commanders who would have to carry it out.

At the tip of the right wing, Kluck constantly sought out the flank from where he could bring about the climactic battle that would scatter and destroy what remained of the armies of the Entente. By the time First Army reached the Marne river on 3 September, its men had been marching and fighting for thirty days and had covered 312 miles. It was a performance of almost superhuman endurance and willpower. Down the cobbled roads of Belgium and the endless tree-lined avenues of northern France, dusty and footsore, shoulders aching, heads bowed beneath the unblinking sun, Kluck's men trudged on. 'Marches and fights, battles and marches, followed one another without interval', Kluck admitted; a situation made even worse by the gradual erosion of German strength the further they advanced – having to detail more and more troops to guard their lines of communication and hold the large population centres they had overrun. For example, III Reserve Corps had been sent north to mask Antwerp, where King Albert's army was now dug in, and a reserve brigade remained in Brussels, holding the Belgian capital.[14]

There was now an urgent need to bring the campaign to a glorious conclusion. Schlieffen had originally tasked First Army with enveloping Paris from the north and west, which had been repeated in Moltke's 'general directive' of 27 August. Yet the further the armies of the right wing advanced, the more stretched they became and the more anxiety that built up inside General Bülow. To keep the German armies together, he asked Kluck (on 30 August) to make an 'inward wheel' to 'gain full advantages of the victory' that had been

achieved over the French Fifth Army.[15] This meant that Kluck would shift the axis of his advance from southwest to south and then southeast; skirting to the east, instead of west, of Paris. This had occurred to Kluck several days earlier, so he quickly agreed. He believed that the British, like the Belgians before them, had almost certainly been destroyed and would be of no further consequence. Moreover, Paris would fall like a ripe apple once the French armies, now little more than a collection of debris, had been surrounded and eliminated. It was, therefore, essential that First Army should find the French left and outflank it, attacking in conjunction with Second and Third Armies to destroy one wing of the French forces. Once this was achieved, the front could then be rolled up and the war ended. Accordingly, on the morning of 31 August, Kluck's troops shifted their direction and headed for the Oise river.

Back at OHL, Moltke had approved of Bülow's 'inward wheel' (given the delays in communication, he probably had little choice but to rubber-stamp it), but his strategic vision remained crucially different to that of his army commanders in the field. By 2 September, Moltke was increasingly confident of crushing the French with his central armies, not those on his right. Therefore, the decision to forfeit Paris (for the time being) meant that Kluck's army would have to operate as his flank guard to prevent any sorties from the French capital. OHL confirmed this in a wireless message sent to First, Second and Third Armies on the night of 2/3 September. 'The intention is to drive the French in a south-easterly direction from Paris. The First Army will follow in echelon behind the Second Army and will be responsible for the flank protection of the Armies.'[16] But it was too late. IX Corps, the spearhead of First Army, had already crossed the Marne and was a day's march ahead of Bülow. They were not in echelon; they were ahead. If they were going to guard the flank, they would need to stop, turn around and then march back north.

Kluck was stunned. The order was not only confusing, but also totally inconsistent with Schlieffen's emphasis on the strength of the right wing. If he halted for a day or two to let Bülow catch up, then he would hand the initiative back to the enemy! Kluck was in no mood to do this, so he authorized the pursuit over the Marne to

continue. IV Reserve Corps, bringing up the rear, was ordered to guard his flank, but the rest of his army would keep going. He radioed Moltke on 4 September explaining why the order to stay behind Second Army could not be carried out:

> The First Army asks for information on the location of the other armies; their messages about crucial victories have so far been followed by pleas for support on several occasions. Under continuous heavy fighting, the First Army has reached the limits of its capabilities in marching orders. Only in this way is it possible to open up the Marne crossing for the other armies and to force the enemy to retreat . . . Order of the Supreme Army Command 2220 that the First Army is to follow the Second Army in stages could not be followed in this situation. Planned pushing away of the enemy from Paris in a south-easterly direction will only be possible to carry out if the First Army proceeds. Necessary protection of the flanks weakens the offensive force. The speedy reinforcement of the right-hand flank . . . is urgently required.[17]

Kluck was unrepentant. His reconnaissance aircraft had spotted long columns of enemy troops retreating to the south, which confirmed his belief that if he could force the French over the Seine, the offensive could be finished. But he was unaware of how many troops Joffre was mustering around Paris and how open his own flank was becoming. The genie was out of the bottle. Moltke had lost control.

On 30 August, it was agreed, after much agonizing, that the French Government would head for Bordeaux. Joseph Galliéni, the newly appointed Military Governor of Paris, was told by the Minister of War, Alexandre Millerand, that he now had full authority to defend the city 'to the last extremity'. When Galliéni heard these words, he seemed to recoil momentarily, stopping the minister and asking him slowly and deliberately: Did he understand the full import of what he had said? Did he realize that Paris, or large sections of it, might have to be razed to the ground? Millerand nodded slowly:

'*To the last extremity* . . .'[18]

The ruthless attitude that characterized the defence of Paris was

symptomatic of how France was now responding to the crisis. Joffre was never the most sentimental of men, but he acted swiftly to root out those whom he believed were weak or ineffectual. General Ruffey, whose Third Army had been shattered in the Ardennes, was relieved on 30 August after Joffre visited his headquarters. Finding him 'in a high condition of nervousness, giving vent to bitter reproaches against the majority of his subordinates', Joffre took him aside and told him to hand over to Maurice Sarrail, a corps commander who had performed well during the Battle of the Frontiers. Lanrezac did not last much longer. Joffre went to see him on 3 September and found him 'hesitating and timorous'; still possessed of his brilliant intellect, but now apt to criticize every order and unable to lift the depression in his headquarters.[19] Lanrezac went quietly, convinced that his order to retreat had saved the army, but relieved that someone else would now bear the terrible burden of command. Joffre replaced him with one of his more determined subordinates, Louis Franchet d'Espèrey.

It was eleven o'clock on the night of 1 September when French intelligence confirmed that Kluck's army had turned to the south-east. A German cavalry patrol had been shot up, losing one of their men, who slumped off his horse, leaving a bulging haversack lying on the ground. Inside, French staff officers discovered a map, smeared with blood, which showed Kluck's order of battle and the line of advance his army was taking. This confirmed information that had been gleaned from the breaking of German wireless codes several days earlier.[20] It was now clear that First Army was moving to the south-east, evidently still searching for the left flank of the French Army. This meant that a major plank of the Schlieffen Plan – that the right wing would drive to the west of Paris and envelop the French capital – had now been discarded, leaving the German flank wide open.

As Joffre steeled himself to mount his great counter-attack, his counterpart in the BEF, Sir John French, was beginning to come apart. French had been horrified by Smith-Dorrien's stand at Le Cateau, and the sight of some of the survivors stumbling along, puttees trailing in the dust, caused him to fear the worst. Like Lanrezac, a sense of pessimism was beginning to darken his outlook and

convince him that defeat was inevitable. He wired Joffre on 30 August and warned him that the BEF would not 'be in a state to take its place in the line for ten days' and that he proposed to retire behind the River Seine.[21] This was, in part, an overreaction to the hardships that his men had endured, as well as a complete loss of faith in Lanrezac, whom he accused of leaving him exposed at Mons. He even wired Lord Kitchener the following day repeating his sense of disgust. 'If the French go on with their present tactics which are practically to fall back right and left of me, usually without notice, and to abandon all idea of offensive operations, of course then the gap in the French line will remain and the consequence must be borne by them.'[22]

The consequences of Britain pulling out of the line at such a crucial moment were not lost on Kitchener, who almost surrendered his legendary self-control when he read Sir John's telegram. He dashed off an urgent reply expressing 'surprise' at the proposal before calling an emergency meeting of the Cabinet. When the members had assembled, Kitchener demanded that French be instructed to remain where he was and that under no circumstances was he to make his planned retirement. This was agreed. Another telegram was then fired off ('The government are exceedingly anxious lest your force . . . not be able to co-operate closely with our allies . . .') before Kitchener returned to the War Office, where he found Sir John's subsequent letter in which he damned the French for falling back on either side of him.[23] Realizing that he would have to grasp the nettle to prevent a strategic catastrophe, Kitchener took the first train he could and crossed the Channel in a Royal Navy destroyer. He met with Sir John at the British Embassy in Paris on the afternoon of 1 September and made his feelings clear, telling French that the BEF was to act, at all times, in accordance with Joffre's wishes. The British Commander-in-Chief, his cheeks flushed with anger, his face contorted with frustration, found the meeting to be deeply insulting, and the sight of the Secretary of State for War dressed in the khaki serge uniform of a British Field Marshal only heightened his sense of humiliation. Yet it worked. The BEF stayed in the line.

Kitchener's urgent stiffening of Sir John's resolve was not a moment too soon. The final arrangements for Joffre's counter-attack were

now being completed. GQG issued its operation orders on 4 September: 'The time has come to profit by the adventurous position of the German First Army and concentrate against that Army all the efforts of the Allied Armies on the extreme left.'[24] The counter-offensive would begin in two days' time, with Sixth Army debouching east from Paris towards Château-Thierry, while the BEF and Fifth Army turned around and faced the enemy, ready to drive north. Now that he had been assured of British support and had put Franchet d'Espèrey in command of Fifth Army (who told him that his men were ready), Joffre was happy to go ahead. He knew that a moment of supreme importance had arrived; one in which the fate of his country was in the balance, but he betrayed little sense of anxiety. His meals were always taken at the usual time and his appetite remained generous. Joffre's broad shoulders carried a weight that would have crushed lesser men.

Perhaps inevitably, there were some last-minute doubts. Henri Berthelot, one of Joffre's most trusted staff officers, would have preferred to wait a little longer to give the Germans more time to push further into the trap, but Joffre was concerned lest the opportunity slip away. On the morning of 6 September, the day of battle, he issued a staunch proclamation to his troops. It was a stark, unwavering demonstration of the gravity of the situation: 'We are about to engage in a battle on which the fate of our country depends and it is important to remind all ranks that the moment has passed for looking to the rear; all our efforts must be directed to attacking and driving back the enemy. Troops that can advance no farther must, at any price, hold on to the ground they have conquered and die on the spot rather than give way. Under the circumstances which face us, no act of weakness can be tolerated.'[25] Shortly after nine o'clock, Colonel Émile Herbillon, the High Command's liaison officer to the Government, arrived at Joffre's headquarters, which had moved to Châtillon-sur-Seine the previous evening. Joffre was now ensconced in the Château Marmont, 'an old castle in the woods', where he occupied a small, bright room with a desk and a few chairs. Herbillon made his way along 'great corridors, stairs with worn steps, old doors with huge latches' to see the Commander-in-Chief. 'As soon as I greet him, he beckons me to come closer to the map where the

locations of the armies are marked. He shows me that von Kluck is turning towards the east, moving away from Paris and towards the British left wing. In these conditions, while the rest of the front would continue to withstand the German Army . . . Maunoury's army would come up against the German right wing and attack from the flank.' Herbillon was amazed at Joffre's incredible self-possession. 'I'll never forget that moment, and the wonderful calmness he possessed, having thrown the dice with a firm hand and peacefully awaiting the future; I felt an irresistible confidence and, as he shook my hand, he said, smiling kindly: "That's it now, my dear friend, and now heaven will decide the rest."'[26]

That was it; it was done. Joffre watched and waited, tilting his head to the window and listening to the rumble of guns out to the north; towards the shimmering battle line where two great armies fought to the death.

Joffre anticipated that the battle would begin on the morning of 6 September, but fighting had already broken out the previous afternoon when the lead corps of Maunoury's Sixth Army, marching out from Paris, collided with the German IV Reserve Corps around the village of Saint-Soupplets. Originally detached from Kluck's main body to guard his right flank as he continued his drive over the Marne, IV Reserve Corps were heavily outnumbered, with barely 22,000 troops against Sixth Army's 150,000.[27] But they did just enough to hold off Maunoury while urgently sending word for Kluck to come up at once. When a German pilot spotted long columns of French troops advancing towards the exposed flank that morning, he dashed off an urgent warning, only for it to be dismissed as 'by no means dangerous'. It was only later on, around midnight, that Lieutenant-General Alexander von Linsingen, commander of II Corps, put another call through to Kluck's headquarters and made it clear just how serious the situation was becoming, shouting down a crackling phone line: 'The ghost of Paris has acquired flesh and blood!'[28] Suddenly realizing the danger he was in, Kluck ordered two of his corps to march north as quickly as possible. This manoeuvre was essential to protect his rear, but it widened the already sizeable gap between

First and Second Armies and caused Bülow, who had long been suspicious of his fellow army commander, to explode in paroxysms of rage as his right flank, in turn, was uncovered.

The clash between Maunoury and Kluck on the Ourcq was only the first of a whole series of epic contests that took place between 6 and 10 September: between Franchet d'Espèrey and Bülow on the Petit Morin; between Foch and Hausen in the marshes of Saint-Gond; between Langle de Cary and the Duke of Württemberg around Vitry; between Sarrail and Crown Prince Wilhelm at Verdun; and between Castelnau and Rupprecht in front of Nancy. Each army fought its own war; desperately trying to keep in touch with units on either flank and jealously holding on to ground wherever possible. Everywhere the fighting was close and confusing, with most soldiers, from either side, having little sense of what was really happening. 'The struggle extended all around us, from one horizon to the other', remembered a French dragoon; 'and if it was incomprehensible to our officers it was still more so to us private soldiers . . . All around us the guns thundered. The horizon was, as it were, encircled with a moving line of bursting shells, and we knew nothing, absolutely nothing.'[29]

For four days German and French forces grappled with one another, gaining an advantage in one place, only to lose it in another. In most places, German troops fought with enormous courage, determination and tactical skill. Two of Kluck's corps executed a forced march of almost thirty miles on 6 September to get to the Ourcq, and then went straight into battle. Elsewhere, along the marshes of Saint-Gond, four German divisions mounted a ferocious night assault in the early hours of 8 September, sweeping away the startled defenders and almost causing the total collapse of Foch's newly formed Ninth Army, which was holding a precarious defensive line along the French centre. Despite the ferocity of the fighting, French battalions continued to show an almost unbreakable will to keep going and to keep taking terrible casualties; even Kluck – not one to wax lyrical about his adversary – found himself admiring the 'extraordinary and peculiar aptitude of the French soldier to recover quickly', no matter what they were subjected to.[30] One German officer watched a French counter-attack form up 'in thick lines' and observed how time seemed