

Chapter 28 The Germans Enter Brussels

Richard Harding Davis, an American journalist, was in Brussels when the Germans invaded Belgium at the beginning of World War I. Davis's account of what he saw is one of the most famous pieces of journalism to come out of the war. To avoid bloodshed, the Belgian king had ordered the citizens of the capital not to offer resistance. Read the extract below and answer the questions that follow.

The boulevards fell suddenly empty. There was not a house that was not closely shuttered. Along the route by which we now knew the Germans were advancing, it was as though the plague stalked. . . . At eleven o'clock . . . came the advance-guard of the German army. It consisted of three men, a captain and two privates on bicycles. Their rifles were slung across their shoulders, they rode . . . with as little concern as the members of a touring-club out for a holiday. Behind them, so close upon each other that to cross from one sidewalk to the other was not possible, came the Uhlans, infantry, and the guns.

For two hours I watched them, and then, bored with the monotony of it, returned to the hotel. After an hour, from beneath my window, I could still hear them; another hour and another went by. They still were passing.

Boredom gave way to wonder. The thing fascinated you, against your will, dragged you back to the sidewalk and held you there open-eyed. No longer was it regiments of men marching, but something uncanny, inhuman, a force of nature like a landslide, a tidal wave, or lava sweeping down a mountain. It was not of this earth, but mysterious, ghostlike. It carried all the mystery and menace of a fog rolling toward you across the sea.

The [German] uniform aided this impression. In it each man moved under a cloak of invisibility. Only after the most numerous and severe tests at all distances, with all materials and combinations

of colors that gave forth no color, could this gray have been discovered. . . . It is not the blue-gray of our Confederates, but a green-gray. It is the gray of the hour just before daybreak, the gray of unpolished steel, of mist among green trees. . . .

For three days and nights [the German army] passed. . . . There were no halts, no open places, no stragglers. For the gray automobiles and the gray motorcycles bearing messengers, one side of the street always was kept clear. . . .

This was a machine, endless, tireless, with the delicate organization of a watch and the brute power of a steam roller. And for three days and three nights through Brussels, it roared and rumbled, a cataract of molten lead. The infantry marched singing, with their iron-shod boots beating out the time. They sang "Fatherland, My Fatherland." Between each line of song they took three steps. At times, two thousand men were singing together in absolute rhythm and beat. It was like the blows from giant pile-drivers.

When the melody gave way the silence was broken only by the stamp of iron-shod boots, and then again the song rose. When the singing ceased, the bands played marches. They were followed by the rumble of the howitzers, the creaking of wheels and of chains clanking against the cobblestones, and the sharp, bell-like voices of the bugles.

From *With the Allies* by Richard Harding Davis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919).

The Germans Destroy Louvain

London, August 30. I left Brussels on Thursday afternoon and have just arrived in London. For two hours on Thursday night I was in what for six hundred years had been the city of Louvain. The Germans were burning it, and to hide their work kept us locked in the railroad carriages. But the story was written against the sky, was told to us by German soldiers, . . . and we could read it in the faces of women and children being led to concentration camps and of citizens on their way to be shot.

The Germans sentenced Louvain on Wednesday to become a wilderness, and with the German system and love of thoroughness they left Louvain an empty, blackened shell. The reason for this appeal to the torch and the execution of noncombatants, as given to me on Thursday morning by General Von Lutwitz, military governor of Brussels, was this: On Wednesday, while the German military commander of the troops in Louvain was at the Hôtel de Ville [city hall] talking to the burgomaster, a son of the burgomaster with an automatic pistol shot the chief of staff and German staff surgeons.

Lutwitz claims this was the signal for the civil guard, in civilian clothes on roofs, to fire upon the German soldiers on the open square below. He said also the Belgians had quick-firing guns, brought from Antwerp. As for a week the Germans had occupied Louvain and closely guarded all approaches, the story that there was any gunrunning is absurd.

Fifty Germans were killed and wounded. For that, said Lutwitz, Louvain must be wiped out. . . .

"The Hôtel de Ville," he added, "was a beautiful building; it is a pity it must be destroyed. . . ."

Money can never restore Louvain. Great architects and artists, dead these six hundred years, made it beautiful, and their handiwork belonged to the world. With torch and dynamite the Germans have turned these masterpieces into ashes, and all the Kaiser's horses and all his men cannot bring them back again.

When by troop train we reached Louvain, the entire heart of the city was destroyed. . . . In their work the soldiers were moving from the heart of the city to the outskirts, street by street, from house to house.

In each building, so German soldiers told me, they began at the

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In 1839 Germany, along with other European nations, agreed that Belgium should be regarded as neutral in any European war. But in August 1914 the German armies swept into this tiny country on their way to France. The Belgians resisted bravely, and it took the Germans eighteen days, rather than the six they had counted on, to cross Belgium. In anger at the delay, the Germans began a campaign of destruction. In the town of Louvain the Germans threw torches into houses suspected of harboring snipers. Soon the university, the library, the churches, and thousands of homes were all ablaze. Eyewitness descriptions, such as the following, roused the indignation of neutrals.

first floor, and when that was burning steadily passed to the one next. There were no exceptions — whether it was a store, chapel, or private residence, it was destroyed. The occupants had been warned to go, and in each deserted house or shop the furniture was piled, the torch was stuck under it, and into the air went the savings of years, souvenirs of children, of parents; heirlooms that had passed from generation to generation.

The people had time only to fill a pillowcase and fly. Some were not so fortunate, and by thousands, like flocks of sheep, they were rounded up and marched through the night to concentration camps. We were not allowed to speak to any citizen of Louvain, but the Germans crowded the windows, boastful, gloating, eager to interpret.

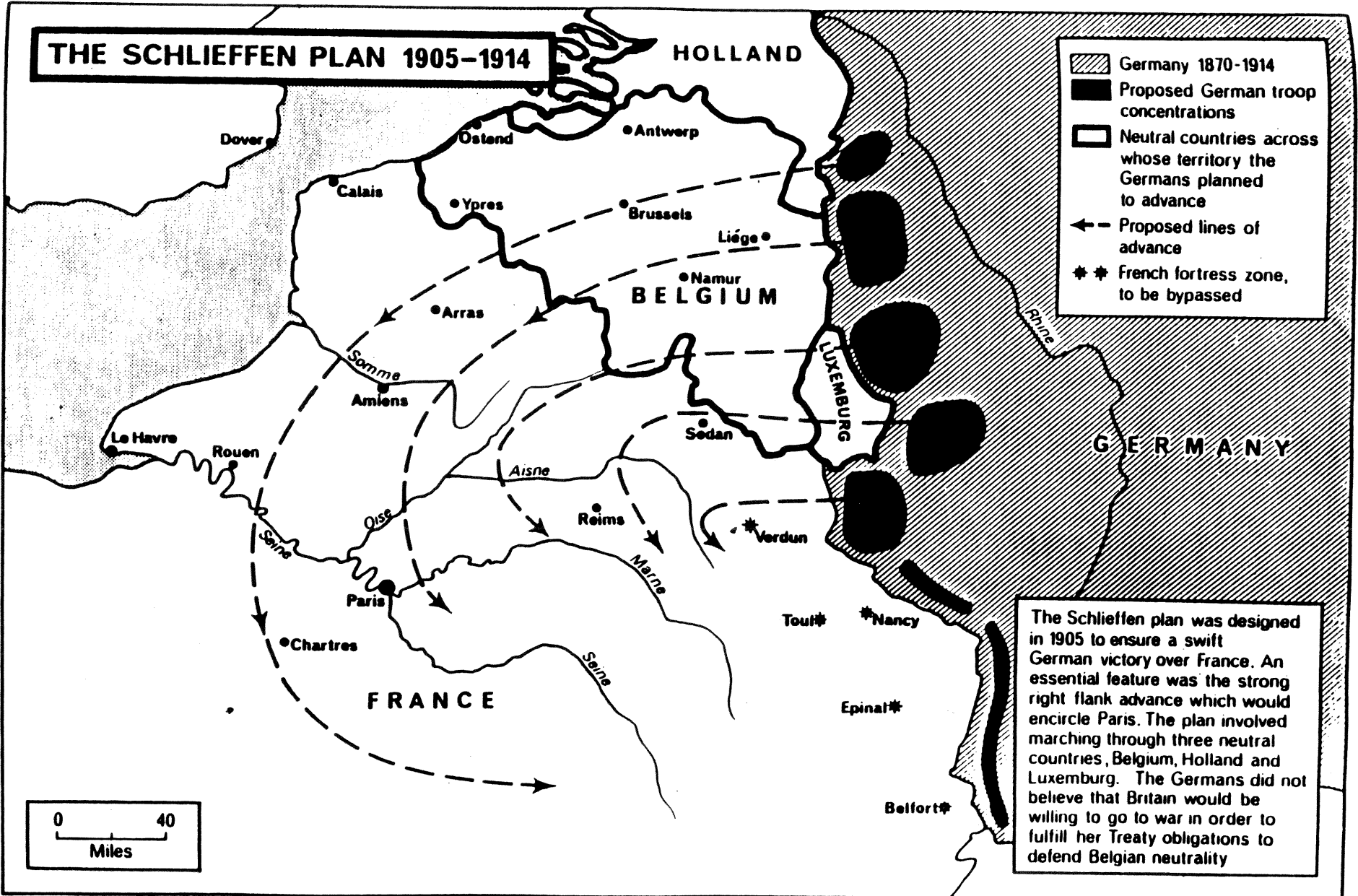
We were free to move from one end of the train to the other, and in the two hours during which it circled the burning city war was before us in its most hateful aspect. . . .

At Louvain it was war upon the defenseless, war on churches, colleges, shops of milliners and lacemakers; war brought to the bedside and fireside; against women harvesting in the fields, against children in wooden shoes at play in the streets. . . .

Outside the station in the public square the people of Louvain passed in an unending procession, women bareheaded, weeping, men carrying the children asleep on their shoulders, all hemmed in by the shadowy army of gray wolves. Once they were halted and among them were marched a line of men. They well knew their fellow townsmen. These were on their way to be shot. And better to point the moral an officer halted both processions, and climbing to a cart, explained why the men were to die. He warned others not to bring down upon themselves a like vengeance. . . .

It was all like a scene upon the stage, so unreal, so inhuman. . . .

You felt it was only a nightmare, cruel and uncivilized. And then you remembered that the German Emperor has told us what it is; it is his Holy War.



The Schlieffen plan was designed in 1905 to ensure a swift German victory over France. An essential feature was the strong right flank advance which would encircle Paris. The plan involved marching through three neutral countries, Belgium, Holland and Luxemburg. The Germans did not believe that Britain would be willing to go to war in order to fulfill her Treaty obligations to defend Belgian neutrality