

RING *of* FIRE

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RING *of* **FIRE**

A NEW GLOBAL HISTORY

of the Outbreak of the First World War

**ALEX CHURCHILL &
NICOLAI EBERHOLST**



An Apollo Book

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*For our friend Rob Thompson.
We miss you.*

Do not ignore the human element! The little flags which you pin into large-scale maps, the little wooden blocks which you manoeuvre as you would chessmen, these are in reality men like you.

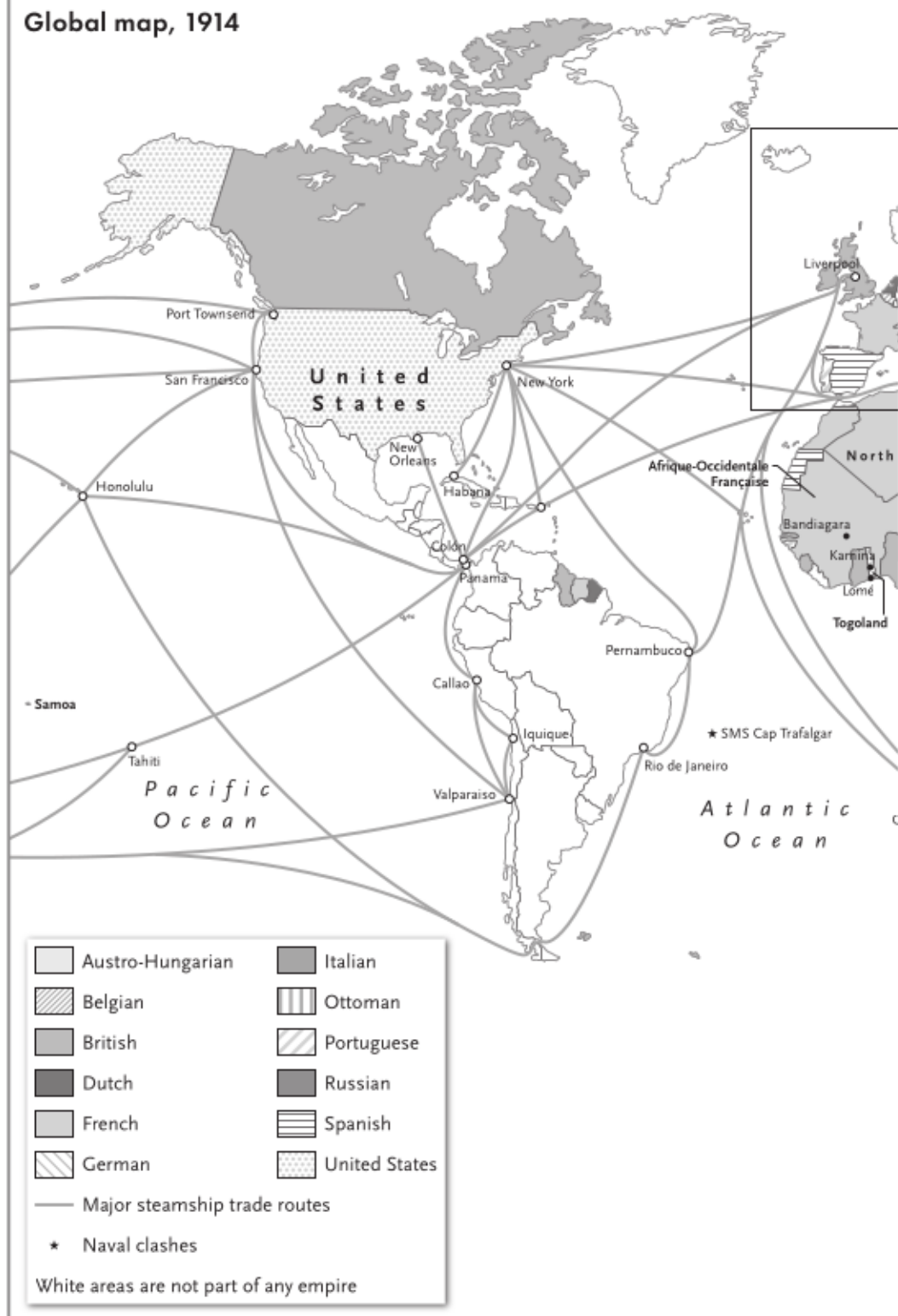
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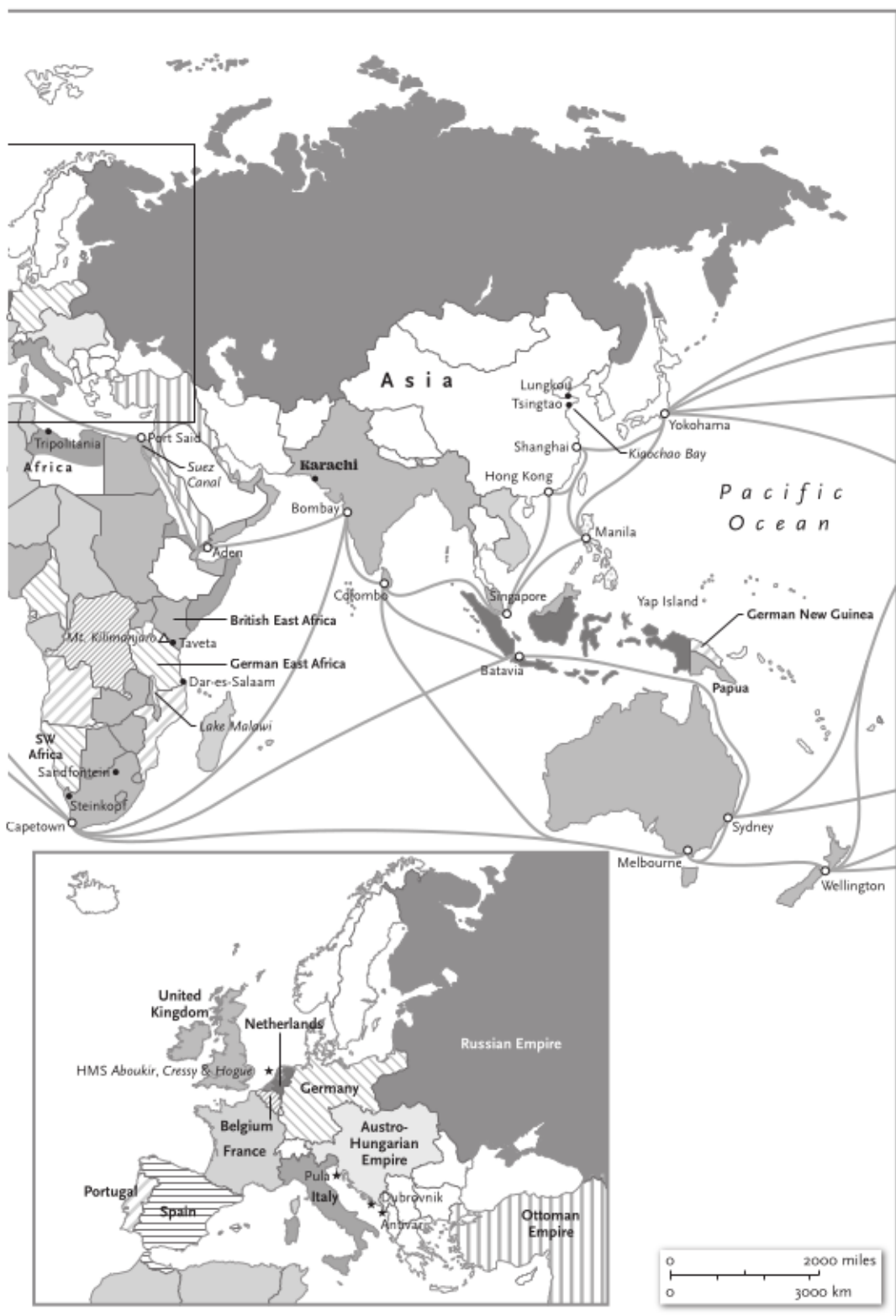
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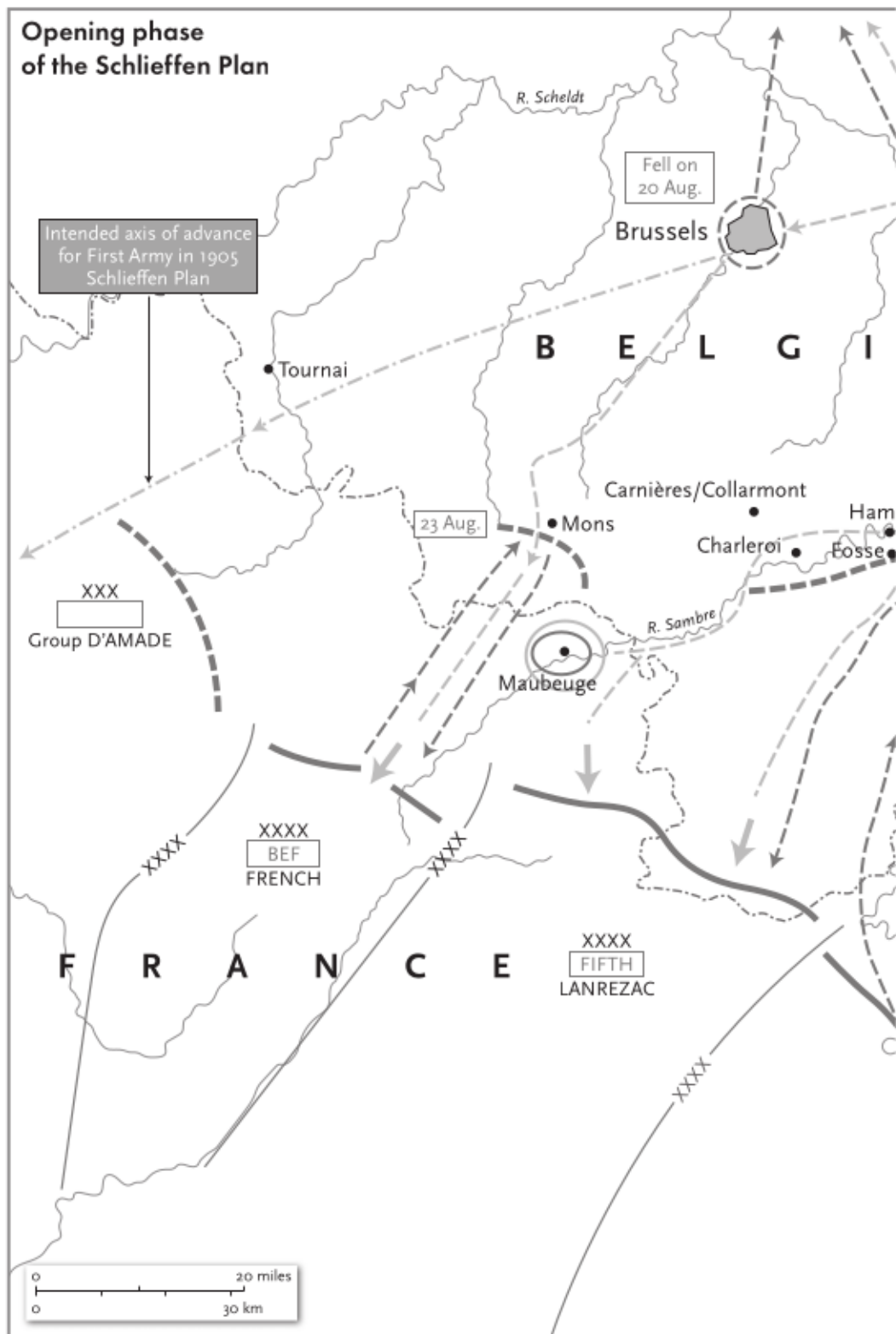
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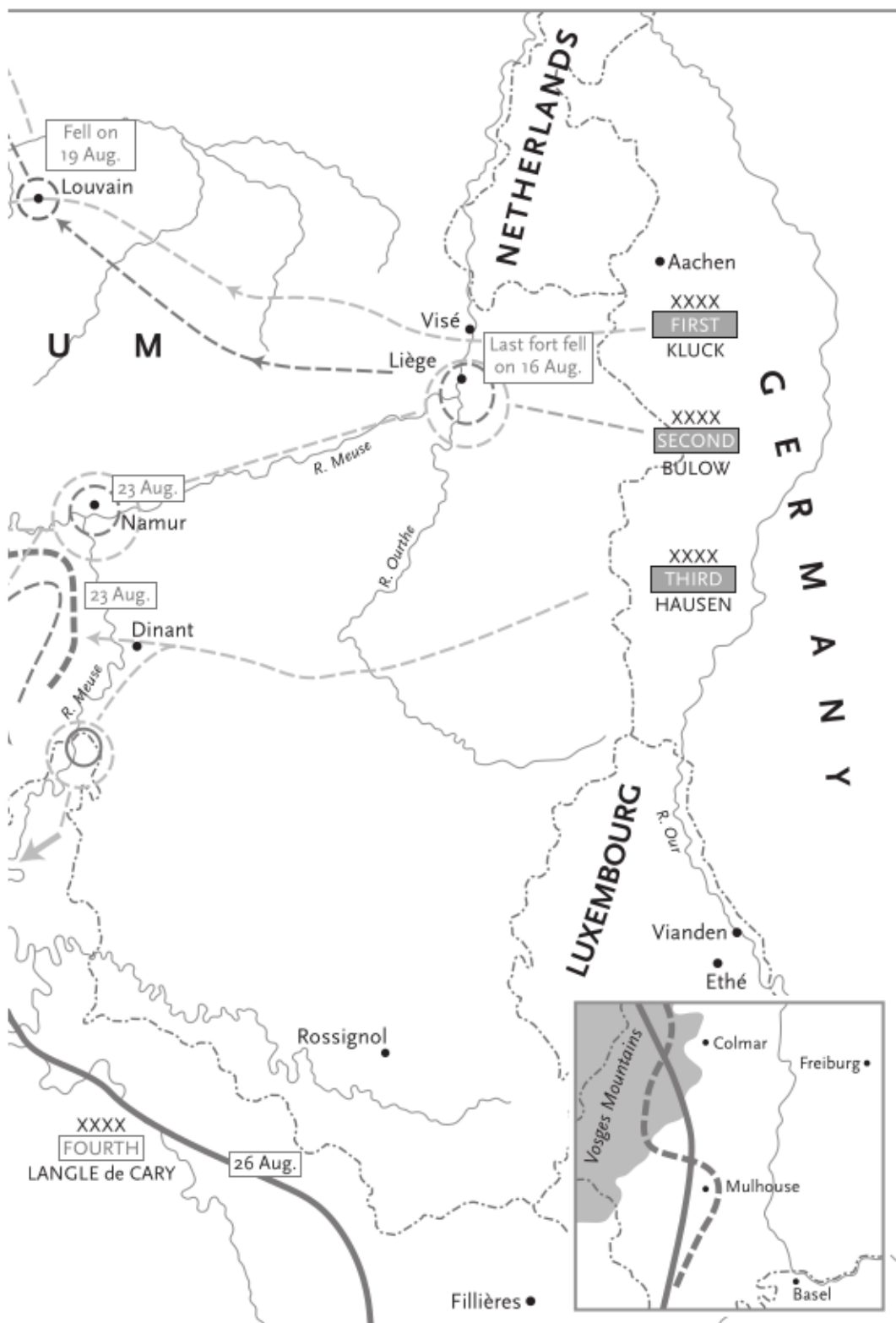
Global map, 1914



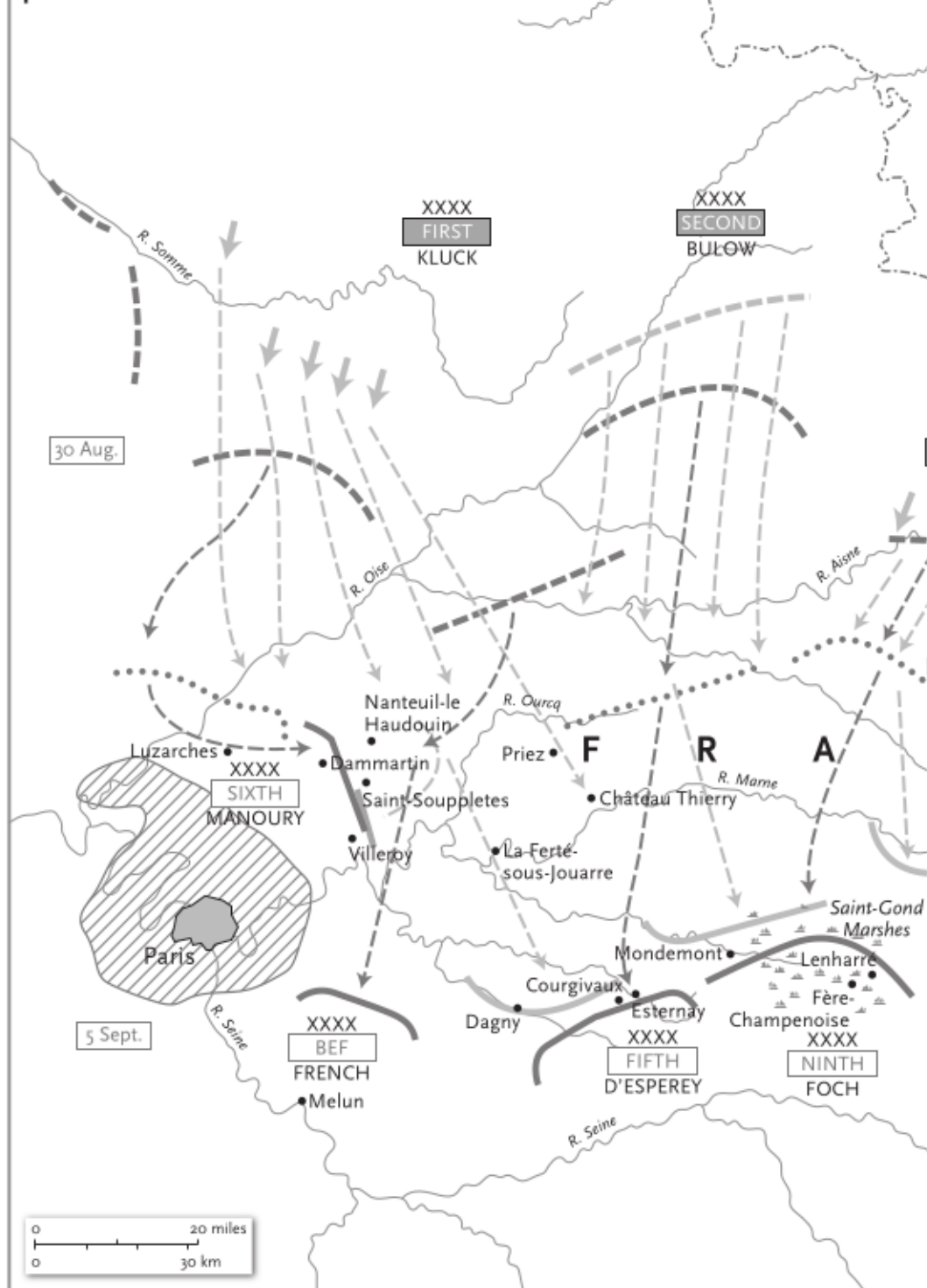


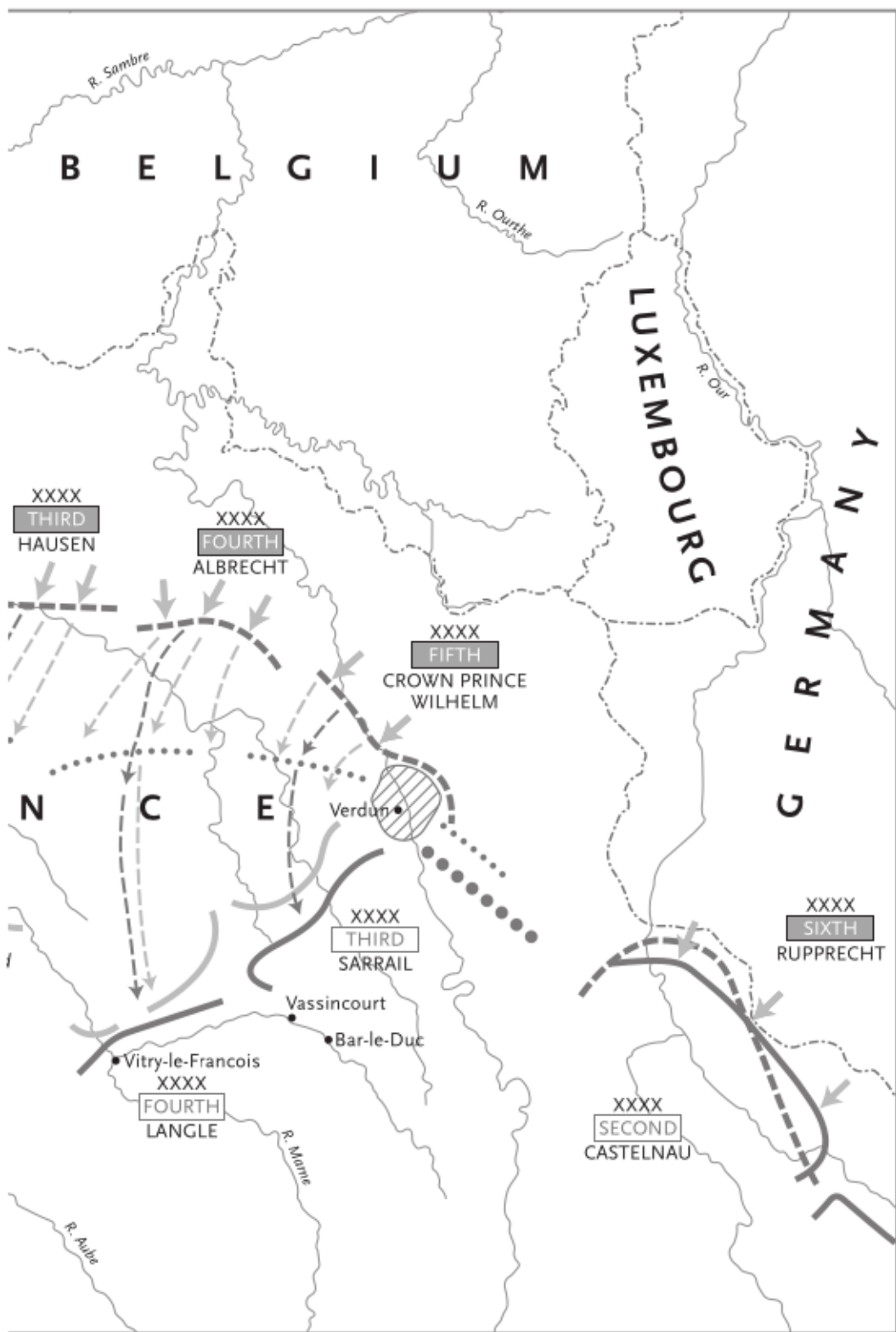
Opening phase of the Schlieffen Plan





The final stages of the German push towards Paris





Eastern Front





Balkans



Introduction

The opening weeks of the First World War shaped everything that was to come in Europe and beyond. More than any other part of the conflict, the events of August and September 1914 ordained what would happen before peace was achieved in 1918. Even then, the grandiose plans for a swift decisive outcome executed in this period, their failure, and the far-reaching consequences of every combatant nation repeatedly trying to find a solution to the conundrum of modern, industrialized warfare would continue to have a knock-on effect for decades. There are even some historians who claim that the Second World War is the same conflict, with a break in between.

Millions of words have been expended on *why* the First World War began; chronicling alliances, old grudges and political machinations and turning points. In this book, we're sticking to a different theme, and that is *how*. How did these weeks appear to those experiencing them in myriad different ways? How well did people appreciate the sheer magnitude of the events sweeping them off their feet and altering their lives and the world in which they lived for good? How did they feel? *What did 1914 look like from the inside?* We've taken the outbreak of war and reconstructed it through the eyes of everyday men, women and children; not those stalking the corridors of power and setting events in motion.

Nobody anywhere on earth had one single response to the outbreak of war in 1914. Alan 'Tommy' Lascelles was destined to one day serve as Private Secretary to multiple British sovereigns, but on 31 July 1914, he was a twenty-seven-year-old traveller

hurrying home from South America, confused, worried that it would be over before he returned. He said that it was 'like dropping 100 years through space, and waking up in another century'.¹

We think about the First World War in absolutes. This country declared war on this day, this battle started and ended then. However, even at the beginning, though the hope until the very last was that it might all come to nothing and everyone might be able to stand down and go home, no nation simply went to war on one specific day. The reality of July and August 1914 was that countries were mobilized in stages, not on a whim. Britain was an exception, since to all intents and purposes the Royal Navy was at war for a week before war was formally declared on 4 August. Just like Europe's armies, naval men crept steadily towards readiness, just in case.

Along the south coast of England, sailors' plans for how to spend their leave – to gamble, joy-ride, feast on lobster or dance – crumbled. Some officers remembered seeing a vague reference to trouble in the Balkans, but eyebrows were barely raised. There was always trouble in the Balkans. The next day, notices were flashed on cinema screens ashore, recalling men to their ships. The navy was being sent to its war stations. Chutes dumped piles of coal on decks and men scrambled to get it into bunkers. Off Dover, a daunting line of warships exited the straits in procession, lit up by powerful searchlights sweeping the Channel. As they sailed north, men dug out ammunition, fused shells and manned the guns. They put warheads on the torpedoes. 'After this war was looked on as an odds-on chance.'²

The main strength of the Royal Navy made for the Orkney Islands in miserable weather; a steady drizzle and strong winds. Daylight on 1 August revealed countless ships ensconced in the vast, sheltered enclave of Scapa Flow. 'In the Fleet the general attitude was a longing for more news and annoyance at being so cut off from the world.'³ Rumours filled the void. One elderly local had been telling sailors that: 'all the butchers from the Fleet had been landed the previous night, that they had slaughtered continuously at Kirkwall till 3.00 a.m. in order to get meat for

the ships'.⁴ At that point, exhausted by this frenzied savagery, the butchers had apparently passed out oblivious in puddles of blood. The storyteller solemnly claimed that he could not possibly guess how many animals had been done to death.

In ports around the world, the Royal Navy beached tables, chairs, chests of drawers. Days before Britain was officially at war, aboard HMS *Southampton* at Scapa, Stephen King-Hall was put in charge of stripping wood off the decks, since splinters flying through the air in battle could be catastrophic. 'I left the ship in charge of a miscellaneous assortment of cutters, whalers, and skiffs, which were to be... hauled up on the beach... I noted with amusement that one of the boats was the... craft, [on which] myself and fifteen others were supposed to seek safety in the case of the necessity of abandoning ship ever arising.'⁵

*

On 4 August, the day that Britain finally declared war, in Paris a memorable scene played out in the Chamber of Deputies. It was packed to capacity. Many of the representatives were reservists and took their seats in uniform. One witness watched Prime Minister René Viviani give a speech 'in which he placed upon Germany crushing responsibility for the catastrophe which has overtaken Europe'. He was constantly interrupted by shouts of *Vive la France!* He finished: 'We are without reproach. We shall be without fear!'

[He] swept the whole Chamber off its feet. The vast [room] was a compact mass of cheering deputies, all waving aloft in their hands papers and handkerchiefs. From the tribunes of the public gallery shout after shout went up. At the foot of the presidential platform the grey-haired usher, with his 1870 war medals on his breast, was seated, overcome with emotion, the tears coursing down his cheeks.⁶

Why was the elderly usher crying? Was he moved to tears of joy, because he thought that Alsace and Lorraine were about to

be avenged? Or was he terrified? Was it because he might now outlive his sons? Was he feeling all of those emotions at the same time?

*

A common image of those days in the summer of 1914 is one of enthusiasm, a universal 'spirit'; people waving flags and rushing forth in their eagerness to fling themselves at the enemy. That sentiment did indeed exist in some places. For several nights, large crowds took to the streets of Berlin. They sang *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles. Burgfrieden*, or 'fortress truce', was an old principle that called for a nationwide unity; and it was called for again now by the Kaiser.

If Germany had *Burgfrieden*, France found solidarity in the *Union sacrée*. This 'Sacred Union' pulled all political parties together in defence of the country. Far from Paris in Corsica, men sang *La Marseillaise*. Across the island, the tricolour flag was waved with the Union Flag and that of Russia. 'We did not hesitate to make the air ring out with numerous revolver shots,' wrote one witness. 'The spirit of the population is excellent.'⁷

In Brno, 130 miles south-east of Prague, Oscar Bittner was serving with an artillery regiment in the Austro-Hungarian army. 'The enthusiasm of the population was indescribable. An actual, unaffected enthusiasm from all walks of life and from all nationalities... It happened to me like many other soldiers and officers that you were suddenly lifted onto the shoulders of complete strangers and carried through the streets a long way with shouts of "*Hoch die Armee*". The jubilation was universal.'

But was it? In Germany, one publication commented on the composition of those patriotic crowds in Berlin: 'it wasn't poor workers whose poverty and agony, whose need and suffering, whose anger over the bloody mockery of their rights and interests has driven them to the streets; it was youth, dressed in the... latest fashion... students and sales clerks... and debonair types'.⁸ As the week went on, in cities like Dortmund, those gathering were characterized as drunken louts with nothing better to do.

A huge crowd assembled outside the Winter Palace in St Petersburg. It was uniquely diverse, in that among some 250,000 people, the working class was heavily represented. 'All of Palace Square was filled to overflowing with people,' wrote a watching priest. 'Workers, members of the intelligentsia, women and children stood shoulder to shoulder. It seemed as if the whole population of St Petersburg had flocked there.'⁹ When the tsar appeared, people spontaneously fell to their knees. 'The mood of the masses is most patriotic,' a young officer told his father. 'As I passed through a crowd, people leapt onto the footboards of my cab and kissed the shoulder straps of my uniform.'¹⁰ All of this flew in the face of the German ambassador in St Petersburg, who had predicted a revolution as soon as war was declared.

Perhaps surprisingly, the biggest crowds of all assembled on the other side of the Atlantic in a country that was not even going to war. America was a nation of immigrants, many of whom felt ties to an old homeland. Up to 400,000 people fanned out from Times Square in New York. Crowds marched up and down Broadway. More groups gathered in Greenwich Village and on both the Upper and Lower East Sides. Two days later, the mayor was so fed up with the disruption that he put out an edict forbidding any more demonstrations.

The 'Spirit of 1914' frequently comprised an element of patriotic resolve. 'I experience cruel anguish,' wrote one Frenchman on his way to the front:

I know what our adversaries are worth; their army is the most formidable military instrument the world has ever known; to get out of this mess... it will be necessary for us soldiers to fight with superhuman energy and courage... good news arrives from hour to hour: around Germany and Austria a ring of iron and fire is taking shape.¹¹

In Berlin, Otto Braun had only just turned seventeen, and he tried to articulate his feelings to his father. 'Germany cannot perish... we have not yet fully realized ourselves. The Germany we carry

in our hearts is not yet incorporated in concrete form... It seems stupid and contemptible to spare or preserve oneself... I want to fight for the preservation of the German spirit and for its fulfilment. Who and what could hold me back from this?'¹²

The most obvious manifestation of enthusiasm was in the shape of men racing to enlist. In most countries those left to come forward of their own accord were not generally deemed suitable for service. In Freiburg, boys as young as fourteen poured out of secondary schools to try to get into the German army. At the other end of the scale, August Würth, a seventy-four-year-old veteran of the Franco-Prussian War, wanted to serve again. One hundred criminals were even pardoned from the local jail so that they might redeem themselves in uniform.

In Belgium, as many as 20,000 additional men came forward. In Mechelen, men in their forties and boys of sixteen waited in long lines. Meanwhile, Russia was carrying out the first general mobilization of reserve armed forces in her history. On the one hand, the authorities expected the surge they saw in young men at the upper end of society trying to obtain exemptions from military service. On the other hand, what they did not expect was the enthusiasm from thousands of others who had not been summoned. They were largely made up of ethnicities like Tatar Muslims who were exempt from conscription, or the lower tier of the militia, or even those who had an existing deferral that they now wanted to ignore. The government had no contingency for dealing with these volunteers, and it was not until war actually broke out that they managed to set up the infrastructure to process them.

The famous phenomena that saw men queue for hours at a time in their thousands was a short-lived British experience for one reason. Britain did not employ conscription, so had not already mobilized her potential manpower. As a result civilians raced to volunteer in August and September 1914. By October, numbers dwindled rapidly again, but for a few weeks, men and boys went to great lengths to enlist. Raymond Mann was fifteen years old and was swept along on a tide of patriotism:

On about the 4th August I went down to... Trafalgar Square and bought myself a driving licence... I went to North Kensington to try and join motorcycle despatch riders and further down the road to Talbot's Works, but couldn't get accepted. However, by some means, I found out that there was a unit of motor transport being formed at Kew Gardens and on 12th August I went in the gates, and up the drive, and joined the few people queuing outside a tent to join the army. I remember very well being asked my age. I said 18.¹³

*

So although the 'Spirit of 1914' did exist, considering this reaction in isolation is like looking at a work of art with your nose pressed against it. The whole picture was far more complex. Rushing to the colours did not necessarily mean that a man was filled with blind, unquestioning patriotism. Honour, duty and peer pressure all motivated men to go to war in 1914. Mikhail Lemke reasoned with himself that his call-up this time was a far cry from the Russo-Japanese War. He was fighting this time 'not because I rush into battle as a loyal subject of Nicholas... in contrast to 1904, I have no reason to consider this war exclusively the work of the Tsar and his associates'.¹⁴ This war was international, a clash of empires and a fight for survival, not a land grab for the benefit of an autocrat. Russian officer Alexander Verkhovsky thought that he knew what everyone was really thinking. 'Twenty million people... have abandoned their homes and families, [for] death and suffering, without personally expecting any benefits... But if you ask each of these twenty million quietly, so that no one hears, whether he would like to return home and not go to war? Undoubtedly, nineteen million out of twenty will say with conviction: "Let's go home."'¹⁵

In deepest Asia, boredom was as much a motivator as defending Russia. Fifteen-year-old Laila Sharov lived in Manchuria. Her father was on the staff of the Chinese Eastern Railroad Company, which was controlled by the Russian government.

When war broke out, the Russian community in Harbin, some 40,000 people, erupted:

The mood rose to a fever pitch... Nearly everyone was ready to [fight]. They were tired of the atmosphere they themselves had created... Tired of 'wine and women', the lavish spending of money and the continuous, meaningless gaiety. Everyone wanted a goal in life, a golden halo around his head. War and Russia were the answer, leading to new adventures and new excitement.¹⁶

In places like Australia, some immigrants saw war as a free passage back to Europe. In East Africa, of a large number of men interviewed in Nyasaland, modern Malawi, a few said that they went because it was the manly thing to do, but the overwhelming majority volunteered to fight for one thing: to escape crippling poverty. Armed service offered a massive windfall. 'I was there with them because I wanted money,' said Joseph Mandana.¹⁷ Enlisting was an economic transaction. The promise of £5 payable to those left behind if he died was also tantalising. Men also coveted the uniform, free clothes and more. When Kazibule Dabi was asked why he chose to fight for Germany, he replied: 'They said that after the war they would build us brick houses with an iron roof and that we would live in our own country.'¹⁸ Mbwana Mdoke summed it up from the village of Chindamba: 'People went in the way they go into the mines here. Nobody doesn't know that life in the mines is miserable, but people still go. It is money they want.'¹⁹

The same logic prevailed in North Africa. Mustafa Tabti was an Arab tribesman who had served the French as a teenager, motivated by the idea of adventure and the desire 'to play with gunpowder'.²⁰ Since then, he had spent twenty years scraping a living. He enlisted again in his mid-thirties because the French army could promise him food, a place to live and a regular income.

Some people did remain excited as the war began. They felt a sense of anticipation about what was to come. Across the globe,

the clamour for news did not subside. In Morocco, where he was stationed with a French colonial unit, Senegalese soldier Bakary Diallo remarked that:

Casablanca looks and feels different... Bugles sound everywhere... The Serjeant-major reads a despatch out loud. It's a bit long and we only grasp two things from it: 'Germany has declared war on France... And France calls on all her children.' Once we've understood... we get giddier and giddier. It's incredible how a sense of excitement takes hold of us, overwhelms us, lifts our souls aloft.²¹

*

There seemed to be no escaping the outbreak of war. Strangers chattered on the top decks of London's buses. In Buenos Aires, 'loudly with truly extraordinary interest... nothing else was discussed in theatres, on the streets, on public walks, and wherever a group of people formed'.²² Even in Theiriati, a sleepy village high in the hills in the remote north-east of India, inhabitants were mesmerized by the war. 'Since that time', recalled one local, 'everyone, male or female, except small children, became very interested in getting news... It became the main subject of conversation in all gatherings.'²³

It is also important to remember that someone waving a flag and cheering in early August might have felt very different a week later. After exuberance, for some came relief. 'The incomprehensible and yet long expected has really come,' wrote Walter von Rummel. 'At last! No matter what grave and even graver things may come, the last weeks, and especially the last days were unbearable. The leaden nightmare grew hourly more oppressing.'²⁴

People were also confused. Every nation had blurred lines within it when it came to loyalties. A Pole might find himself called to serve Germany, Russia or Austria-Hungary. Was he loyal to one of those? Or to a free Poland? Twenty-one-year-old Stanislaw Kawczak was a student, but was carrying out his

national service in Kraków, wearing an Austro-Hungarian uniform. Desperate for news, he went to the university:

The billiards room was in an uproar. Everybody was arguing... We should take advantage of this unique moment, as another such occasion is not likely to happen. I trudged back to the barracks, pondering what to do. Should I desert? I could not reconcile myself to it somehow... while in the Austrian army I could merely expect hardship, compulsion, mistrust, if not hatred from the Germans.²⁵

There were no appealing choices.

✧

Once the war began, the nature of the crowds changed. In Glasgow, clerk Thomas Macmillan thought people looked rudderless. 'The street was abnormally busy: people of all ages were walking rather aimlessly about... while scattered here and there were groups, earnestly discussing the momentous news.'²⁶ On the Ramblas in Barcelona, too, people wandered about trying to make sense of events. In Nyasaland, churchman Petro Kilekwa was being subjected to a barrage of questions. He had preached to indigenous flocks about Christian love and charity. Now they wanted to know: 'Are the Germans Christians? Why have the Christians gone to war?'²⁷ On the other side of the continent, in what is now Mali, confusion was also rife. Baye Tabéma Tembélé, a soldier, tried to explain events to his family: 'I know Europeans well and all the twists and turns of their words... I have the impression that before long the gunpowder will speak in France.'²⁸ Tembélé showed more understanding than certain troops in Russia. There, General Alexei Brusilov asked some of his men why they thought they were at war. The answer was always that 'some [man] and his wife were killed by someone, and therefore the Austrians wanted to offend the Serbs... who the Serbs were, almost no one knew, what are Slavs, that was also dark, and why the Germans decided to fight because of Serbia, that was completely unknown'.²⁹

If some people were baffled about what was happening, it passed others by completely. This was especially so among children, who had more immediate concerns than comprehending the indirect impact of a global conflict. In South Wales, when Bessie Davies heard her parents talking about the outbreak of war, she was ambivalent. A far-away war could not compare to what she had seen with her own eyes: a colliery explosion a few months before. 'Four hundred and thirty-nine men and boys lost their lives... for days and days they were bringing out the dead... [The war] didn't seem nothing to me to what the explosion was because I knew people that had been killed.'³⁰

In West Africa, Amadou Hampâté Ba Amkoullel had fresh recollections of a famine that impacted the entire Niger Bend region. The memory of watching people tossed into mass graves far surpassed the outbreak of a war in Europe:

We saw two men... each dragging the body of a human by the feet. Now, if one is dead, the other is visibly still only dying. The two gravediggers, hardened, perhaps, by habit, laugh and speak loudly as if they were dragging... common tree branches. Arriving at the edge of the mass grave, they throw the two bodies there, then turn on their heels and leave.

But one of the bodies was still alive.

The dying person, in a last burst of his desire to live, lets out a hoarse moan... His fingers, convulsed, try in vain to hold on to something. His body twitches, liquid oozes from his mouth. Suddenly it stiffens like dry wood, then, a few seconds later, sags limply. His motionless, almost white eyes remain focused on the sky. The unfortunate man has just expired, already lying among the dead.³¹

Some people's response to the outbreak of war was selfish, as opposed to disinterested. Alan Lascelles was disgusted by this sentiment in South America:

Most of the Anglo-Argentines look on the whole thing solely from the point of view of their immediate business interests, much as if we had missed a train... One man was in a tearing fuss for fear he should miss a meeting... and a little rat sitting opposite me said he had just resigned his commission in the territorials, so he needn't go home. I told him without any justification I fear, that he would almost certainly be shot as a deserter if he didn't, which scared him considerably.³²

Others reacted with complete disbelief. Many people clung to the idea that the war would be short, but did they actually believe it or was this a comfort in trying to process terrifying events? Some reasoned that war was so expensive, that nobody could keep it up for long on this scale. But at what point were people latching onto the idea of a short war to make themselves feel better? *It will all be over soon. It won't be as bad as we expected.*

When the reality of the war's probable length emerged, people sank into depression. Some men were mortified at the thought that they could have done more to maintain peace. When Walter Page, the US Ambassador to London, went to see his German counterpart, Prince Lichnowsky, he found his colleague distraught in his pyjamas. Page thought that the prince 'might literally go mad' and called this interview 'one of the most pathetic experiences of my life'.³³ When Page met with Edward Grey, Britain's foreign secretary, the British statesman sat and cried.

In the Paris suburbs, priest Felix Klein was plagued with dark thoughts and insomnia. 'I have felt myself incapable of settling down to any occupation... The writings I had on hand are abandoned; no more correspondence even... The night was worse than the day. I don't speak only of the [insomnia] that would not allow sleep lasting more than five minutes.' He thought the noise would drive him mad:

Train followed train with intervals of just a few minutes... heavy carts, motor-cars shook the ground. Over my head...

squadrons of aeroplanes hummed... It was truly like the sound of a flood, a flood at the height of a storm, but which, instead of waves to the distant sea, was rolling men, men, and still more men into the jaws of the guns.³⁴

There were clear distinctions throughout the world based on class. For those living on the poverty line, giving up pay to loiter in the streets and sing songs was not an option, and being sent away to war and potential death was nothing to be excited about if your family could barely make ends meet. In a locomotive plant in Kharkov, 300 miles east of Kyiv, hundreds of workers gathered in the courtyard. Alexei Selyavkin noticed that 'they stood in silence with stern, gloomy faces, smoked, and occasionally exchanged remarks about the bitter fate of their loved ones being abandoned'.³⁵ Karel Tůma, a Czech miner in Bohemia said the same thing: 'People standing around, crying and wailing, while others are already going to the pub to drink in mourning.'³⁶

People were also rightly terrified in 1914. War was a career for many men. They had trained for this eventuality, but it did not mean that they were not afraid. On HMS *Marlborough*, James Somerville panicked when Britain's ultimatum to Germany expired. 'I felt sure we should be attacked during the night. It's a bit trying to the nerves, expecting to be blown up at any moment but I don't think I showed it and I did my best to encourage my staff with many quips and jests.'³⁷ General Émile Fayolle was destined to win fame in this war, but as hostilities commenced, he, too, was scared. 'I'm afraid of being afraid, of being inferior to my task,' the Frenchman wrote.³⁸

At the other end of the ranks, soldier Dominik Richert was twenty years old and serving in Mulhouse in the 'lost' province of Alsace when he heard that war had broken out. His comrades burst into a rendition of *Deutschland über alles*. Dominik did not join in. 'I did not feel like singing, because I thought straight away that the most likely thing that can happen to you in a war is that you will be shot dead. That was

a really unpleasant prospect. In addition, I was worried about my relatives and my home, because they were near the border and therefore at risk of being destroyed.³⁹ Frenchman André de Maricourt feared for his mother. '[She] has "guts", but... at 76 seeing the Germans a second time would be difficult.' She was preoccupied with invasion. 'To anticipate everything I look for hiding places. Obviously, you have to be ready... In any case, the clear role now is to try and instil in women a confidence that I would like to have.'⁴⁰ Concerns varied, but the world over, fear reigned. In the Netherlands, defensive strategies included flooding flat landscapes to hold back an invader. When people realized that if war broke out their homes and businesses would be inundated, they panicked, 'stacking furniture, taking down curtains, and storing food, hay, and fodder in their attics'.⁴¹

Karonga lies on the far north-western side of Lake Malawi, which means that in 1914 it sat in British Nyasaland and faced German East Africa. The lake is one of the largest in Africa, and whoever dominated it would have the upper hand in the region when war came. The locals articulated different reasons for their fear: 'We were afraid because we knew the whites would take us to war to fight for them,' said Vmande Kaombe.⁴² An impending sense of Armageddon terrified more than one young person: 'I was very much terrified when the old people said that this war would wipe out all the human race; we would all perish,' recalled Diamond Chirwa.⁴³ Young Konsala Mwakisahi learnt of the war on seeing the British at district headquarters digging shelters. 'When we asked, they told us the Germans were coming. I don't remember clearly, but we were filled with fear of death and began to make preparations for escape to the hills.'⁴⁴ This flight was not an isolated occurrence. Many opted to run and hide from the white man's war. At the southern end of the lake, with long memories of slave traders and previous conflicts, people fled into the bush. They gradually returned, 'but for the better part of a week there was scarcely a soul about the place'.⁴⁵

Across the world, fear and a lack of information led to rumours and then panic. The most common manifestation of this was spy fever. Germany was said to be overrun with Russian agents. Vigilantes prowled the country looking for them. In Munich, Ernst Toller witnessed a grim attack: 'Somebody had heard two women speaking French, and they were immediately surrounded and set upon. They protested that they were Germans, but it did not avail them in the least; with torn clothes, disheveled hair and bleeding faces they were taken off by the police.'⁴⁶ Berliners were convinced that Russians had poisoned the Muggel-See, which supplied part of the city's water. Based on similar nonsense, the people of Brussels were attempting to brew tea using rainwater. In France, Maggi incurred the wrath of a mob. Rumours spread first that the dairy company was backed by German money, then that it had sold milk poisoned by an enemy agent, killing 300 children in Boulogne. Felix Klein described the destruction of one of their shops in Paris:

Most of the raiders were women. There was some jesting, and some dry wit, but mostly it was serious business. The work was carried forward painstakingly and thoroughly. The iron screen... was torn off... and the window itself was smashed to bits... every bit of glass or crockery was shattered into fragments against the sidewalk and the pieces were ground into powder under the heels of the raiders. Account books... were torn sheet by sheet into the tiniest bits and strewn up and down the street... and all wood-work was smashed into kindling.⁴⁷

One last, obvious emotion evident across the planet on the outbreak of war was anger. Ferdinando Martini, the Italian colonial minister, was enraged with the regimes involved:

These emperors in their proclamations and speeches always speak of God and invoke him. But do they believe in God? And if they believe it, how have they not refrained from

throwing Europe... into the abyss of desolation and misfortune? And how can they think that God does not punish them for their bloody outrage, their boundless ambition?⁴⁸

In Russia, a unique situation resulted in violence. People were distinctly unimpressed with the government's decision to ban the sale of alcohol. Not only that, but supplies were supposed to be destroyed. This was coming at precisely the time when most Russians felt a particular need to drink. In Naumiestis, 150 miles north-west of Vilna in Lithuania, the authorities seized boxes of vodka, took them out on the street and smashed them. 'Vodka like rainwater flowed on a pavement down to the Šešupė river', wrote one resident, 'as locals jumped to the alcohol rivulet with buckets, boxes, and empty bottles ignoring the gendarmes who tried to chase them away.' One hundred miles south-east at Suwałki, near the border with East Prussia, there were bizarre scenes the day after the ban came into effect, when the local police chief wanted everyone to take their supply up a hill to smash it. People sobbed. 'The peasants threw themselves down on the ground, lapped the vodka with their tongues, and when they could swallow no more they rolled over and over in it!'⁴⁹

The alcohol ban came on top of mobilization, the departure of breadwinners, and a loss of freedoms and property associated with the war. Two thousand miles away from St Petersburg, where these laws were being made, in Siberia, there was significant unrest. Soldiers had to be called in. 'The mobs threw stones at them, one rifleman was wounded with bullets, as a result of which the troops opened fire... two were killed, two were seriously wounded,' read one account. The requisitioning of horses was halted. The worst incident of 1914 occurred in Barnaul, a city some 220 miles south of Tomsk, closer to Mongolia than it was to Europe and the main theatres of war. Rioters set fire to houses, shops and a warehouse that held alcohol, and more than a hundred men died in a string of tiny battles with the authorities.

All over the world, people had a sense of what was to come: hardship and loss. Joseph Ilyin, a Russian officer, was disgusted

when he and his men received a telegram from a general celebrating the fact that Germany had declared war on Russia. 'I just can't understand, what is there to congratulate! Mass slaughter, hundreds of thousands of mutilated, ruined cities and villages!' Writer Zinaida Gippius, one of the major figures in Russia's symbolism movement, declared: 'Now Europe is a ring of fire... I look at these lines, written by my hand, as if I was out of my mind. *World War!*'⁵⁰ The American ambassador to London, Walter Page, had watched the terrifying spectre of war unfold in the English countryside:

I walked out in the night a while ago. The stars are bright, the night is silent. The country quiet... Millions of men are in camp and on warships. Will they all have to fight and many of them die, to untangle this network of treaties and alliances, and to blow off huge debts with gunpowder so that the world may start again?⁵¹

What is to Become of Us?

The outbreak of war caused millions of people to move from one place to another. By far the most regimented cause of the massive displacement witnessed in 1914 was the mobilization of armies and navies around the world. The largest number of men in history was being brought forward to participate in a war, and significantly, not primarily because they wanted to fight, but because they had been forced to.

The methods used to summon these men were diverse. In France, posters went up in Paris. At Besançon, close to the border with Switzerland, a gun was fired. 'A silent stupor invades the crowd,' wrote a local priest. 'Everyone stops nailed to the spot... A second cannon shot heightens the emotion; cries escape from the lips; women cry and hide their faces with their hands.'¹ In Belgium, policemen walked the streets with letters, while in Copenhagen, twenty-year-old factory worker Åge Houlby was woken up at midnight by his mother after a yellow notice was presented at the front door ordering him to report for duty immediately. In rural areas of Europe, the news often came by messenger, in a car, or on a horse.

In Turkey, where a large part of the population was illiterate, men walked through towns and villages rhythmically chanting the contents of mobilization orders, accompanied by musical instruments. Ismail Hakki Bey even composed *The Patriotic March* to accompany them. At the conclusion of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which occurred at the end of August

1914, the French used similar methods to start recruiting North Africans in large numbers. Drummers came into public spaces in smart, colourful uniforms, accompanied by the high-pitched sound of the *ghaita*, a double-reed horn. 'The serjeant-major brought the music to an end once it had achieved the desired effect,' Messali Hadj recalled. 'An Arab serjeant would take the floor and elaborate with great eloquence all of the benefits that volunteers would enjoy. His propositions were most attractive, particularly to those with empty stomachs.' Their parents, on the other hand, 'lived in anguish' at the prospect of losing their sons to foreign wars.²

Men were not the only ones on their way to war. Women mobilized on a scale never seen before. They took on more roles, in larger numbers, than in any other conflict before 1914. Nursing was a traditional role for women in wartime. In Baku, deep in the Caucasus, Khristina Semina told her husband Ivan that she wanted to be a nurse. He was mortified, thinking she would not stand up to the strain, but as soon as he left for the front, she trained anyway. On 8 August, in Silesia, Ilse von Richthofen spent her birthday making herself a nurse's uniform. 'More than anything, [she] wants to lend a hand wherever she goes,' wrote her mother.³

Across Europe, women from wealthy backgrounds put their homes at the disposal of the war effort too. In London, affluent Mayfair was full of aristocratic women turning rooms over for convalescent officers and men. In Warsaw, Polish women, particularly the intelligentsia, came forward in numbers. To prepare for the wounded arriving from the front, they received permission from the Russian government to organize nursing courses, and luxurious homes were dedicated to convalescent men.

Women also fought as combatants from the beginning of the First World War. Some of the world's first female doctors, scholars and scientists came from Russia. There was also a long appreciation in Russian culture of strong female figures, so it should not be surprising that here, of all places, women found a way to the front. Some of these young women disguised themselves as

men, others assumed a sort of neutral gender, while others made no attempt to hide their sex. Some were from military families – Colonel Tomilovsky had more than one daughter procure a uniform to go and fight in 1914. One of them distinguished herself near Augustów in the opening weeks of the war. Working-class women also found ways to enlist. Sixteen-year-old Alexandra Shirakova was working in a tailor's shop in Moscow when the war broke out. She used shop materials to make herself clothes, cut off all of her hair and passed herself off as a teenage boy. She changed her name to Sasha, joined a unit going to the front and was soon under heavy fire. Further south, Cossack women could be especially keen to serve. In September, eighteen-year-old Tatiana Kaldinkhina convinced the military commander of Astrakhan, on the Caspian Sea, to send her to the front. She had lived alongside German immigrants, and using her language skills won numerous medals carrying out reconnaissance missions.⁴

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Mobilization did not mean fighting. It meant getting an army ready to fight if need be, and to that end, more countries underwent the process of preparing to fight than those generally described in 1914. They did not have a choice. From Bangkok, the government of Siam proclaimed neutrality as early as 6 August, but could not avoid sending men to defend Phuket from potential enemies or to southern provinces to protect German miners. In Switzerland, in just five days, almost 240,000 men were under arms, more than double the force of the one that Britain was sending to France. The Dutch mobilization plan was also highly detailed. Railways were seized immediately. By 4 August, more than 177,000 men had been moved, along with 6,600 horses and almost 500 vehicles.

In Italy, as early as 6 August reservists were blocked from leaving the country. In Turkey, mobilization began on 2 August and was described as 'a wholesale looting of the civilian population'. A brutal new edict demanding that men of all races and backgrounds come forward fell on a country that had recently gone

through similar turmoil during the Balkan Wars, with terrible results. At the British embassy, junior diplomat Charles Lister was sympathetic. 'The soldiers, called up for the fourth time within three years, cannot be fed, armed, or clothed. They openly state they will desert at the first opportunity.' Unsurprisingly, those that did report for duty often presented a diverse but miserable display of the Ottoman empire's manpower. On a scale never attempted before, more than a million men went into uniform:

Arabs, bootless and shoeless, dressed in their most gaily coloured garments, with long linen bags (containing the required five days' rations) thrown over their shoulders, shambling in their gait and bewildered in their manner, touched shoulders with equally dispirited Bedouin, suddenly snatched from the desert. A motley [collection] of Turks, Circassians, Greeks, Kurds, Armenians, and Jews, showing signs of having been summarily taken from their farms and shops, constantly jostled one another.⁵

In 1914, many men of service age from around the world found themselves in an absurd situation. Having emigrated, they were summoned back to the homelands they had chosen to leave behind to serve in the military. Austria-Hungary expected some 200,000 men in the United States to return to Europe. Germans in Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, the Carolinas and Florida were all ordered to report to Atlanta for transport back to Germany. There were similar drives to assemble reservists all over South America: in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Paraguay. By no means did all of these men want to comply. In New Orleans, plenty of Frenchmen refused. The French consul-general was outraged. He protested that such men were not only traitors and cowards, 'but are so void of honour that they should be denied the right of citizenship in the United States or other foreign countries'.⁶ He called for the French societies of New Orleans to throw them out. Nobody listened.

In reality, no government had the infrastructure, the money, or the time to focus on enforcing these orders in 1914. For example,

not only were emigrants born in Italy expected to return, but also so were second and third generation Italians, the children and grandchildren of these emigrants, who might never have set foot in Italy. The Italian government threatened those who did not comply, but was not always helped by other countries. Australia seemed willing to use police to force Italians to return for mobilization, but the largest group of Italians living outside their homeland were in America, and in August 1914, Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan announced that the US would not force any man born abroad to go 'home' and fight. In all, of the men expected to return to Italy, perhaps only about one in four actually did. As many as 800,000 Italians in America potentially ignored their summons.

Those who complied had complicated reasons. One young Italian had emigrated to Belgium with his father prior to the war. In September 1914 he received a telegram from Italy with details of his mobilization. He hoped to obtain a medical certificate in Belgium that would lead to his rejection for military service, meaning that he could stay in Brussels. His father ruined his plan: 'Papa absolutely wants to leave... and therefore I must accompany him in spite of myself... A son's duty compels me to follow Papa in such sad circumstances. So I leave but with sad premonitions.'⁷

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One thing that staggered people all over Europe on the outbreak of war was the extent of the planning that had gone into preparing for mobilization. Britain's rail network comprised some 23,000 miles of track. On 4 August 1914, 130 companies were effectively taken over by the government. At Aldershot, near London, from 5 August officers were being handed dossiers that revealed the plan for their departure. For instance: 'Train No. 463 Y will arrive at Siding B at 12.35 a.m., 10th August. You will complete loading by 3.40 a.m.'⁸ Troop trains bound for Southampton would soon be arriving on the coast every twelve minutes. Given 60 hours to send 350 trains to Southampton

packed with troops, the London and South Western Railway did it in 45.

Each country was faced with its own unique challenges, but broadly speaking, mobilized men on the continent were digging trenches and manning forts. They were also chopping down trees, commandeering strategically placed houses and razing buildings to the ground. There was a buzz about proceedings, fuelled by nerves. In Italy, a mad rush was on to find enough uniforms, while governments were stockpiling munitions, food and equipment for their armies. The Russian navy was chomping at the bit, too. Constantine Benckendorff had joined the *Poltava*, which was moored on the Neva at St Petersburg, now renamed Petrograd because it sounded less German. The navy had been humiliated a decade previously by its Japanese counterpart, but things had changed:

Stricter discipline, more formality in dress and harsher and more frequent punishment for petty crimes, were the outward manifestations of that state of affairs; even movement on deck had taken on a sort of goose-steppy... appearance. This, however, did not in any degree affect the keenness of all ranks to get to grips with the enemy... Both on the material side, and in training, great things had been achieved since the disasters in the Pacific, and this made all the younger men, both officers and ratings, only dimly conscious of any change, and rather proud of the sense of efficiency the new régime gave them.⁹

In Casablanca, tirailleur Bakary Diallo and his comrades also felt anticipation building. These African troops served France, and it quickly transpired that they would be shipped off to war. 'We're given uniforms made of thick dark material, the sleeves and collars edged with narrow yellow braid... The battalion marches to the harbour where we'll board our ships.' He felt a pang of sadness that instead of sailing for West Africa as planned, to see their families for the first time in years, they were rumoured to be

going to Europe. He felt embarrassed. 'I felt even worse hearing my brothers in arms say the name "France" over and over so passionately, like lovers coming to the rescue of a damsel in distress while I seemed to be the only one whose thoughts strayed from France back to Senegal.'¹⁰

For every excited man, there were many more who were miserable about the hand that fate had dealt them. Edward Spears spent decades in the British army and served in both world wars:

I have never met a conscripted soldier who did not long for his release, who did not find the call of duty an almost intolerable waste of the best years of his life, rendered bearable only by the sense of accomplishing a noble and necessary duty. On the contrary, anti-militarism is born in a barrack-room and gains vigour and strength by strenuous exercise on the square, while pack drill gives added bitterness to its spleen.¹¹

For half a century, Danes in Schleswig-Holstein had found themselves living under German rule. In 1914, this meant they were conscripted into the Kaiser's army. For men like Hans Petersen, the word '*Mobil*', was devastating. 'It was as if I'd witnessed something horrible. The word had a repulsive, ominous ring to it like sharp, piercing steel and iron.'¹² Some men simply did not turn up as commanded, choosing to become fugitives instead. In Paris, many "brave" petty bourgeois... took flight... Of all the French networks, that of Orleans, which connects Paris to the south-west, was the most crowded with these "cowards".¹³ Others did report for duty, then thought better of it. In Poland, in a district 70 miles north-west of Warsaw, of 2,000 men who initially reported at one depot, 10 per cent then disappeared.

Some felt duped into serving. In Corsica, the locals were fearful of Italy joining the war on the side of the Central Powers. The military governor on the island permitted anyone who came forward to volunteer; whether they be woefully underage and

lacking any parental consent, or elderly and infirm. Their expectation had been that they would be simply protecting their own homes, so men flooded forward, but then these recruits were summoned to mainland France. The 373^e Régiment d'Infanterie arrived at the front in September looking extremely conspicuous: 'greying beards and hair, sometimes white, old faces tanned by the sun'.¹⁴ Back in Corsica there were loud protests. Some of these men had left behind families of eight, even ten children.

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Throughout the world, men prepared to depart for war. At Louvain in Belgium, a medieval university town some 18 miles east of Brussels, a few soldiers were manning a guard post at dawn on 5 August:

With the first streaks of light we heard the rhythmic tramp of feet on the Malines road; soon singing became audible, and came nearer: we recognized the melody and the words of 'The Lion of Flanders'. Then, in the grey morning light, the head of the column appeared on the sunken road which enters the city... The soldiers passed with a joyful and proud air, in spite of the fatigue of the march, covered with dust and dripping with perspiration, but in perfect order, without stragglers.¹⁵

The population came out in force to cheer them on their way. 'They were overwhelmed with attention... Factory girls left their work to bring the soldiers their simple lunches, university professors kept open house and handed round armfuls of bottled beer.'¹⁶ The 'torrent of hospitality' was so generous that the authorities had to ask the townspeople to stop. South of the border with France, with the 276^e Régiment d'Infanterie, Victor Boudon watched their train pull slowly into the station:

In a few moments, from the first to the last car, our train is decorated, adorned with flags and flowers... Huge inscriptions... 'Pleasure Train for Berlin', 'Death to Guillaume and

the Boches!', 'Long Live France and its allies!' Caricatures, little flattering to our enemies, cover the train from one end to the other, while the front of the locomotive is adorned with a superb decoration with allied colours.¹⁷

Across Europe, plenty of conscripts dealt with their grim prospects by getting drunk. Georg Pöllmann embarked for war with the Austro-Hungarian army from Salzburg. 'When we arrived at the train station, we were given beer... Many a poor comrade probably drank down the pain.' In Normandy, 750 miles to the west, it seemed like the whole population turned out to bid goodbye to the 129th RI on 8 August. What they witnessed, according to twenty-four-year-old philosophy student Etienne Tanty, was drunk and disorderly:

The weather was sweltering... at 5.45 p.m., when the company was assembled, it was a spectacle which would have been comical, but which was not. It was just lamentable. Two-thirds no longer knew where they were, they lost everything, they turned everything upside down, they could no longer stand up, they showed up half-equipped, screaming.¹⁸

The overwhelming, gut-wrenching thread running through recollections of mobilization was the anguish of separation. Cossacks were a people well versed in sending their men to war. 'For centuries my people have been... a military nation,' wrote Marina Yurlova. 'Though not professional soldiers, they were in constant training and ready for any emergency... Cossacks, both men and women, have been brought up to believe that... when war is declared that their duty to country, religion, and Tsar becomes something not to be questioned.'¹⁹

None of this meant that departures were easy. Marina and her fellow villagers walked 3 miles to the station to see the men off. 'Fatigue and desperation and the choking dust made some of the women clutch at the men on horseback.' As the procession moved along, the men sang:

Hey, woman!
Your husband is a Cossack,
And die he surely must.
For country, for religion, for our father Tsar.
The time has come,
The time has come.
Die we must,
Die we must.
Hey! Cossacks, away! Away.²⁰

Scenes were even more pathetic when the men leaving were so clearly unsuited to the active service that they might have to face. In Antwerp, Jozef Muls watched 'all those elderly men in their often no longer appropriate military uniforms saying goodbye'. Meanwhile, in Copenhagen Agnes Bremer had been walking about in a state of shock for several days:

At the Storm Bridge, I saw conscripted young people in boats being sailed out to their barracks. They waved at us, and it seemed completely incomprehensible to me... what was the point of sending young people, who were about to start life, to war? Why didn't they send the old people, who had already had their time?²¹

Several Danes departing with the German army had their misery compounded by the fact that this did not feel like their fight. Karl Klemmesen had to bid goodbye to his wife and three-day-old daughter. 'I don't know how I managed to say goodbye to them both,' he later recalled. 'The thoughts were: will you see them again, or will you be a cripple, when you [do?]' And what was going to happen to them.²²

In Prague, Karel Tůma witnessed the assembling of a regiment in Wenceslas Square: 'I see women crying, while the soldiers are carrying children in their arms. In my mind I'm thinking: children, maybe your dad is carrying you for the last time.'²³ Some 20 miles away, thirteen-year-old Zdeňka Konopáskova's father was

a stationmaster at Kladno. She watched local men depart to join the Austro-Hungarian army. 'Already... all the roads in the area, converging on the station, spewed a flood of recruits. With their typical, black suitcases, with frightened children in their arms, they filled the station platform... It is as if they are accompanying the living to the grave.' With her mother and father, Zdeňka watched as isolated episodes of sadness combined to create a wider scene of human tragedy:

Here the old parents are saying goodbye to their only son. The father firmly shakes his hand and admonishes: 'Watch out for yourself and write often!' The mother, with tears, crosses and kisses him, begging the virgin Mary, so that she will protect her only child, she secretly slips a talisman of some kind into his pocket... There, a woman with three children. She lifts up one after the other and puts them in the arms of her husband, so that he can kiss them for the last time. The children, silent and frightened, widen their gullible eyes filled with tears, hard for them to understand what a tragic moment this is for them, they see only how the mother throws herself crying onto the chest of the father, who then disappears inside the carriage filled with the noisy mass of the conscripts. Maybe he'll disappear forever.²⁴

Similar, heartbreaking scenes were playing out in rural Russia. 'My God, how many tears were spilt when we had to go,' wrote Ivan Kuchernigo:

My five-year-old daughter sat in my arms and, pressing against me, said 'Daddy, why are you going? Why are you leaving us? Who's going to earn money and get bread for us?' Her little arms clasped me about the neck and tightly, tightly hugged me. I heard the beating of her little heart, and heard her lips begin to kiss my neck. I couldn't answer her questions, and couldn't hold back my own tears, and just answered, 'I'll be home soon, baby.'²⁵

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For the British Expeditionary Force, mobilization was complicated by the need to get some 80,000 men across the English Channel. In the years leading up to 1914, the army and the Royal Navy had worked out in minute detail how they would land this force. Instead of heading for the Belgian ports, or Calais, they would be making a longer, less obvious journey to the French harbours at Havre, Boulogne or even Rouen. At Avonmouth, in the south-west of England, most of the heavy transport was being embarked:

Outside the dock gates, by all the approach roads into the little town, there were streaming in hundreds upon hundreds of great motor lorries... The organisation of it!... You picture a vividly green lorry of a big whisky distillery up north, axle to axle with the scarlet of a Brixton firm with its blatant advertisement of somebody's corsets. 'Can't you imagine Tommy's comments when he finds a Johnnie Walker van bringing up his ammunition in the wilds of Belgium,' was the general remark, 'but I suppose they'll give them a coat of paint first.' They didn't, as a matter of fact; at least not for several months.²⁶

It was 'a period of extreme psychological tension' for Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty as the BEF prepared to cross the Channel.²⁷ The navy had envisaged every worst-case scenario: an attempted German invasion or a naval raid on the transports. There were to be no convoys. Instead, vessels were to sail in no more than pairs, as and when they were ready to leave. The navy kept a cautious distance. The system of cover was based on closing both ends of the Channel against raids. The only failsafe for the troops crossing to the continent was the Life Saving Patrol, small craft cobbled together and pressed into service, waiting to fish men out of the water if the enemy managed to slip into the Channel. On 12 August, the main bulk of the BEF began embarking, and would continue to do so for

nearly a week. Accordingly, the Grand Fleet sailed out into the North Sea to guard against the sudden emergence of the German High Seas Fleet.

Some 250 ships had to be requisitioned to carry the BEF, and the quality varied greatly. A man might find himself on an ocean liner built for comfort, or a tramp steamer that leaked. The *Seahound*, an Irish cattle boat, was filthy and still smeared with animal faeces. Those that could brave the cold stayed out on deck rather than sleep down below during the crossing. Army Service Corps officer Herbert Stewart was also uninspired when he passed through the dock gates at Southampton on the morning of 11 August, came along the wharf and found a tramp steamer dubbed the *Seven Seas*. 'There were no crowds, all goodbyes had been said outside the dock gates, and the dingy little steamer, our crowded condition on her decks, and our very meagre field kits, brought home to us the great errand on which we were bound.'²⁸ There was silence when the engine-bell clanged and the men felt the first throb of the engines. The cheer sending them on their way was muted, limited to the embarkation staff and dockworkers.

Intelligence Officer George Fletcher was luckier, and painted a rather more romantic picture of his departure on board a small ocean liner. 'You can well imagine the sailing of our transport... on a perfect summer evening down Southampton water was a thing that can never be forgotten.' His elder brother was an officer in the Royal Navy and George had consummate faith in its protective powers. 'We knew that we were safe in the hands of the navy after the lights of England had disappeared.' Herbert Stewart felt a similar sentiment when his transport passed a single destroyer about its business:

As she drew abreast the sailors whipped off their caps and cheered; the soldiers on *Seven Seas* swarmed up the rigging and returned their cries; then the ship cheerfully disappeared over the horizon with a wave from the commander. Her advent, however, gave us a feeling of security, and we

felt that though the British navy was out of sight yet our safety had been considered and provided for.²⁹

Far away, on *Canopus*, Captain Heathcoat Grant was nervous. 'We were in constant expectation of an attack... One misty morning it was confidently reported that three enemy cruisers were standing directly for us, and their appearance was sufficient to warrant all hands being at their action stations, until the doubtful craft were satisfactorily made out to be three of our own destroyers.'³⁰ Meanwhile, on *Agamemnon*, Midshipman Denham was bored of going back and forth. 'To cover against what? No one could explain. There was no sign of the enemy.'³¹

The last significant day saw thirty-four vessels make the crossing. In a week, little had occurred to panic the authorities. The tiny size of the BEF compared to the French and German contingents, which numbered in the millions, meant that the enemy's attitude was let them come. Some 80,000 men hardly threatened to derail German war plans. The Imperial German Navy, the *Kaiserliche Marine*, aware that it was outgunned by its British counterpart, knew exactly what would happen if they tried to disrupt the transportation. It was not worth the risk. 'We could only interfere with it at the price of a decisive battle with the English fleet,' wrote Admiral Reinhard Scheer.³²

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Throughout the world, some people found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time as war was declared. In the Grand Hotel in Paris, a note was posted at the counter: 'Germans and Austrians are kindly requested to leave the hotel without delay.'³³ The displaced persons who were arguably the easiest to deal with were tourists. They had homes to go to, and they wanted to return. They had just had the misfortune to find themselves abroad when the world caught fire. The problem was, though, that many of these tourists did not have the means or the connections to find their way home under the circumstances. In Germany, there was suddenly no post, while telegrams had to

be sent exclusively in German, and were liable for censorship. Letters of credit and traveller's cheques were no longer valid.

The obvious port of call for any citizen in distress was an embassy, and across Europe these were suddenly inundated. This was, after all, the height of the tourist season. Myron Herrick was the American ambassador in Paris. Most of those arriving at his door did not have passports, because people did not usually need them in 1914. Herrick and his staff had to design forms, print them up and issue them to people who were able to prove, somehow, that they were American citizens. Eric Fisher Wood was in Paris and immediately volunteered at the embassy. He watched as men and women blustered and made demands:

Most of them... announced to no one in particular that it was their right to see 'their Ambassador' in person. They demanded information! They needed money!... What was 'the government' going to do about sending them home? Was Paris safe? Would there be immediate attacks by Zeppelins? Could they deposit their jewels in the Embassy vaults? Were passports necessary? WHY were passports necessary? They asked the same questions over and over, and never listened to the answers.³⁴

In Berlin, the American ambassador James Gerard was undergoing a similar ordeal. He was buying steerage tickets in bulk, 200 or 300 at a time, and they were resold by his female volunteers, even given away to those with no funds. Typically, not everyone was grateful for the help that they received:

One morning an American woman spoke to me and said she would consent to go home on one of [our] ships provided she was given a state-room with a bath and Walker-Gordon milk for her children, while another woman of German extraction used to sit for hours in a corner of the ball-room, occasionally exclaiming aloud, with much feeling, 'O God, will them ships never come?'³⁵

One woman went on a hunger strike because she did not want to travel steerage. They sat her in a rocking chair in the lunch room and she abandoned her protest within a few hours. The most ludicrous demand belonged to the woman who wanted a written guarantee that their ship would not be sunk by a submarine. They made out a certificate to keep her quiet.

Aside from tourists, who were merely having to change their plans, across the world people who had emigrated at some point in their lives now found themselves unwelcome or unsafe. Italy was still officially an ally of Germany and Austria-Hungary, so thousands of Italian workers in France were given twenty-four hours to leave. As a result, neighbouring Switzerland experienced a massive influx of Italian refugees. By 10 August, the southern canton of Ticino alone had recorded an incredible 188,000 people moving towards the Italian peninsula. Spaniards who worked as labourers in France also saw their livelihoods implode. They poured south over the border in their thousands, to the extent that Spanish towns and local councils put them up in shelters and tried to reintegrate them back into their towns of origin.

Germans in Belgium ran for the Netherlands. By 3 August, the Dutch border town of Roosendaal was experiencing an invasion of its own as endless carts rolled into town. 'For a week, droves of German citizens cross the border,' wrote a local. 'They are loaded with suitcases, chests, baskets and makeshift bags... Among them are Jews of German nationality who have lived in Antwerp for years. I hear one ask a police officer in half-Flemish, half-German: "Can we stay here for the time being? We have at least four weeks' worth of money with us." The decent man says he has lived in Antwerp for thirty years and has now been forcibly driven home.'³⁶

As soon as Japan declared war against Germany, all Japanese people were imprisoned in the latter, supposedly for their own safety. Eventually it was arranged to get them out via Switzerland. Even members of a Siamese legation were treated badly. The explanation? They looked so like the Japanese to their European hosts that it was a case of mistaken identity. Regardless, 'for a

long time [they] did not dare move about freely in Berlin or even leave their houses'.³⁷ For some, the forced migration and upheaval was too much: 'Mrs Anna-Catherine Schneider,' reported *Le Petit Journal*, 'born May 29, 1858, in... Germany and residing Rue Grange-aux Belles, committed suicide this morning at four o'clock.'³⁸ The fifty-six-year-old had thrown herself from her fifth-floor bedroom window. Anna had been told that she was to be sent away from her home in Paris to a detention camp.

Some of the repatriation journeys endured were torrid. Copenhagen was full of Russians hoping to return home. Some 1,400 of them on one train suffered a particularly miserable adventure. 'Many dragged all their earthly possessions along in suitcases or bundles. It was a sad sight to see the distraught masses. Old people with white hair, who dragged themselves along, dead tired. Crowds of women with fear painted on their faces, babbling children, who didn't understand a word of it all.'³⁹ They described having been given twelve hours to get out of the country before they would be imprisoned.

Travelling in the same direction, a Danish woman visiting family in East Prussia experienced the rough treatment foreigners in Germany were subjected to first hand, when her train to Berlin was stopped by a platoon of soldiers looking for Russians. 'The windows were opened and the curtains drawn. We were all then ordered to stand up and stand with our backs to the windows. At every door stood an officer, and on every side outside and inside there were soldiers pointing loaded guns at us. "Whoever turns around will be shot."⁴⁰

Few people, however, could have told a story like that of Anna Gibbs. A German emigrant, when she stepped off *Campania* in New York in November 1914, she was dressed all in black and accompanied by her daughter. Her cousin had come to meet her, and on seeing her clothes he only had one question. *Where were her other two children?* At this point, Anna burst into tears, pointed at little Martha, and cried: 'She is all I have.'⁴¹

Born in East Prussia, Anna returned to Europe with her three children in summer 1914 to see her sister, who lived in

the Russian border town of Wirballen. On the outbreak of war, Anna panicked. 'The people were all leaving town before the German soldiers should come, as they were afraid of the Uhlans.' Anna claimed that she set off on 2 August, with the intention of a three-day walk to Vilna, where she had friends and where she could escape the Russo-German frontier, where skirmishes were already breaking out. Unfortunately, she got lost. 'I found that we were right in the midst of the Russian soldiers, and that I had walked in the wrong direction.'⁴² The soldiers jumped up, grabbed the children and ushered them all to safety.

'I spent the night... with my children looking up at the stars,' claimed Anna. She had noticed that her son was running a slight fever the day before. 'In the night he became worse, owing to the noise of the guns and the exposure, and died in my arms at dawn.'⁴³ Curtis Gibb died aged seven on what would become the Eastern Front.

When the fighting ceased, Anna picked up her son's body, and with four-year-old Anna and three-year-old Martha clinging to her skirts, she went to find her sister:

The place seemed deserted so I walked on until I came to an undertaker's shop which I entered and called out to see. If anyone was there. No reply came. So I found a coffin, laid out my boy in it and carried it on my shoulder to the house of my brother-in-law. They had all gone too so I dug a grave in the soft soil in the garden and put the coffin into it. I had no strength to do more and the children were crying for food.⁴⁴

Anna did not feel like going anywhere for the next few days, then she tried once again to walk to Vilna. Aided by rides on passing farmers' carts, she made it in three days, but her namesake daughter did not. Little Anna died of a combination of exposure and hunger. Her mother buried her in a little cemetery at Vilna: 'By this time I had become inured to hardship and sorrow. I

did not care for my own life, but I was determined to bring my youngest child, Martha, back to her father.⁴⁵ From Vilna she travelled to Petrograd by train. There she applied for an American passport to get her home. In Finland, she was lucky enough to meet an older American woman who lent her some money and they crossed the Atlantic together. Finally, at Gothenburg, an American government official bought her passage to New York via England. The description of her journey is supported at every turn by official documents.

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Perhaps the most distasteful journeys were inflicted on people who had spent their lives in a country, only to be labelled outcasts in 1914. Elsa Cahen was living a comfortable life in a leafy Paris suburb. She had a British father and Irish mother, and had been raised in Paris before marrying an Austrian. She considered all of these countries 'home'.

Rumour immediately had it that they would be forced to leave Paris. 'Since dawn I have been packing, the garden is full of boxes, paper and disorder. Our neighbours... will take charge of some boxes in which I have put our silver and valuables... But we must smuggle the things in the evening over the walls which separate our gardens, so that the neighbours may not see.'⁴⁶ On 5 August Elsa learnt their fate. 'We are to be transported, evacuated, exposed, whichever you like, to... Normandy... Only hand luggage is allowed.'⁴⁷ The family left their home less than a week after the declaration of war. 'The half empty cups on the table, the teapot still warm... shall we ever return? We got up early to get away before our friends came to go with us. We were ashamed, laden as we were with boxes, baskets, knapsacks, and bags. We looked like unhappy emigrants.'⁴⁸

A large crowd was loaded into cattle trucks like animals and from then on their dignity continued to ebb. 'We were counted like a flock of sheep.'⁴⁹ They were not allowed out at halts. 'After several hours, the doors were opened, and we could get out and a hurrying crowd flung itself, women to right, men to

left.' Crammed into the cattle trucks, these undesirables were terrified:

It became dark, we had no lights, and the children were very tired. I sat on the ground. They all three crept to me, laid their heads in my lap and fell asleep in spite of the dreadful wrenching and vibration of the springless wagon. It was remarkable how cold it became. I could just about recognize still the silhouette of grandpapa's poor head which nodded mightily in his sleep... it is hard at this age to pass through all this. In my corner of the floor I felt utterly miserable. I covered the children as well as I could. Through the narrow windows the telegraph posts rushed past in the shadow of the night. What was to become of us?⁵⁰

The French government had rapidly opened a dozen detention camps, and the Cahen family arrived at one 40 miles south of Caen. Men and women were separated on the platform by soldiers. Housed in a convent, the conditions were cramped, but Elsa emphasized that at the beginning, they were 'treated with the greatest consideration and kindness'. Elsa took to sitting out in the garden to avoid the stuffiness of the long dormitory housing women and their howling children. It almost felt like 'a kind of forced summer holiday, which was not so very unpleasant'. But then the first wounded soldiers arrived in the town and people looked at them differently, 'became bitter... and we felt no longer safe when we went out'. Living in a room with twenty strangers wore thin quickly:

I wash myself either in darkness, or very early when nobody is awake. A horrible two-year-old called Felix sleeps near me, he has not been properly trained and must be consistently attended to, and the windows always closed. I get up at night and open one, very quietly, just as quietly soon after, my anxious stuffy neighbour gets up and closes it, that goes on till one or other of us gets so tired that she falls asleep.

On 4 September they were told to pack again. 'Where to? No answer.' The locals cursed and abused them, and they once again climbed into cattle wagons. 'To our horror... the railwaymen had used them as a WC.' Now they were told they were being sent 500 miles south to the Pyrenees. Elsa did not sleep. 'There are a good many in our wagon... We were all crowded together like sheep... All my fellow travellers were still asleep, dirty and pale on the ground.' Locals en route took them for Belgian refugees and Elsa and her fellow passengers were not about to correct them when they were given food. After a second night in their cattle wagon, they were turned out of the train after passing Lourdes.

We are tired, hungry, dirty and hot, and let ourselves be led to the market house dumb and passive... We mothers with children have been brought to a gymnasium... We got nothing to eat, our baggage was held back... For fear of fire no light was allowed, so that it was quite dark when we got some straw and spread it out on the floor. In the darkness the women quarrelled, the hungry children howled. One could not move without touching somebody, it was pandemonium. Added to that came a thunderstorm... Many cried out in terror, and the thunder rolled and growled.

A final 10-mile journey in hay carts and the group reached Garaison, 65 miles south-west of Toulouse, where they were to live at another convent. That evening, Elsa reached one of her lowest points:

No preparation had been made for us... towards evening, it was announced straw has arrived... like wild beasts, the 'ladies' flung themselves upon the great heaps and tore and scratched and fought with each other, it was hateful. The soldiers had to insist on order. I satisfied myself with making a bundle of what others in their haste had lost... It was really a fight for existence.

The plight of Elsa and immigrants all over the world was a war of its own kind. A fight for survival, a fight for dignity, all based on where they happened to have been born and where they lived. There was also the terrifying question of what they might eventually return home to. In mid-September Elsa's sister sent bedding, towels and winter clothes, but warned that that would be the last time she would be allowed into their home to retrieve things. The house had been seized by the government, along with everything Elsa's family had in the bank.⁵¹