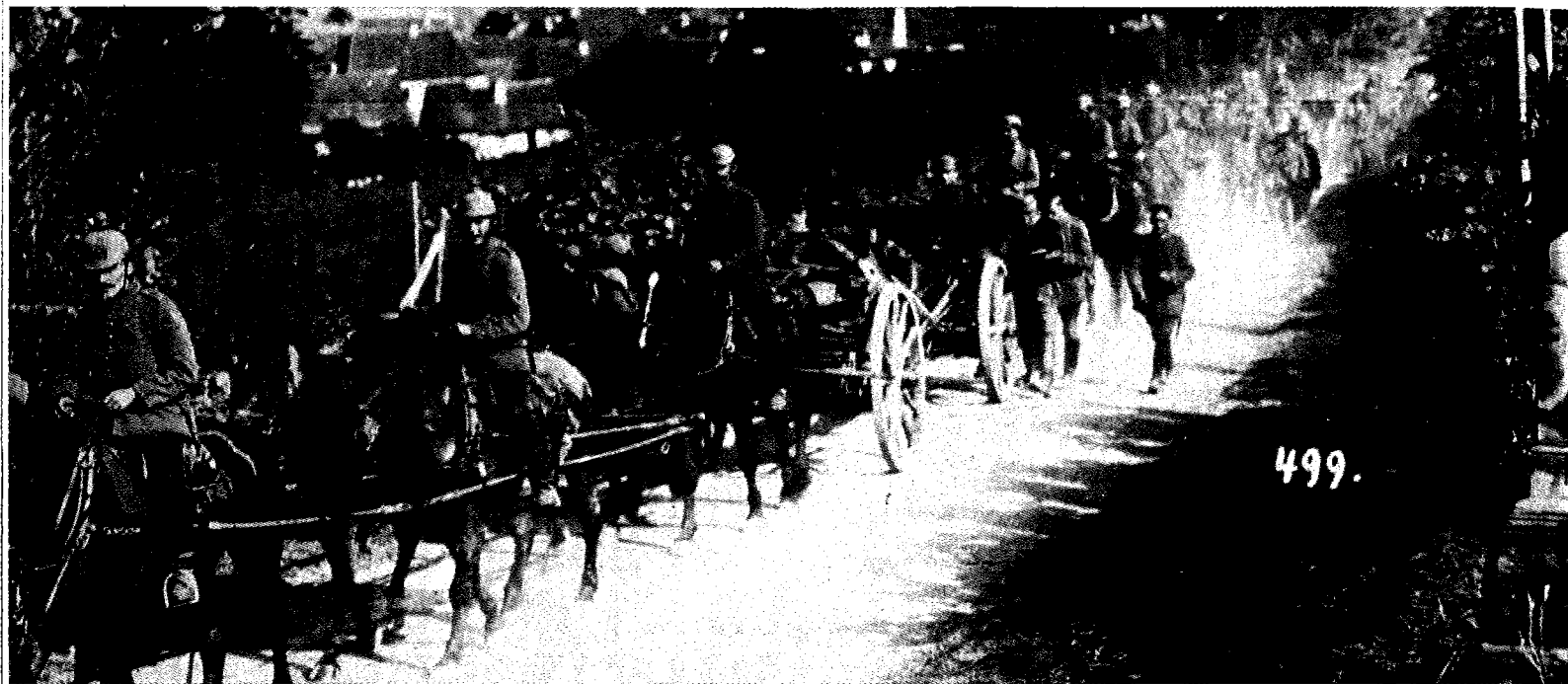


1

THE WAR PLANS FAIL IN THE WEST



German soldiers marching towards the River Marne, September 1914

War plans in the west

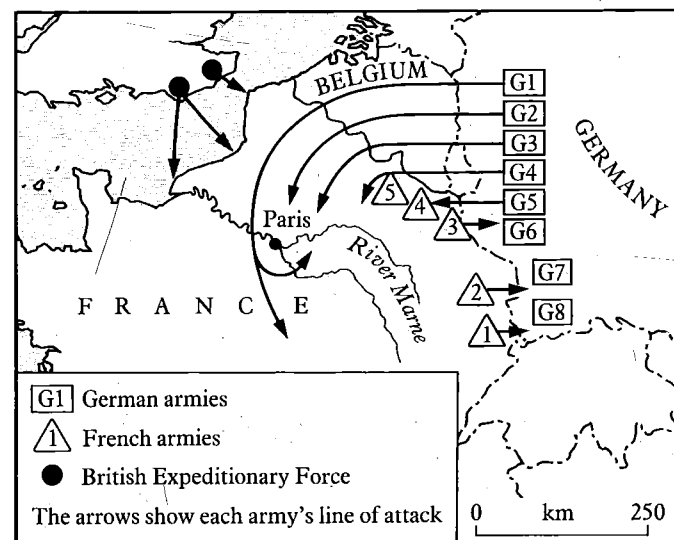
The Great War began exactly according to plan. A million grey-uniformed Germans were packed into 6480 railway trains at stations all over Germany. The trains began rolling at three-minute intervals towards Belgium. Farther south, three great armies of French soldiers in bright blue tunics gathered on the German border to invade the province of Lorraine. In the English Channel troop ships from Britain nosed their way into French ports and 125,000 khaki-clad men of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) streamed down the gangways, ready to march east.

It took only three weeks for the war plans to go wrong. When the German 1st and 2nd Armies marched into Belgium they met tougher fighting than expected. The Belgian army fought bravely and slowed them down for ten days in a battle at Liège. Then the British Expeditionary Force, which the Germans called 'a contemptible little army', slowed down the 1st Army in a battle at Mons. The British rifle-fire at Mons was so fast and accurate that the Germans thought they were being machine-gunned. For the rest of the war the BEF was proud to be called 'The Old Contemptibles'.

While the Germans were being slowed down in Belgium, the French were being torn to pieces in Lorraine. Their orders were to attack with 'élan' (speed) and 'cran' (guts) but they found themselves

charging at well-defended machine-gun posts. Speed and guts were useless against these and 300,000 French soldiers were mown down in just two weeks. Plan Seventeen had failed completely.

Now Germany's invasion of France went wrong. Far away in the east, the Russian army attacked Germany sooner than expected so von Moltke, the German commander, sent part of his armies to fight them. This meant he had fewer men for the attack on France. Next, the 1st Army, led by General von



The line-up of the armies

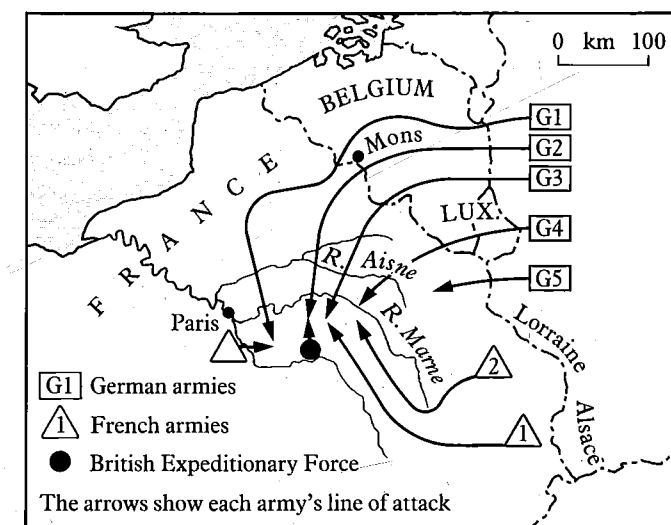
Kluck, ran into difficulties. As you can see from the map on the opposite page, Kluck's army (G1) had the farthest to go. His men often had to march 50 kilometres a day under a blazing hot sun, and they were exhausted by the time they reached France. Finally, the Germans found they were under attack from an unexpected direction, for now that Plan Seventeen had failed, the French were marching back from Lorraine to cut the Germans off.

The Battle of the Marne

Despite these setbacks the Germans pressed forward until they reached the River Marne. By 4 September some were so close to Paris that they could see the Eiffel Tower in the distance. For a while it seemed that the Schlieffen Plan would work. But then Moltke and the German generals made a fatal mistake. Instead of going west to surround Paris as planned, Kluck's army went east of Paris towards the Marne. It was this that gave the French a chance to save themselves.

As you can see from the map below, the French armies were marching west to cut the Germans off. To help them, the Military Governor of Paris, Marshal Galliéni, rounded up 250 taxis from the streets of the city and used them to send reserve soldiers to the Marne. Day and night, starting on 4 September, the 'taxis of the Marne' shuttled back and forth taking fresh troops to fight the exhausted Germans.

The Battle of the Marne



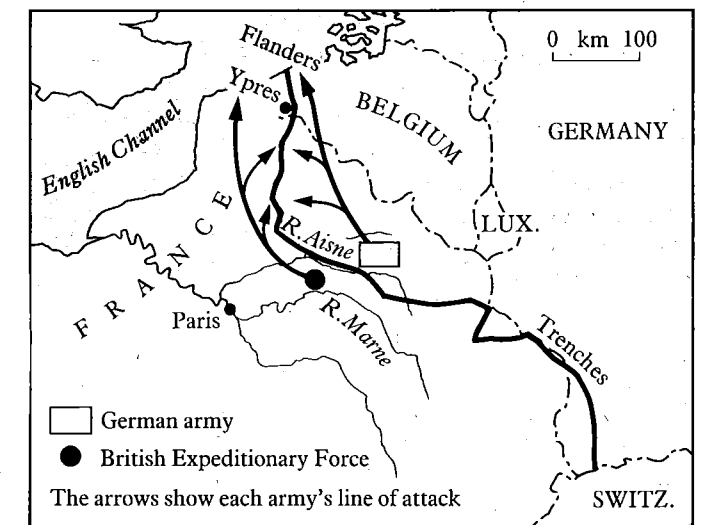
The Battle of the Marne lasted a week (5-11 September) and was one of the biggest ever fought. Two million men battled along a 240 kilometre front around the river. Gradually the French and the BEF drove the Germans back. By the end of the week they had retreated 60 kilometres to the River Aisne where they dug trenches and set up machine-gun posts to defend themselves.

The race to the sea

The Battle of the Marne saved the French for the time being and the rival generals now wondered what to do. Abandoning their original war plans they each tried to outflank the other – that is to get round the side of an army to cut it off. The French, the BEF and the Germans all set off north, hoping to outflank each other before they reached the English Channel. During this 'race to the sea', terrible battles were fought, the worst of them at Ypres. There the BEF stopped the Germans from outflanking them, but at an appalling cost. One British division lost 365 of its 400 officers and 10,774 of its 12,000 soldiers.

Neither side won the race to the sea so they started to dig trenches to stop the other from advancing. Gradually the lines of trenches lengthened so that by the end of 1914 they stretched all the way from Flanders in Belgium to Switzerland in the south. The armies could no longer move. It was stalemate.

The 'race to the sea'



Work section

Study these newspaper headlines of 4 September and 8 September 1914. Then answer these questions.

1. How did Paris 'throw up new defenses' on the day this paper appeared? Who was in charge of the new defenses?
2. In what ways did the German armies seem to be in a strong position on 4 September?
3. Explain in detail the second headline, 'Germans pushed back'.

