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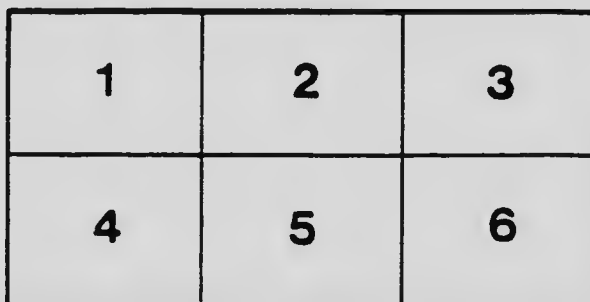
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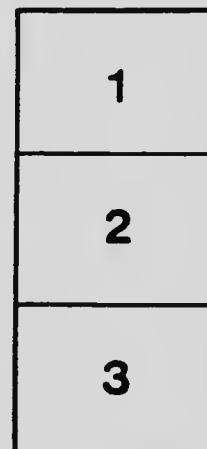
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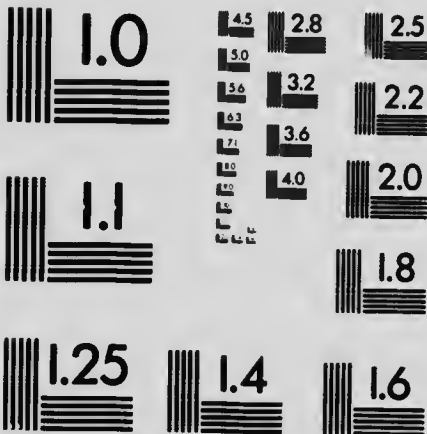
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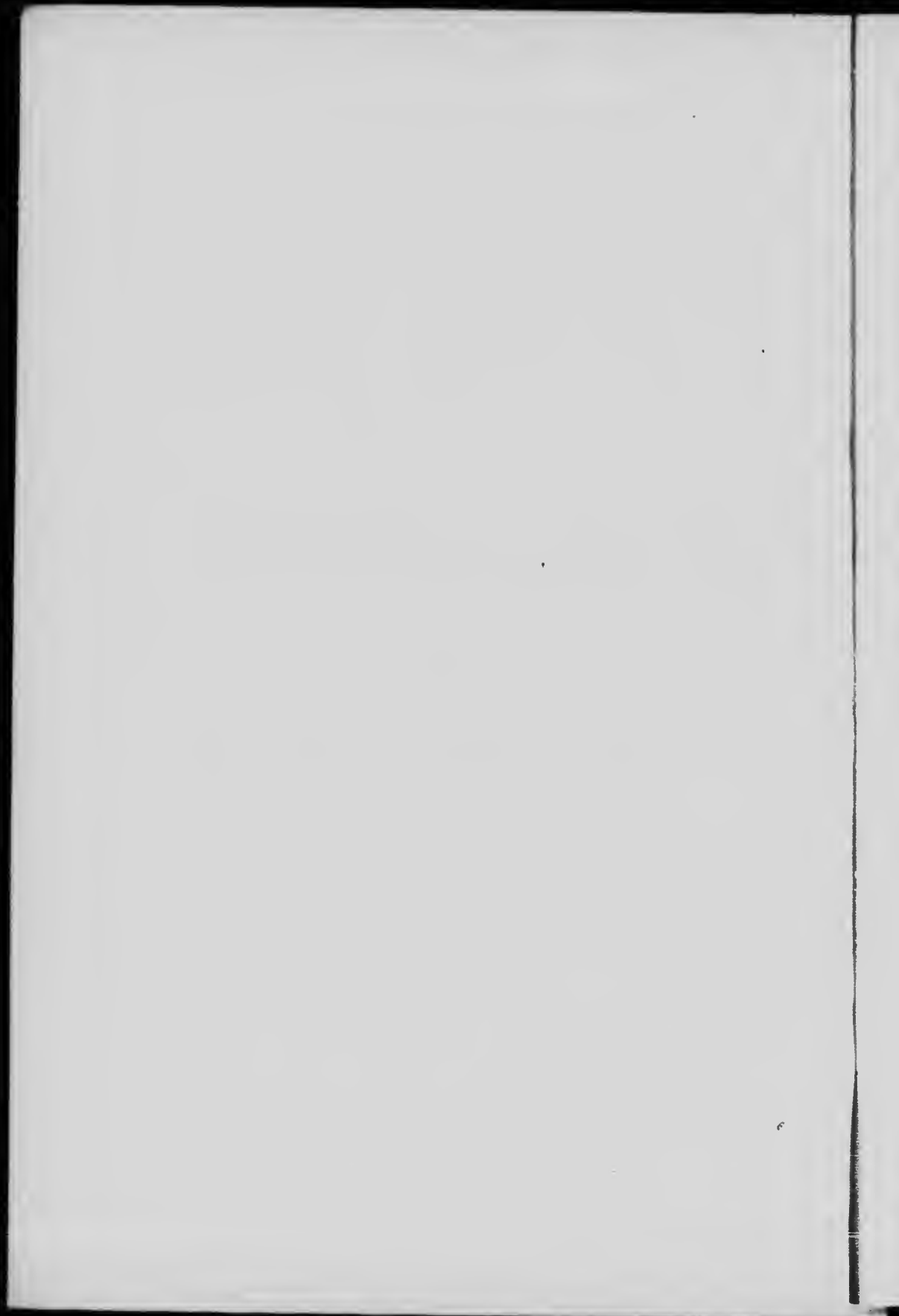
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OXFORD PAMPHLETS
1914-1915

BRITAIN'S WAR
BY LAND

BY

JOHN BUCHAN

Price Twopence net

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
HUMPHREY MILFORD
LONDON EDINBURGH GLASGOW
NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE BOMBAY

THIS pamphlet was originally written as an article for translation into Russian and publication in the Russian Press. It has since been revised and enlarged by the author, at the instance of the Delegates of the Clarendon Press, for publication in pamphlet form.

H. W. C. D.

BRITAIN'S WAR BY LAND

To the foreign observer, looking only at the numbers in the fighting line, it may seem at first sight that Britain, whatever her achievements at sea, is making on land but a small effort when compared with the splendid muster of her Allies. Such a view is not unnatural, and, if well founded, would constitute a grave indictment of the British people. In this life-and-death struggle it is the duty of each ally to fling his whole resources into the common stock, and any reluctance is treason to the common cause. But I believe that the view, if it is anywhere seriously held, is based on a misunderstanding, and I wish to set down very shortly the reasons for my belief. The questions to be answered are two : Has Britain done her part in providing troops, and have those troops given a good account of themselves ?

I

In the first place we must remember the circumstances of Britain at the outbreak of war. We were an island people with a world-wide empire. That meant that we needed an omnipotent navy, and we held with good reason that we had got it. It meant also that, having no great land-frontier, such as Russia or France, we did not need land forces on the Continental scale. If a European Power declared

war against us, we believed that our fleet would prevent invasion, and that all that we needed was a Home Defence force sufficient to repel a raid. But since we were always fighting little wars up and down our Empire, we had to have a professional army, composed of those who voluntarily chose a soldier's life, highly trained, and enlisted for a reasonable length of service. This army was fixed at about 250,000 men, and 160,000 of them were ready for use at any moment in any part of the globe. It did not represent the real fighting strength of the nation, as the army of France, for example, represented the French fighting strength. It was only a spear-head to the man-power of Britain, and we knew that in a world-war, if time were granted us, we should soon get the shaft for it from among the hedgerows of England.

It may be said that our military policy was mistaken. That may or may not be true, but it was the policy in vogue last July. All our military arrangements were based on it, and our zeal in the cause of the Allies can only be judged by our use of the weapon which we found ready to our hand. This is not the place to discuss our future methods of defence, but one thing may be urged in reply to those critics who have argued that we were radically unprepared. The question is not whether we should have had some system of universal training, or whether on the outbreak of war we should have raised our new armies on a compulsory basis. For

both of these policies a good case can be made out. But the point is whether the *whole* of our traditional system was not culpably inadequate. Now, this system sufficed for our ordinary needs, for ninety-nine out of a hundred possible developments. As it chanced, the hundredth happened, and we had to revise and supplement it in some vital parts. But a military policy adequate to the hundredth contingency would have been futile and extravagant for the ninety-nine others which were our reasonable day-to-day expectation. It would have taxed our resources and impeded our normal life, and would have been valueless except in the one remote contingency. Nothing short of an army on the Continental scale would have met the need. Other schemes, no doubt, might have given us a better foundation than we actually possessed for the raising of new armies, but that alone would have fulfilled the immediate military requirements. Had we been able to put on the Continent in August from half a million to a million trained men it is probable that the campaign on French and Belgian soil would have long since been over. But to argue from this probability to the conclusion that we should always have had a Continental army ready is to forget the first maxim of sound government. A statesman budgets for ordinary conditions, not for a year of uninterrupted pestilence and earthquake. A wise man insures against risks which are really likely, not against something which is just on the distant rim of

possibility. There is such a thing as over-insurance, and to have based all our preparations on the sudden insanity of Germany would have meant paying too high a premium. Unless we subscribe to the belief that this kind of war was always 'inevitable'—a belief which seems to demand a direct Divine revelation—it is difficult to see how any British Government could have prepared for it in the only way which would have brought it to a summary close. And let it be added that, accepting our traditional policy, we had brought the system created under it to a high efficiency. Our Expeditionary Force and our General Staff had never been more ready for war.

War came, and we at once sent our whole Expeditionary Army to the front in France, and set about increasing our armed forces. To those who remembered the delays and confusion at the beginning of the South African War, the speed and precision with which our Army crossed the Channel and fell into line with the French seemed little short of miraculous. Having no system of compulsory service, we relied upon the patriotism of our people. Our islands were not invaded, or immediately threatened, so we could not call for recruits to fight for the existence and sanctity of their homes. Our appeal was made on behalf of the honour of Britain and the liberties and interests of our Allies. These are great matters, but it takes the ordinary man, unversed in foreign politics, a little time to understand them.

It should not be forgotten that the new voluntary armies which we raised were not like a Continental levy which defends its borders against the horrors of invasion, but men who volunteered either because they hated what Germany stood for and believed in the Allies' cause, or because they liked fighting for its own sake. The class in any nation which responds to such an appeal cannot be as wide as the class which will fight for the safety of its homes.

At the outbreak of war we had about 900,000 men wholly or partly trained—250,000 in the Regular Army, 230,000 in the various Reserves, and 420,000 in the Army for Home Defence.¹ By August 17 we had sent 150,000 men to the Allied line in France, a force which may be taken as equivalent to three German Army Corps and three Cavalry Divisions. Since then we have sent out further divisions and at least 80,000 men as drafts to fill up gaps, for our losses in the first four months of war have been very large in proportion to the size of our Army. One brigade in fifteen days' fighting lost 97 per cent. of its officers and 77 per cent. of its men, and many battalions have lost the whole of their original strength. Up to the end of 1914 we had sent out not less than 300,000 men, and we continue rapidly to add to this figure. We have in these islands, as a Home Defence Force and in training for foreign service, well over a million and a half of men, and recruits are pouring in daily. Voluntary recruits,

¹ This figure includes a portion of the National Reserve.

remember, coming largely from classes to whom the pay is no attraction and who have other means of earning their living. In four months' time we shall have a total armed force of something over two millions, and at least 500,000 of these will be fighting on the Continent. In nine months' time we may have a million in the fighting line.

That is for Britain alone. Canada has sent 32,000 men and is training 10,000 more. She believes that if the war lasts for a year she will send us any number from 100,000 to 250,000. Australia and New Zealand have equipped over 30,000, and can certainly send 100,000 if required. Then there is India, which has sent us two divisions to Europe, and another force to East Africa. We can probably count on not less than 200,000 Indians for our fighting lines in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Remember, too, that the war on the continent of Europe is for Britain not all the war. In the first place we have to keep a force for home defence. In the case of a Continental Power the only army is the field army. France need not guard Algiers, nor Russia Turkestan, from invasion. But we are compelled to keep an army on our coasts to meet any possible danger from the German fleet. Again, we are fighting at this moment in Egypt and in Mesopotamia against the Turks, in the Cameroons, in German East Africa, and in South Africa. We have also to provide garrisons for strategical points throughout the Empire, like Gibraltar, Malta, and

Aden ; and we have to send troops to replace the British regulars withdrawn from India and the East.

Taking all these activities together, we can claim, I think, that we have well over two million men at the moment under arms for the different purposes of the war, and in six months' time it will be nearer three million.

Now, how does this compare with the population of our country ? According to the latest figures, we have in the British Islands just over eight million men of military age—that is between eighteen and forty-five. Taking a percentage on the French precedent, we must deduct two millions as unfit. We must also allow large deductions for men required to run our industries, for at present we are manufacturing war material and supplies for all our Allies as well as for ourselves. That is good for the British manufacturer, but it is a good thing, too, for our Allies, and clearly such industries must be kept going. So let us deduct two million men for this purpose. We shall not be far wrong if we allow 500,000 as the amount required for the Navy and purposes connected with the Navy ; and at least another 500,000 for the men between thirty-eight and forty-five, since thirty-eight is the age limit we have fixed for enlistment. So we get three millions as our maximum of possible recruits. Our British forces, as we have seen, will presently be very little below two millions, and that is 66 per cent. Britain has never professed to be a military Power. Her

main preoccupation is her Navy, and the appeal she is now making must be regarded as a special effort, something quite outside her common line of interests, and something for which the machinery has had to be improvised. With this in mind the percentage must surely seem creditable, and every month it will go on rising.

II

In the three months of fighting which began at Mons on August 23, the British Army under Field-Marshal Sir John French has done its full share. More than its share in proportion to its numbers ; and this is only right, for it is the most professional and highly trained force in the world, and like many of the Russian troops, it has had recent war experience. When General Joffre took up the position along the Sambre and the Meuse in order to feel the strength of the German advance, the British Force was given the post on the extreme left, between Condé and Binche, with its centre at the town of Mons. At that time the Allies believed that Namur could hold out for weeks. They gravely underestimated the strength of the German right wing under von Kluck and von Buelow, and they were apparently unaware of the large armies advancing against their centre through the Ardennes.

Namur fell in less than two days, and its fall made the Allied position an impossible salient. The 5th French Army on the British right was driven back under the severe frontal attack by von Buelow, and

the 4th and 3rd French Armies were at the same time repulsed from the line of the Meuse and forced southward. This meant that the left of the line, held by our troops, was more or less in the air. Von Kluck on the German right was not only attacking Sir John French on the front, but had an Army Corps and two Cavalry Divisions moving westward in an enveloping movement, while von Buelow was threatening the British right.

We began the battle of Mons on that Sunday afternoon in the belief that we had only two army corps against us. At that time our total force in the firing line was scarcely more than 80,000 men, the Third Corps having not yet come up, so the strength seemed evenly matched. On the Sunday evening, however, Sir John French heard from General Joffre of the defeat of the 5th Army on our right and the fall of Namur, and he also became aware that at least four Army Corps were moving against him. Nothing was left but to retreat, and on that night our movement southward began. The arrangement was that the Second Corps should make a stand to permit the First Corps to retire to the Maubeuge position, and should then break off the engagement and follow. Accordingly, during most of Monday General Smith-Dorrien's Second Corps was employed in holding back the enemy, a task in which he was outnumbered by at least three to one. It succeeded, and the whole British Force by the Monday evening had fallen back in good order to the new position.

But by this time it was clear that the German aim was to turn our left flank and drive us under the guns of Maubeuge, which would become for us what Metz had been to Bazaine ; so Sir John French gave the order for a further retreat. During Tuesday this was carried out successfully with many sharp rear-guard actions. Late on Tuesday night we occupied a position from Maroilles and Landrecies in the east to Le Cateau in the west. In the early darkness the 4th (Guards) Brigade of the First Corps at Landrecies was violently attacked, and the engagements spread along the line of the First Corps and lasted far into the night. In the morning it was plain that if the First Corps was to get away the Second Corps must hold up the enemy. Smith-Dorrien was thereupon involved in a battle which lasted till the afternoon of Wednesday, and deserves to be remembered as one of the finest achievements in the history of the British Army. The odds against him were never less than four to one, and were probably greater. He had to fight a covering action, and then break it off and retire ; and every soldier knows the difficulties of such an operation. We lost severely but we were never defeated, and by the Wednesday evening the Second Corps had begun its retirement. All night the retreat continued, and our wearied men were hotly pressed by the German vanguard. Next morning the pursuit had slackened, and we held a position from St. Quentin east along the Oise valley. For the next five days of the retirement the pressure

was less severe, for the French cavalry had come up on our flank, and the new French 6th Army was forming on our left. We had heavy fighting in several places, especially in the woods of Compiègne, but on the whole till we had crossed the Marne we were not seriously driven. Le Cateau had told on von Kluck as well as on the British.

The whole retreat was a very brilliant exploit for all the Allied Armies, but especially for the British, who had to bear the brunt of the attack. Our retirement was a strategic retreat—that is, it was undertaken under the pressure of strategic requirements, but not under the compulsion of a defeat. The rarity of such retirements is a proof of their difficulty. In modern history there are three famous examples. The first is Sir John Moore's retreat from Astorga to Corunna, a march of 250 miles through wild mountains in a tempest of snow and rain, with Napoleon and 70,000 men at his heels. Moore fell back, as all the world knows, fighting constant rear-guard actions and losing heavily each day, chiefly from starvation and fatigue. But he preserved his army intact, and on January 16, 1809, could turn at Corunna and beat off his pursuers. That is the most perfect instance in British history, perhaps in any history. A second is Wellington's retreat into Portugal after his victory at Talavera. 'A pretty general', wrote Cobbett, the eternal type of the ill-informed critic, 'who wins a victory one day, and finds he has to run away the next.' A third is the

Russian retreat before the French in 1812 which lured Napoleon into the icy depths of the continent. That was a true strategic retirement, for the battle of Borodino was an accident, and Kutusov would never have fought it but for political pressure. Russia won by drawing on her foe till winter, her ally, could destroy him. Sir John French, in the days from Mons to the Marne, had an easy country to traverse and perfect weather, as compared with what fell to the lot of Sir John Moore and Napoleon. His supplies did not seriously fail, and his transport problem was not difficult. His special danger lay in the enormous masses behind him, moving at a speed unknown before, and ever threatening to envelop his flanks. The pace, the comparatively small losses, and the excellent discipline and *moral* preserved in his troops, were the distinguishing features of his performance.

In estimating the achievement, we must remember the temperament of the soldier. He was entering upon a war against what public opinion agreed was the most formidable army in the world. In such a campaign an initial success, however small, works wonders with the spirit of an army. But there had been no success. The men had gone straight from the train, or from a long march, into action, and almost every hour of every day they had been retreating. Often they were given the chance of measuring themselves in close combat against their adversaries, and on these occasions they had held

their own ; but still the retreat went on, and it was difficult to avoid the feeling that, even if their own battalion stood fast, there must have been a defeat elsewhere in the line to explain this endless retirement. Such conditions are desperately trying to a soldier's nerves. The man who will support cheerfully any fatigue in a forward march will wilt and slacken when he is going backward. Remember, too, that, except for a few members of the Headquarters Staff, the officers and men knew nothing of the general situation. Had they learned of the fall of Namur it would have explained much, but few of them heard of it till a week later. That under such circumstances complete discipline and faithfulness were preserved, and that after so great a damping of zeal the fire of attack could be readily rekindled, was an achievement more remarkable, perhaps, than the most signal victory.

On September 5 General Joffre informed Sir John French that the time had now come to take the offensive. Early on Sunday morning, September 6, the Allied line, now almost touching the Seine, turned and struck. Von Kluck, believing that the British were too weary and broken to be dangerous, marched across our front in an attempt to envelop the French 5th Army. His own rearguards and communications were assailed by the new French 6th Army, and the British, moving from behind the Forest of Crécy, fell upon the right flank of his main advance, while the French 5th Army attacked it in

front. After four days' hard fighting von Kluck was forced to retreat, and his retirement compelled the whole German front from the Ourcq to Verdun to fall back also. The battles on the Marne were a brilliant performance for each one of the Allied armies. That after a fortnight's rapid retirement they should be able to turn and strike with undiminished vigour spoke volumes for the stamina of both French and British.

The decisive movement on the Marne was probably that of Wednesday the 9th, when the British drove von Kluck across the river, while the 5th French Army uncovered von Buelow's right, and General Foch with the 9th Army drove the Prussian Guard into the marshes of St. Gond. To illustrate the fighting quality of our own troops we may note that one day forty-five of our cavalry squadrons drove before them seventy-two German squadrons ; while four German infantry divisions were utterly beaten by five British ; though at Mons four British had repulsed the attack of eight German.

By September 12 the German Army had occupied its prepared positions along the river Aisne, and those months of trench warfare began which are not yet concluded. The achievements of the British forces are now less individual than in the days from Mons to Marne ; they are part of the slow general offensive of the 250 miles of the Allied line. One incident, however, should be noted. The crossing of the river Aisne by the three British corps on Septem̄t 13-14

in the face of strong German resistance was a remarkable achievement. On the 14th Sir Douglas Haig and the First Corps on the British right made an effort to drive a wedge into the enemy's front, and succeeded in gaining a position on the high ground north of the river, which they continued to hold against great odds during the succeeding days of the engagement.

In the first fortnight of October it became clear that the Germans were meditating another enveloping movement against our left flank, their object being the possession of Calais and the southern ports of the Channel. To prevent this, the Allied left was extended northward, and the British Forces were sent to hold the extreme northern flank in West Flanders. The change in the dispositions was made with the utmost secrecy and precision, and a new line was taken up by the British extending from La Bassée to the north of Ypres. For a moment there was grave danger to the Allies. After the fall of Antwerp very large German forces were hurled against our left. The British 7th Division and the 3rd Cavalry Division fell back from Ghent and Bruges towards the Lys, and for some days we held a line of nearly forty miles with hurriedly prepared trenches against a vast numerical superiority. Presently the Belgian Army and a new French Army came up on our left, and held a position between us and the sea. November and December saw the British Forces engaged in a war of entrenchments which recalled

the fighting of Marlborough's day. The cavalry charges in the retreat from Mons and the battle of the Marne had gone, and our best cavalry fought like infantry in the trenches, and were away for weeks from their horses. This is not the place to tell the day-to-day history of that stubborn fighting. We had to encounter not only the tidal waves of the new German Armies, but the desperate attacks of their picked troops, the Prussian Guard.

The worst period for the British forces was the assault upon Ypres, which began about the 17th of October and continued till about the 13th of November. So far as the British were concerned, the bulk of the fighting fell upon General Capper's 7th Division, Sir Douglas Haig's First Corps, and on General Byng's 3rd Cavalry Division. The severity of the engagements may be judged from the fact that the generals commanding the 1st and 2nd Divisions were both wounded and five of their staff officers were killed. More than once the British line was pierced, but, like the Arabs who broke our square at Abu-Klea, the invaders were given no chance to make good their success. On November 10 a division of the Prussian Guard, which had received its Emperor's special command to pierce our front, attacked with great vigour, and their decisive repulse on the following day brought the fiercest fighting to an end. In the struggle for Ypres it is difficult to single out regiments when all did brilliantly, but special mention should be made of the work of the Household Cavalry in

General Byng's division, who, fighting in an unfamiliar trench warfare, added to the glory they had won before on more congenial fields. Then, as ever, the bulk of the defence was in the hands of those steady, old-fashioned English regiments of the line who have always been the backbone of our army. The Foot Guards showed that their unique discipline was compatible with a brilliant and adroit offensive, and Cavan's 4th Brigade added to the laurels they had won at Landrecies, at Villers-Cotterets, at the Marne, and at the Aisne. Two Yeomanry regiments fought with General Byng, and three Territorial battalions with Sir Douglas Haig, and showed all the steadiness and precision of first line troops. 'I venture to predict', Sir John French wrote of the British Armies in West Flanders, 'that their deeds during these days of stress and trial will furnish some of the most brilliant chapters which will be found in the military history of our time.'

The day is still far distant when any part of the military history of the war can be finally written. The lines of the campaign are so broad and simple that we can follow more or less clearly the main strategy, but the tactical details must long be obscure. Even now, however, it is important that each of the Allies should know something of what the others are doing, and the story of a nation's deeds can best come from the nation itself. Nothing would be more welcome than to hear from Russia the splendid

tale of Lemberg and Augustovo and Warsaw, and from France the full story of Foch's attack on the Prussian Guard, and the heroic defence of Nancy. This slight sketch of British doings is a humble contribution to the common stock, which I hope will be repaid in kind.

