Chapter 3
1914: The Opening Campaigns

Popular Reactions

The outbreak of war was greeted with enthusiasm in the major cities of all the belligerent powers, but this urban excitement was not necessarily typical of public opinion as a whole. The mood in France in particular was one of stoical resignation – one that probably characterized all agrarian workers who were called up and had to leave their land to be cultivated by women and children. But everywhere peoples were supportive of their governments. This was no 'limited war' between princely states. War was now a national affair. For a century past, national self-consciousness had been inculcated by state educational programmes directed to forming loyal and obedient citizens. Indeed, as societies became increasingly secular, the concept of the Nation, with all its military panoply and heritage, acquired a quasi-religious significance. Conscription assisted this indoctrination process but was not essential to it: public opinion in Britain, where conscription was not introduced until 1916, was as keenly nationalistic as anywhere on the Continent. For thinkers saturated in Darwinian theory, war was seen as a test of 'manhood' such as soft urban living no longer afforded. Such 'manhood' was believed to be essential if nations were to be 'fit to survive' in a world where progress was the result, or so they believed, of competition rather than cooperation, between nations as between species. Liberal pacifism remained influential in

Western democracies, but it was also widely seen, especially in Germany, as a symptom of moral decadence.

Such sophisticated belligerence made the advent of war welcome to many intellectuals, as well as to members of the old ruling classes, who accepted with enthusiasm their traditional function of leadership in war. Artists, musicians, academics, and writers vied with each other in offering their services to their governments. For artists in particular, Futurists in Italy, Cubists in France, Vorticists in Britain, Expressionists in Germany, war was seen as an aspect of the liberation from an outworn regime that they themselves had been pioneering for a decade past. Workers in urban environments looked forward to finding in it an exciting and, they hoped, a brief respite from the tedium of their everyday lives. In the democracies of Western Europe mass opinion, reinforced by government propaganda, swept along the less enthusiastic. In the less literate and developed societies further east, traditional feudal loyalty, powerfully reinforced by religious sanctions, was equally effective in mass mobilization.

And it must be remembered that all governments could make out a plausible case. The Austrians were fighting for the preservation of their historic multinational empire against disintegration provoked by their old adversary Russia. The Russians were fighting for the protection of their Slav kith and kin, for the defence of their national honour, and to fulfil their obligations to their ally France. The French were fighting in self-defence against totally unprovoked aggression by their traditional enemy. The British were fighting to uphold the law of nations and to pre-empt the greatest threat they had faced from the Continent since the days of Napoleon. The Germans were fighting on behalf of their one remaining ally, and to repel a Slavic threat from the east that had joined forces with their jealous rivals in the west to stifle their rightful emergence as a World Power. These were the arguments that governments presented to their peoples. But the peoples did not have to be whipped up by government

propaganda. It was in a spirit of simple patriotic duty that they joined the colours and went to war.

Writing at the end of the nineteenth century the German military writer Colmar von der Goltz had warned that any future European war would see 'an exodus of nations', and he was proved right. In August 1914 the armies of Europe mobilized some six million men and hurled them against their neighbours. German armies invaded France and Belgium. Russian armies invaded Germany. Austrian armies invaded Serbia and Russia. French armies attacked over the frontier into German Alsace-Lorraine. The British sent an expeditionary force to help the French, confidently expecting to reach Berlin by Christmas. Only the Italians, whose obligations under the Triple Alliance covered only a defensive war and ruled out incurring British hostility, prudently waited on events. If 'the Allies' (as the Franco-Russo-British alliance became generally known) won, Italy might gain the lands she claimed from Austria; if 'the Central Powers' (the Austro-Germans), she might win not only the contested borderlands with France, Nice and Savoy, but French possessions in North Africa to add to the Mediterranean empire she had already begun to acquire at the expense of the Turks. Italy's policy was guided, as their Prime Minister declared with endearing frankness, by *sacro egoismo*.

The Invasion of Belgium

We have seen how the military plans of all the belligerents were based on the assumption that, if the war were not to be disastrous, it had to be kept short, and that a successful offensive was the only way to ensure that it was. Nowhere was this believed more strongly than in Berlin. The General Staff had calculated that the French army had to be defeated within six weeks if sufficient forces were to be transferred to meet and defeat the expected Russian attack in the east. That could be done only by the great outflanking movement through Belgium visualized by Schlieffen – a manœuvre aimed not only at defeating the French armies but at surrounding and

annihilating them in a *Schlacht ohne Morgen* – 'a battle without a tomorrow'. Schlieffen's successor, Helmuth von Moltke, nephew of the great field marshal who had led Prussian forces to victory in 1866 and 1870, modified the plan so as to provide better protection against a possible French invasion of south Germany and to avoid having to invade Holland as well; for, if the war did drag on, a neutral Holland would be essential for the German economy. After the war Moltke was accused of having ruined Schlieffen's concept, but later research has shown Schlieffen's recommendations to have been logistically impossible. A German invasion of Belgium had been generally expected – the railheads constructed along the Belgian frontier gave the game away – but French and British staff calculations had concluded that constraints both of logistics and of manpower would confine the movement to the right bank of the Meuse. It was only the two additional army corps provided by the German military reforms of 1911–12, and the unorthodox use of reservist units as front-line troops, that enabled Moltke to flesh out Schlieffen's ideas, and mount an attack on a scale that took the Allies completely by surprise.

The Belgians had prepared for a German invasion by constructing a major fortification complex at Liège. To deal with this the Germans employed their major 'secret weapon' – mobile siege artillery, especially heavy howitzers from the Austrian Skoda works, whose shells crashed through steel and concrete and battered the garrison into surrender. By 17 August they had cleared the way, and the German march through Belgium began. Before them the German armies drove a flood of refugees who clogged the roads with carts bearing all that they could rescue of their possessions – the first trickle of that immense and miserable flood of uprooted humanity that was to characterize warfare for the rest of the century. Those who remained were treated by the invaders with a harshness intended to pre-empt the kind of 'people's war' of sabotage and assassination that the French had begun to wage against their invaders in 1870. Seeing saboteurs and *francs-tireurs* even when they did not exist, German troops took and shot an estimated 5,000

Belgian civilians and indiscriminately set fire to buildings, including those of the medieval university of Louvain. Wildly exaggerated reports of their atrocities were spread in Britain, confirming public support for a war that rapidly came to be seen as a crusade against barbaric German militarism – a view that spread to influential quarters in the United States. If the invasion itself had not been enough to provoke Britain to intervene, the manner in which the German forces enforced their occupation would have created almost irresistible pressure to do so.

The Battle of the Marne

Meanwhile General Joseph Joffre, the French commander-in-chief, launched his own offensive further south – initially into Alsace-Lorraine, largely to satisfy public opinion, then northward into the flank of the German attack. Everywhere French forces were repulsed with heavy losses, largely in encounter battles with the advancing Germans whose heavy artillery often destroyed French units long before they could bring their own lighter guns to bear. The French armies were thus already falling back when the German outflanking movement began to take effect. The right wing of the German forces, General von Kluck's First Army, passed through Brussels on 20 August and two days later found the Allied left flank in the industrial town of Mons. There the two corps of the British Expeditionary Force under Field Marshal Sir John French had been rushed into the line and had barely taken up their positions when they were attacked. With their French allies on their right, they were forced into a retreat that lasted for two sweltering weeks until, at the beginning of September, the Schlieffen plan came unstuck; the Allies counter-attacked; and the entire German strategy collapsed.

The story of the so-called Battle of the Marne has been retold innumerable times, and everybody involved has claimed the lion's share of the credit. Perhaps the most cogent comment was that of Joffre, who later said that he did not know who had won the battle,

but he knew who would have been blamed if it had been lost. Briefly what happened was this. Kluck had been ordered to sweep round to the west and south of Paris in order to encircle and complete the annihilation of the French armies. But on 30 August he decided that, rather than carry out this hugely ambitious operation, he should give priority to maintaining contact with General von Bülow's army on his left, which had been slowed down by French counter-attacks. With Moltke's approval, he therefore deflected his line of advance to the south-east of Paris. Meanwhile Joffre had been using his railway network to switch forces from his right wing to the region of Paris, whence they now threatened Kluck's exposed right flank. On 4 September Joffre halted the retreat of his main forces and simultaneously unleashed this new army against Kluck. When Kluck deployed to meet it, a gap opened between his left flank and Bülow's right, into which British and French forces began to penetrate. Von Moltke, 150 miles behind the front at Luxembourg and receiving only fragmentary messages from his army commanders, became uneasy. He had already weakened his forces by sending two army corps to the Eastern Front, where things seemed to be going badly wrong. On 8 September he sent his Chief of Intelligence, Colonel Hentsch, to see what was happening, with plenipotentiary powers to sort matters out. Hentsch found both army headquarters in a state of confusion, and confirmed their own inclination to retreat. The whole German line fell back to the line of the Aisne, the French and British cautiously following. There the Germans established themselves in positions that they were successfully to defend for the best part of four years to come.

The First Battle of Ypres

Moltke, an unstable character at the best of times, now suffered a nervous collapse, and was replaced in command of the German armies by the Minister for War, Erich von Falkenhayn. Falkenhayn knew as well as anyone the importance of gaining victory before winter set in. He rushed every unit he could lay hands on to rescue what he could of the Schlieffen plan by outflanking the Allies to the

north. Joffre responded in kind, placing the northern section of the front under the command of the most inspiring of his subordinate commanders, General Ferdinand Foch. The coast was held by all that was left of the Belgian army, which had made a brief stand at Antwerp, gallantly if ineffectually assisted by a scratch relief force from Britain, before having to fall back on 6 October. The British Expeditionary Force, now three corps strong, just had time to take up positions on the right of the Belgians around Ypres before, on 30 October, the German attack began.

Both sides knew that this might be the decisive battle of the war. The British had put into the line virtually the whole of their old regular army, whose quality more than compensated for its diminutive size. Falkenhayn attacked with four newly created army corps, some units of which consisted largely of untrained students below military age. They attacked with desperate courage, to be mown down in their thousands by British rifles and machine guns outside the village of Langemarck in what became known in Germany as the *Kindermord*, the 'Massacre of the Innocents'. But the British line just held, and on 11 November beat off the last German attack.

The First Battle of Ypres, as it came to be called, saw the end of the old British army. It also saw the end of mobile war on the Western Front. The trenches hastily scrabbled in the boggy soil round Ypres became part of a line stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier that was, as we have seen, to remain essentially unchanged for four more terrible years.

The Eastern Front in 1914

On the Eastern Front the situation was a great deal more confused. Political logic would have led the Austrians to concentrate their attack on Serbia, the original occasion for the war, and the Russians to advance south as quickly as possible to rescue the Serbs. It did not work out like that. Both governments had divided purposes.

The Russian government was certainly under strong pressure to help the Serbs, mainly from the Panslav nationalists who had for fifty years past been the driving force behind Russian expansion in the Balkans. But there was equally strong pressure to help the French from the liberal bourgeoisie whose ties with the West had been cemented by French loans and investments. There was also a significant pro-German faction, especially among the court aristocracy, that had been momentarily silenced but was to become increasingly powerful as the war went on. The High Command was riven by political and professional rivalries that the Czar tried to resolve by creating two totally separate army groups under the nominal command of his uncle the Grand Duke Nicholas. These were to fight separate wars, one in the north-west in Poland and East Prussia against Germany, the other in the south in Galicia against Austria-Hungary.

Ever since 1911, when the great increases in the German army began, the French High Command had been urging on the Russians the need for a rapid attack to distract as many German forces as possible from the offensive in the west. The Russian northern army group did its best. On 15 August, while the German forces in the west were still held up by the forts of Liège, the Russian First Army under General Rennenkampf drove into East Prussia from the east, and five days later inflicted a sharp reverse on the Germans at Gumbinnen. On the same day the Second Army under General Samsonov advanced from the south, threatening the German right flank. The German concentration against France had left only one army to defend the eastern frontier. Its commander, General von Prittwitz, panicked and ordered a general withdrawal behind the Vistula.

But East Prussia, the historic heartland of the Prussian monarchy, could not be so easily abandoned. Prittwitz was dismissed, to be replaced by the formidable combination of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff. Hindenburg, a solid embodiment of the traditional Prussian virtues, had served in the wars of both 1866

and 1870 and had been recalled from retirement at the age of 66. Ludendorff, his Chief of Staff, was a middle-class professional whose ferocious competence had been displayed as much in the bureaucratic battles over the expansion of the army before the war as by his astounding performance in its early days when he had driven in a commandeered car between the outlying forts into Liège and bluffed the authorities into surrendering the central citadel. On their arrival they adopted a plan already prepared by Prittwitz's equally able Chief of Staff Colonel Max Hoffmann, whereby only a thin cavalry screen was left to delay Rennenkampf's advance from the east while the bulk of German forces was concentrated against Samsonov. The success of this manœuvre owed much to German foreknowledge of Russian plans gleaned from reading their radio signals dispatched *en clair*, and more to the initiative of a German corps commander, General von François, who ignored orders to stand fast and boldly advanced to cut off Samsonov's retreat to the south. The three-day battle of Tannenberg (27–30 August) resulted in 50,000 Russians killed or wounded and 90,000 prisoners. It was one of the greatest military victories of all time and has been studied in staff colleges ever since, but its effect on the outcome of the war was negligible. Its only lasting result was the elevation of Hindenburg and Ludendorff in Germany to the status of demigods. In the subsequent fighting among the Masurian lakes the Germans took a further 30,000 prisoners, but lost 100,000 men of their own.

Further south the Austrians, like the Russians, were divided in purpose. The distinct preference of their Chief of Staff, Conrad von Hötzendorf, was to deal once and for all with the troublesome Serbs, but he had four Russian armies massing against him on the frontiers of Galicia and was receiving daily messages from Berlin urging him to engage them and relieve pressure on the German army. Conrad made the worst of both worlds. His attack on Serbia went off at half-cock. The Serbs were hardened fighters who drove the Austrians back across their frontier with the loss of 30,000 men. His attack northward into Russian Poland resulted in confused encounter battles, until ultimately a Russian threat to his

right flank forced him to fall back to the Carpathians, abandoning the key fortress of Przemysl and losing a further 350,000 men. The Germans responded to his increasingly desperate cries for help by attacking over the western frontier of Poland towards Warsaw. In November, while the British were fighting at Ypres, huge and inconclusive battles were swirling around Lodz, in which each side lost about 100,000 men. The irrepressible Conrad then launched a winter offensive across the Carpathians to relieve Przemysl. This collapsed in howling snowstorms, and Przemysl surrendered the following March. By then the Habsburg army had lost over two million men.

So by the end of 1914 the short war for which Europe's armies had been preparing for the previous forty years was over; but nobody had won it.