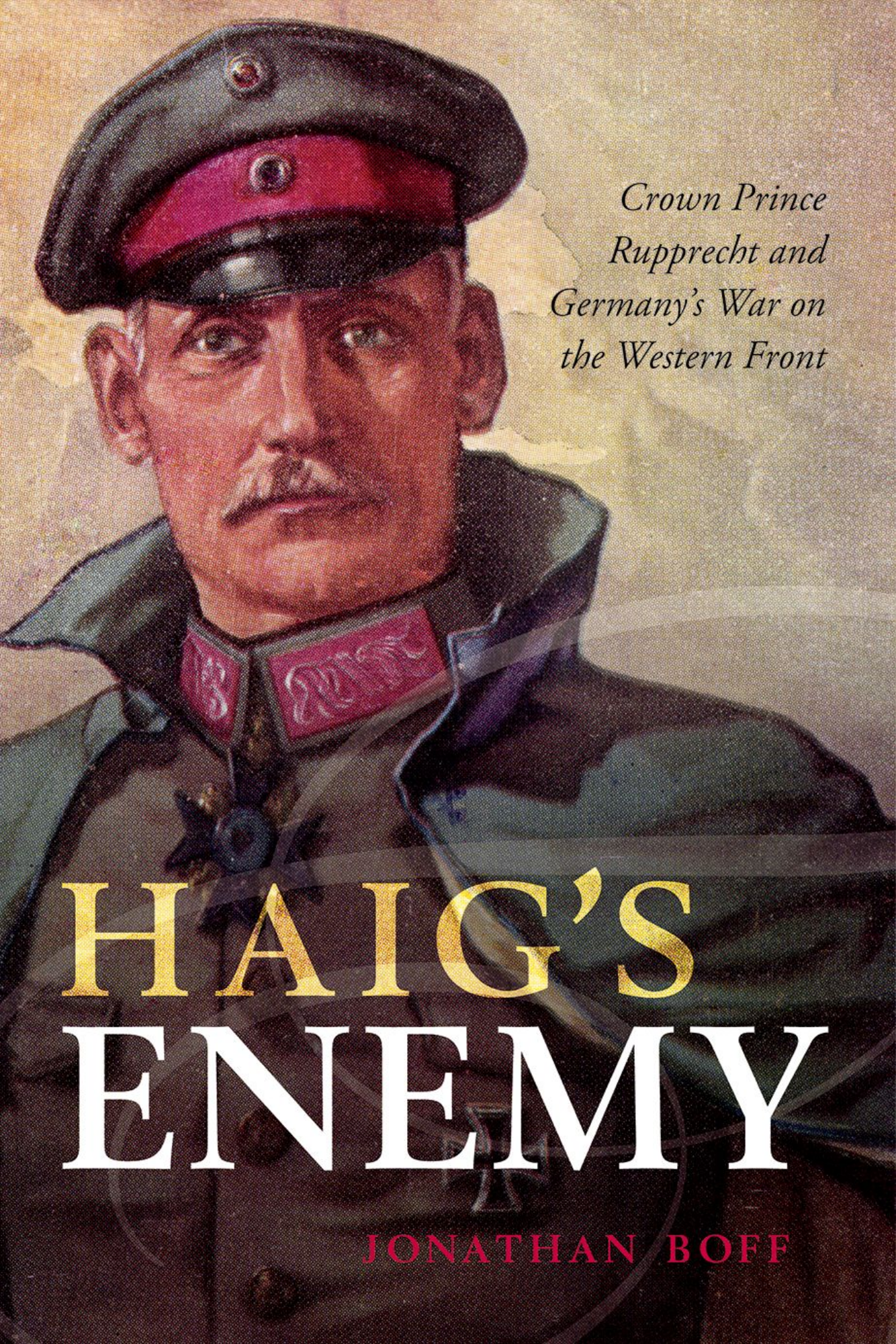

Crown Prince Rupprecht and Germany's War on the Western Front

HAIG'S ENEMY

JONATHAN BOFF

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Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria

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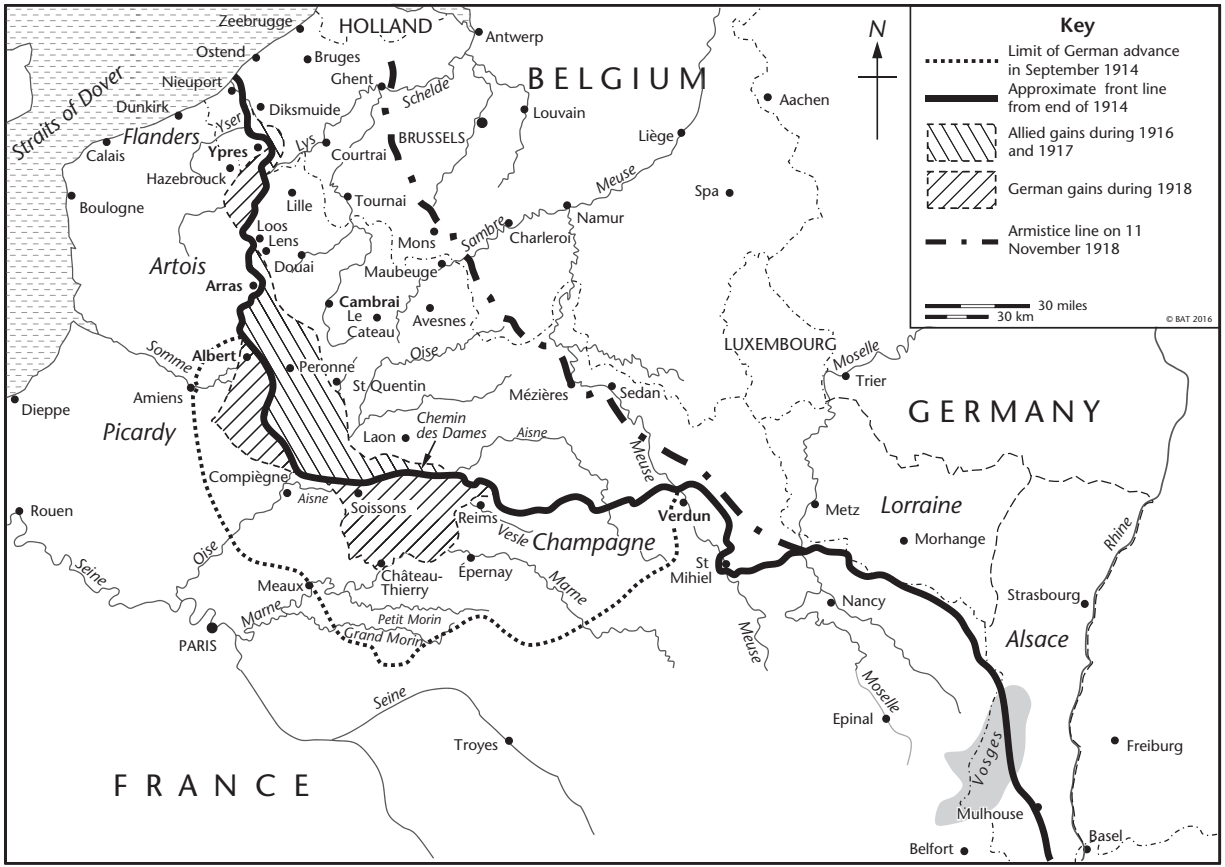

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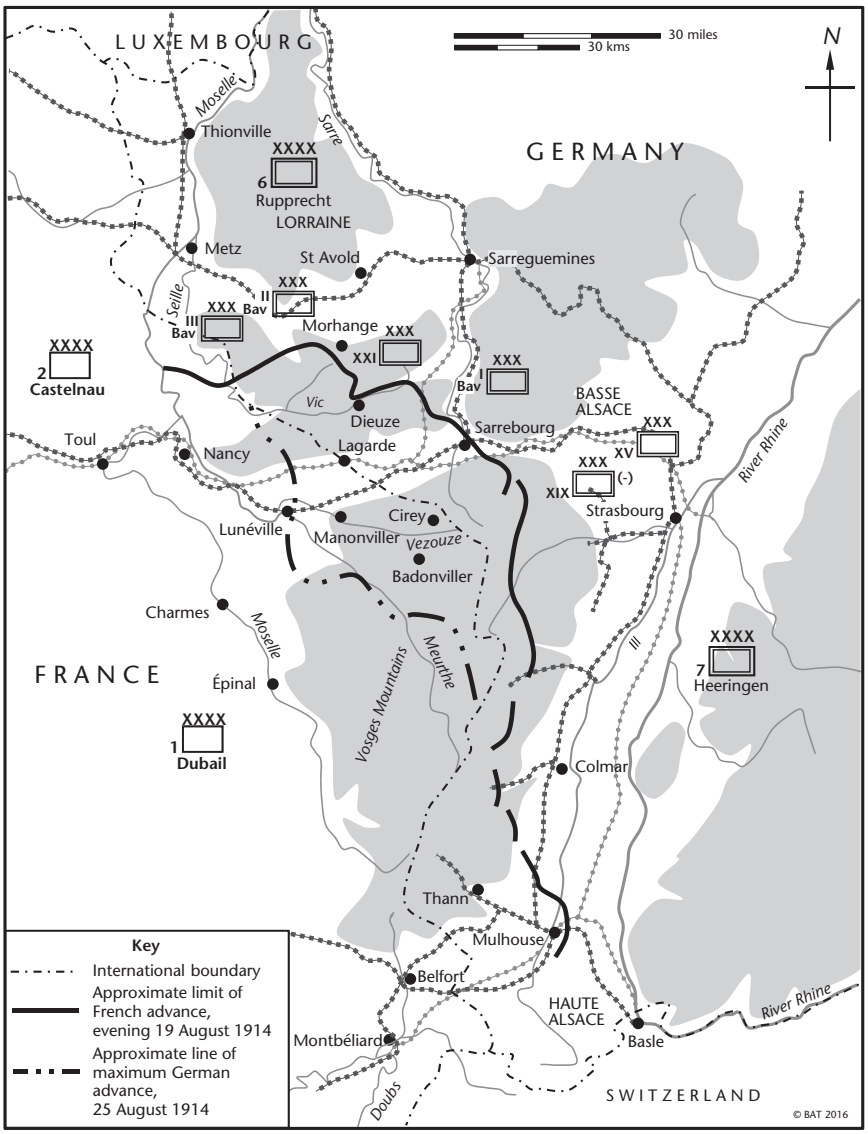

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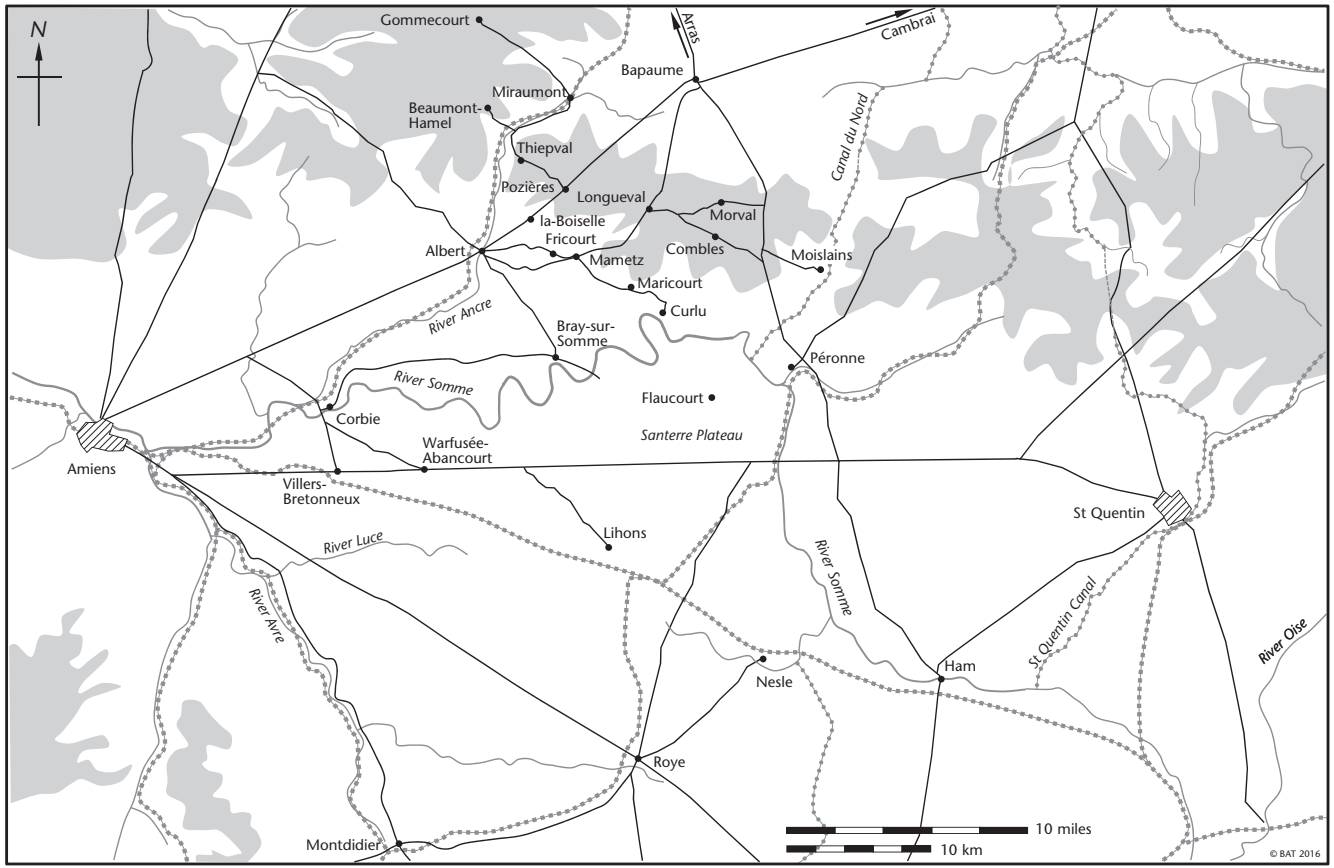
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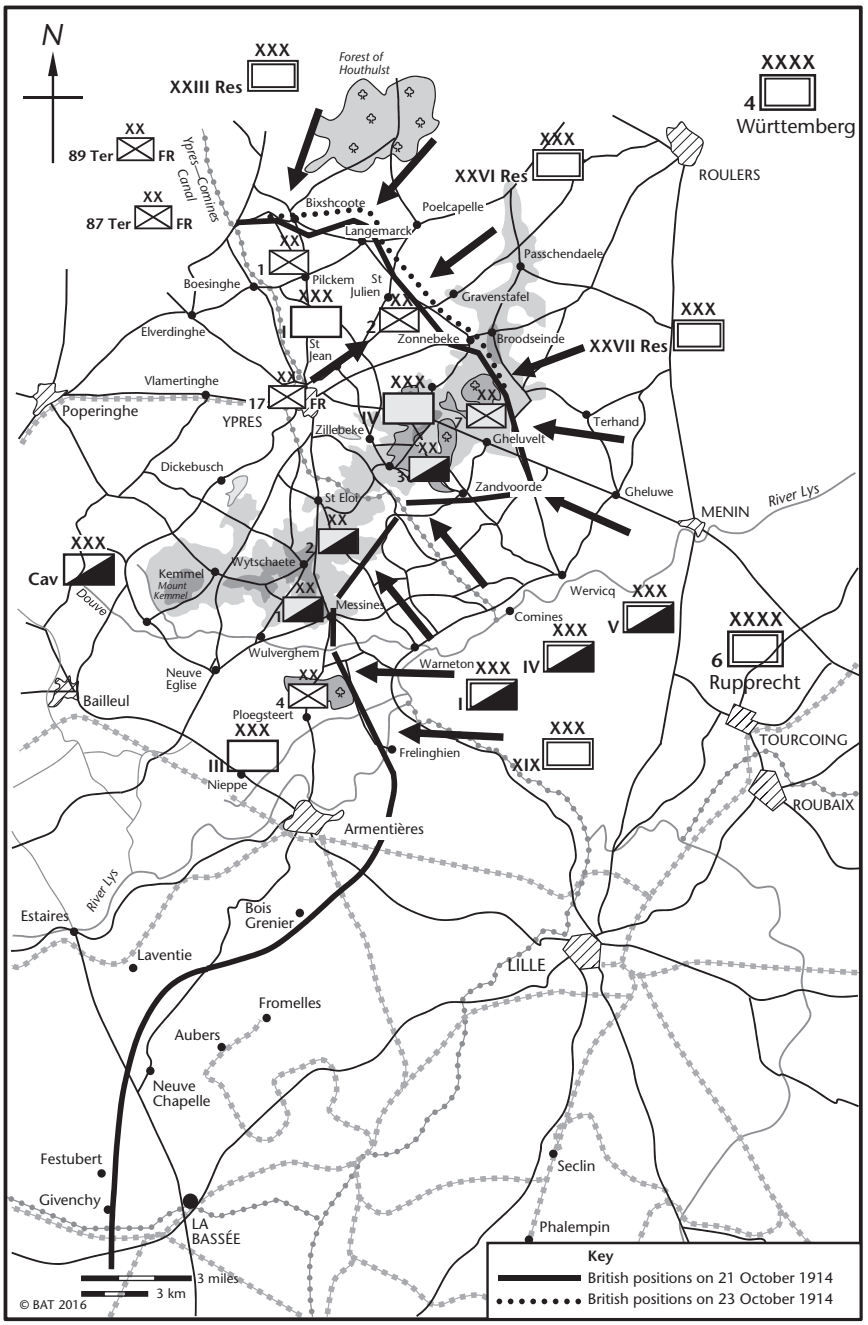

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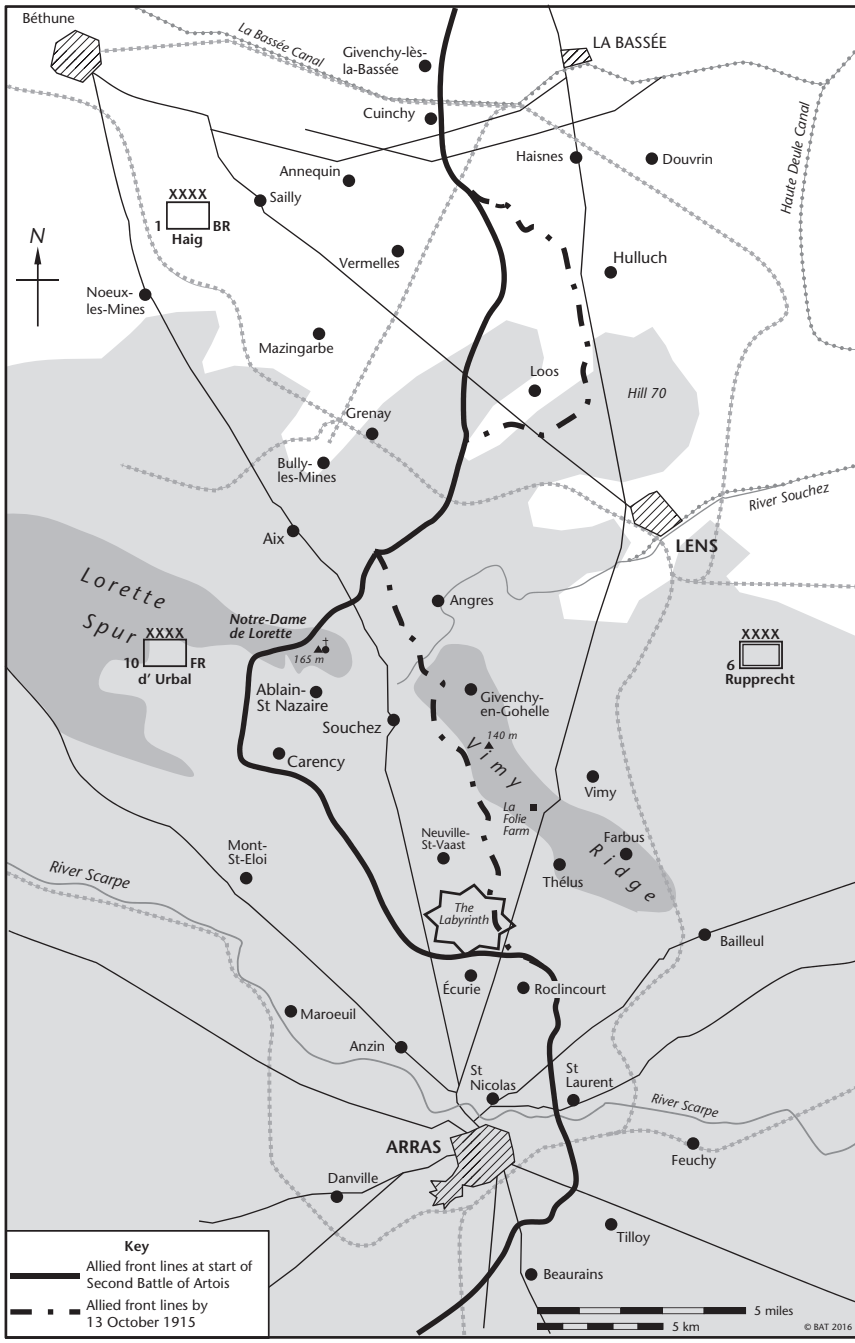

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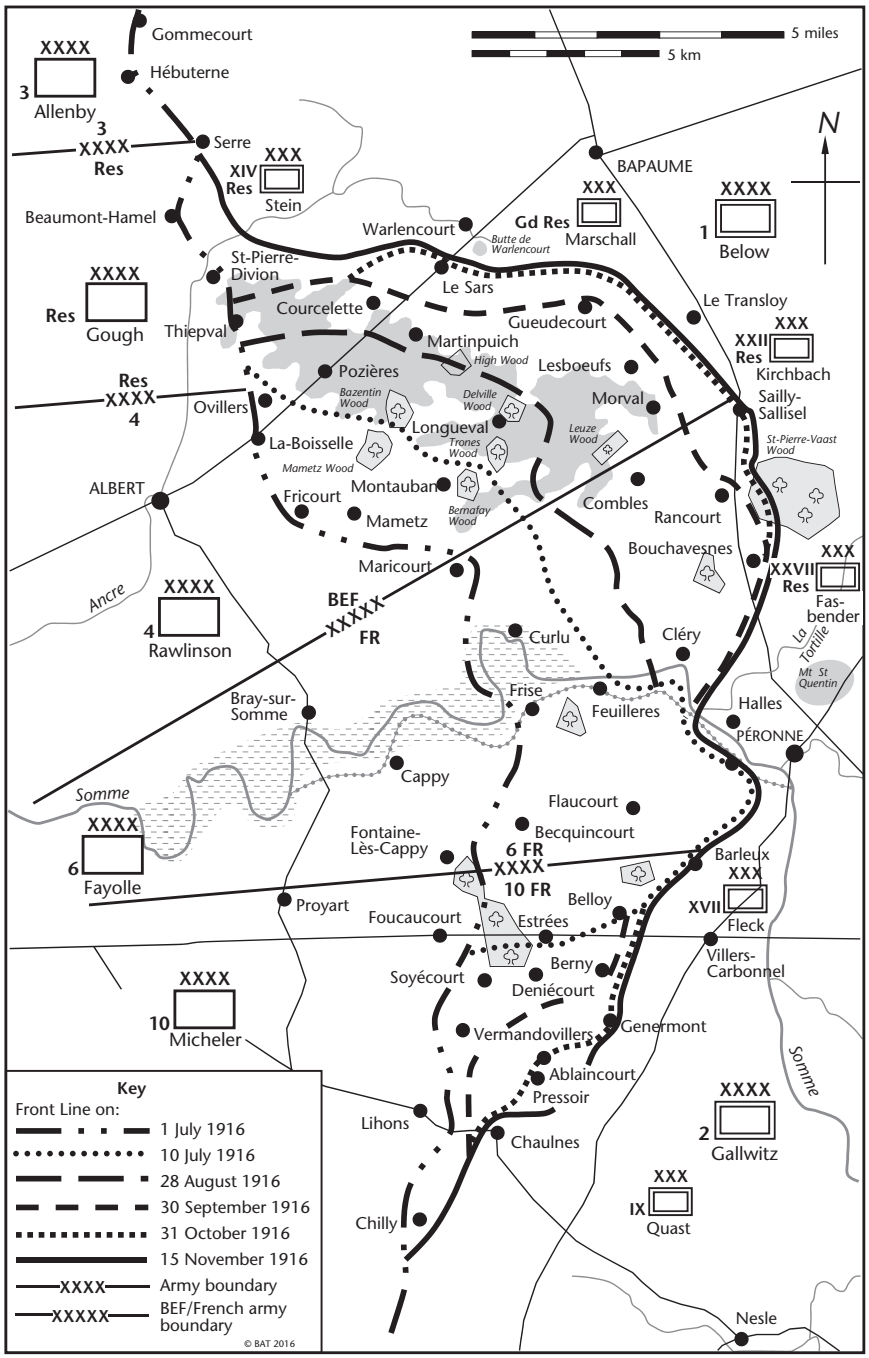
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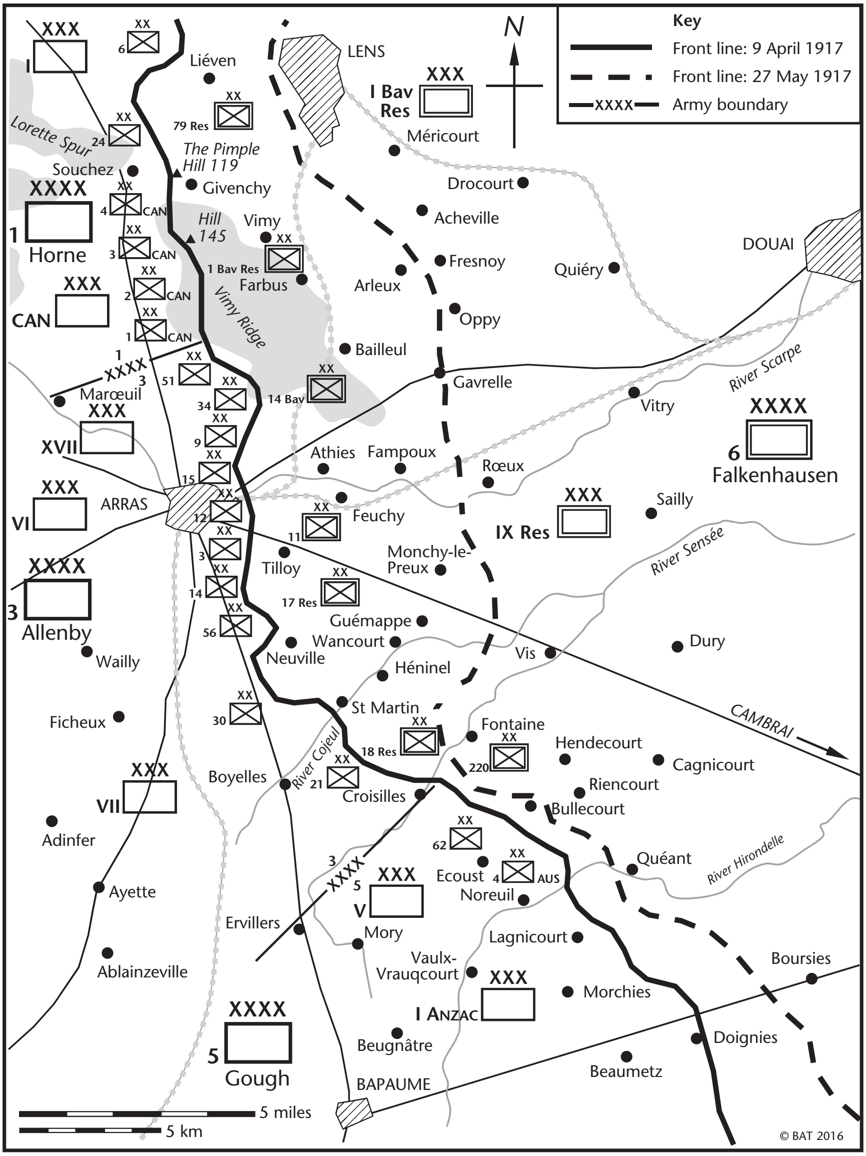
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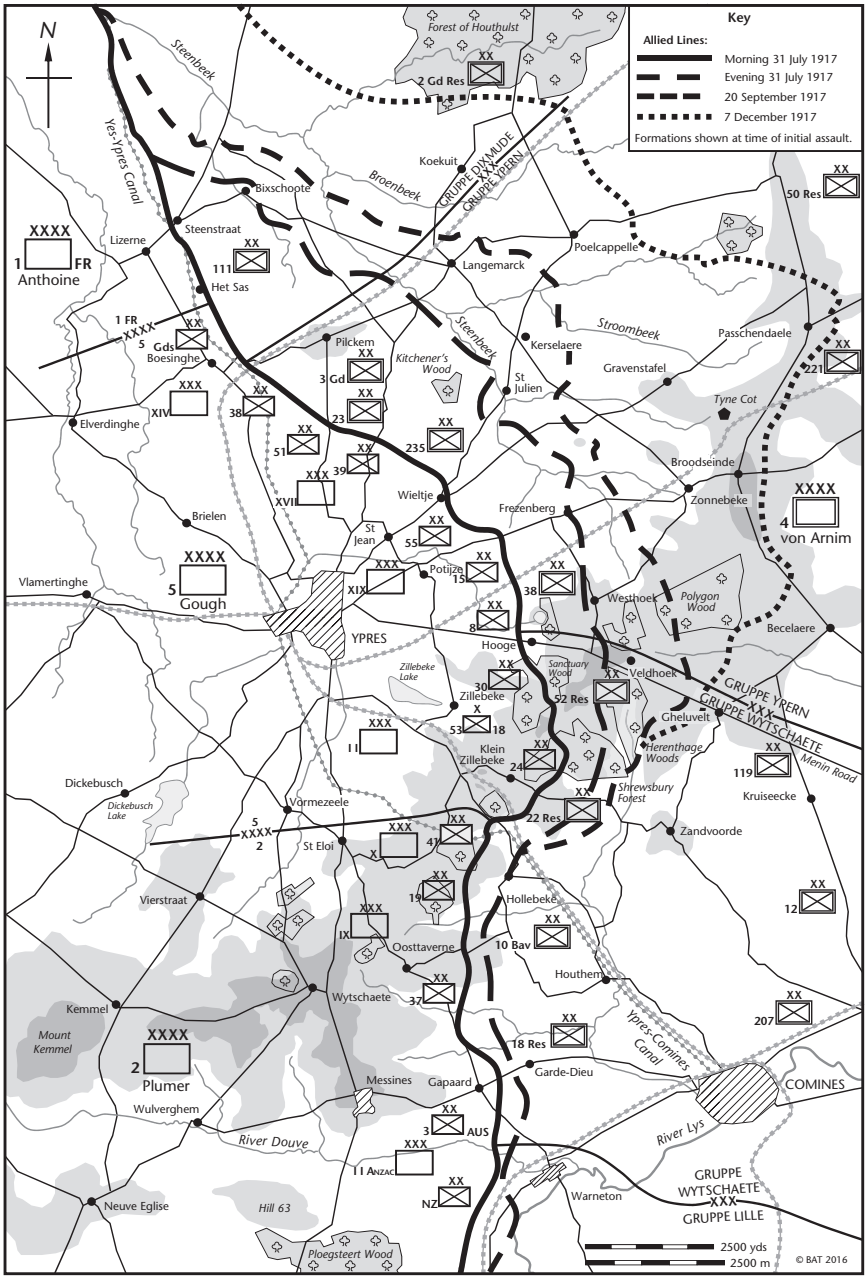

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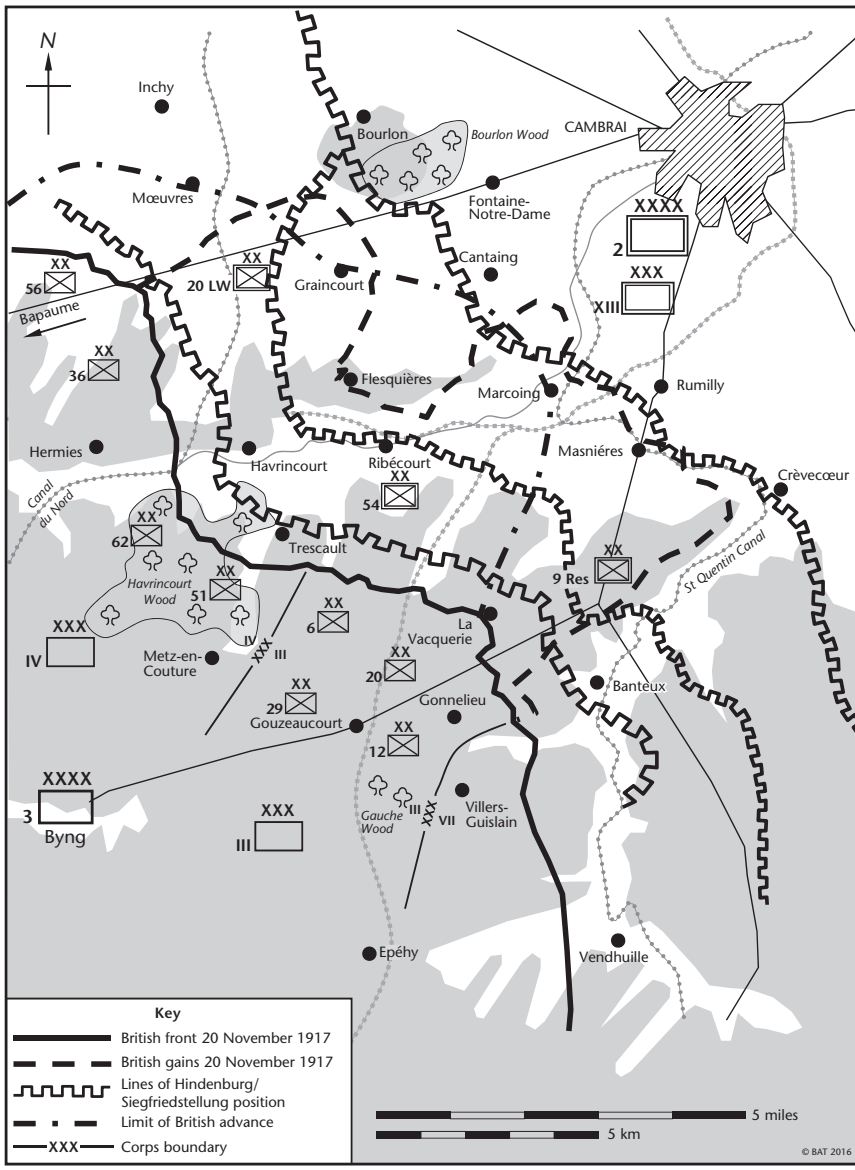

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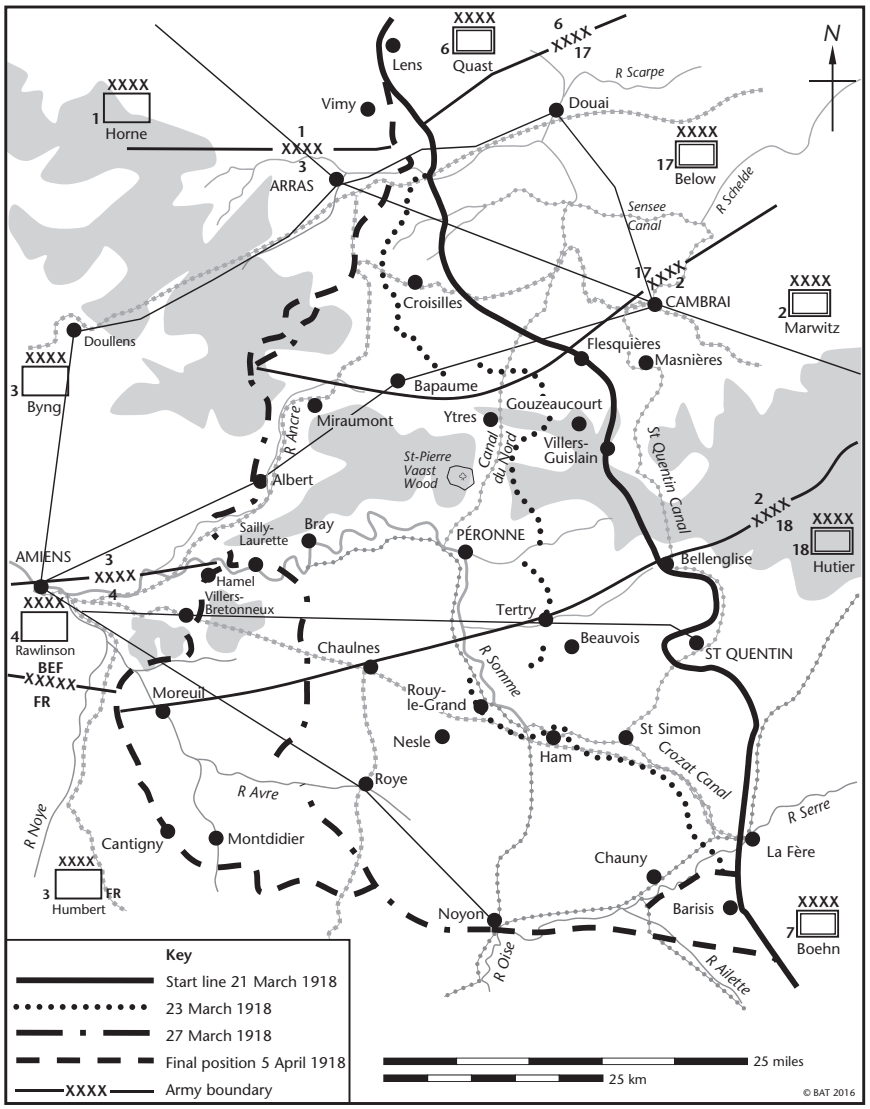

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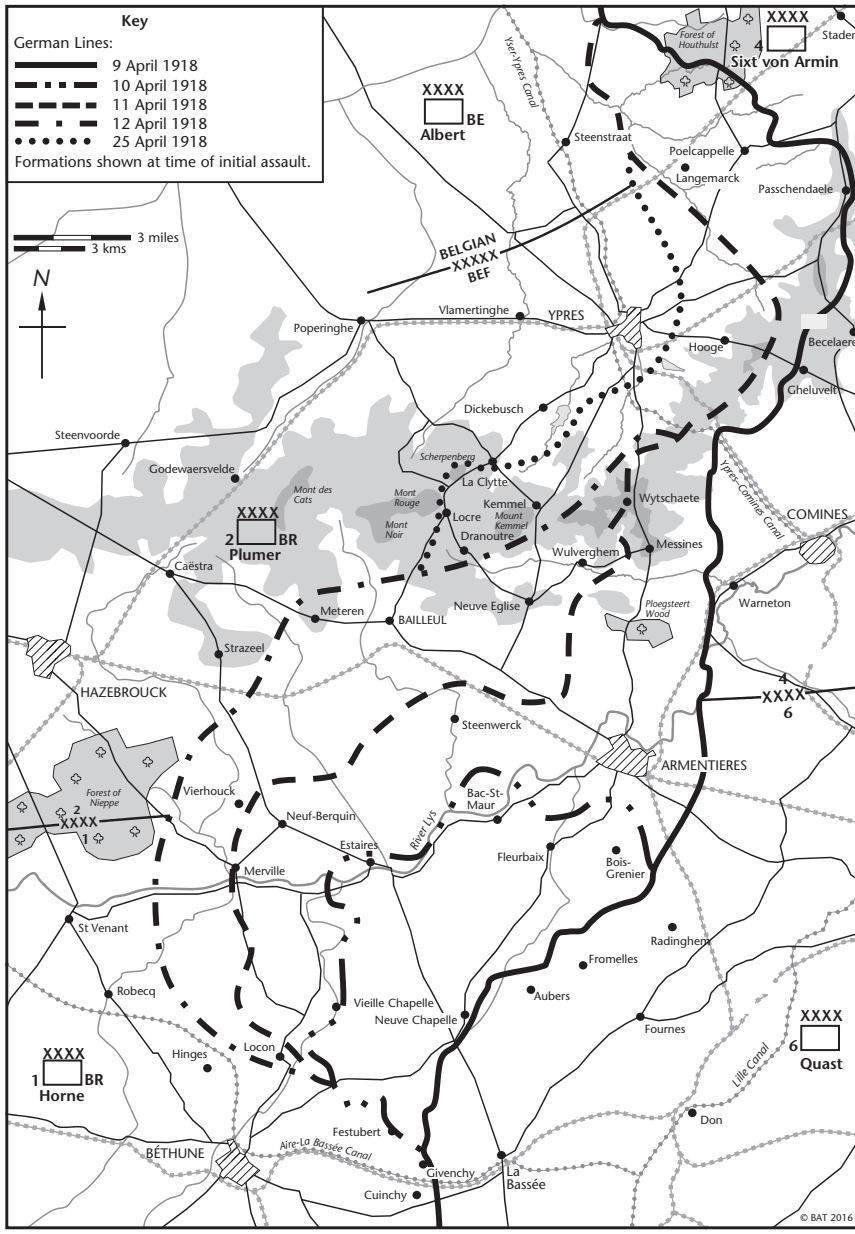

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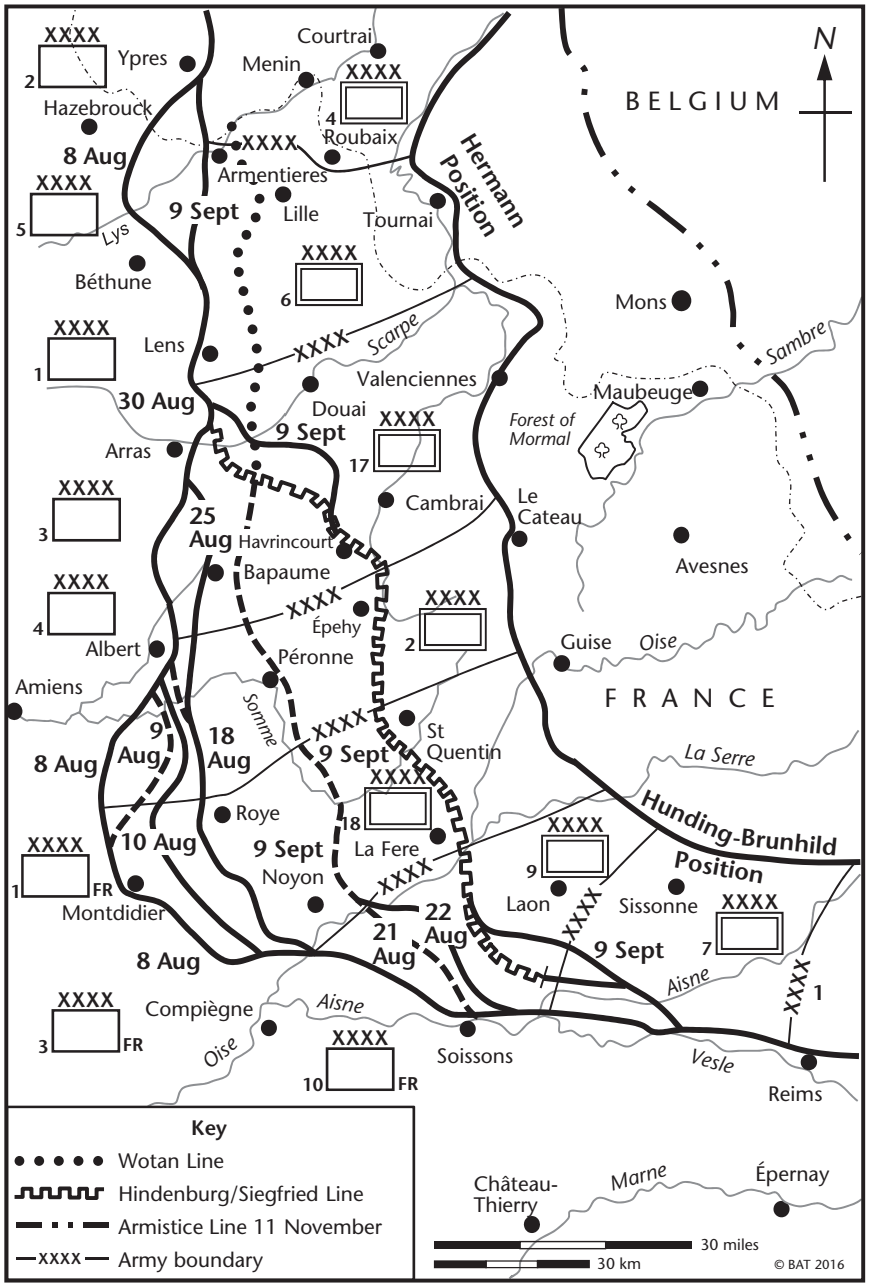

14. The Hundred Days

Introduction

Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria first came alive for me a few years ago. I was working on a book about the last few months of the war on the Western Front and had gone to Munich to explore the archives of the Bavarian army. These somehow escaped the Second World War firebombs which destroyed many of the Prussian records and as a result constitute one of the best sources for information on the German army during the First World War. On the last day of my trip, as I was idly flicking through a folder of apparently random documents, one sheet of paper caught my eye. It was a passport, issued by the Dutch embassy in German-occupied Brussels, allowing the Marquis de Villalobar and his party to enter the Netherlands on 12 November 1918. What was it doing in the personal files of Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria?

I already knew a little about Rupprecht. I knew, for instance, that he served as one of Germany's most senior generals between 1914 and 1918 and spent most of the war fighting against the 'tommies' of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), leading the German Sixth Army, and later an army group of one and a half million men, in famous battles such as Ypres, the Somme, and Passchendaele.[1] It was Rupprecht's men who launched Germany's last-gasp offensives in March 1918, and when they failed it was his army group that felt much of the weight of Allied counter-attacks during the so-called 'Hundred Days' campaign in August–November 1918. Rupprecht's closest British counterpart and most consistent enemy was probably Sir Douglas Haig. Like Rupprecht, Haig rose to command an army group: the BEF; and everywhere Haig and the BEF turned from October 1914 on, Rupprecht and his men were in the way. A good parallel from the Second World War might be the mythical rivalry between Bernard Montgomery and Erwin Rommel, although Haig and Rupprecht, who never met and were in no sense personal rivals, would have despised any

propaganda of personality of that kind. What did the Marquis de Villalobar have to do with Rupprecht, though, and why was he travelling to neutral Holland the day after the Armistice had been signed?

In the early days of November 1918 Germany was in double crisis. At home, Socialist agitators were whipping up revolution, pushing crowned heads from their thrones and seizing power. Among those deposed were Kaiser Wilhelm II and Rupprecht's father, King Ludwig III of Bavaria. At the front, the famed discipline of the German army was breaking down after a series of heavy battlefield defeats. Some units were already setting up Russian-style soldiers' councils ('soviets'). The people of Brussels, where Rupprecht had his headquarters, cowered behind locked doors as gangs of drunken German soldiers rampaged through the streets, looting and worse wherever they could. Rupprecht's life might be in danger. Less than four months before, after all, Bolsheviks had pitilessly murdered the Russian Tsar and his entire family. The Spanish ambassador to Belgium, Rodrigo Marqués de Villalobar, came to Rupprecht's rescue. He offered sanctuary in the embassy and made arrangements to smuggle him, disguised as plain Mr Landsberg, to safety in the Netherlands. That was what the passport was for and that explained why it had found its way to the archive in Munich.[2]

Answering one question, however, raised others. How was the proud heir to an ancient throne, a man of consequence in Germany and across Europe, a field marshal who had led hundreds of thousands of men in battle, reduced to skulking across borders under cover of darkness and a false name? This is the first question this book seeks to answer. It offers the first biography of Crown Prince Rupprecht in English, concentrating on his military career. He has had several German biographers but they have tended not to be specialists in the history of warfare. Only a couple of scholarly articles in German have addressed this aspect of his career before now.[3] As we will see, the human story is a fascinating, moving, and possibly tragic one. It also, however, raises important questions with broader ramifications than the purely individual. Studying Rupprecht's military career allows us to interrogate and challenge several of the preconceptions we have about the First World War and about modernity itself.[4]

We can, for instance, see the war from a new perspective if we look through Rupprecht's eyes. Too often we have been told the story of the Western Front from the British point of view alone.[5] The French, and even the Germans, often fade into the background or even out of the picture altogether. This book aims to help correct this distortion and to give the

proper weight to all three armies, enabling us to understand the war in a more balanced way.

We can also explore important questions about the war. One of the key ones is: why did Germany lose the First World War? Inevitably, a range of factors played a part. Germany did not lose the First World War only because her army was defeated on the Western Front. Events on other fronts and at home, some of which had little or nothing to do with Rupprecht, played a part in determining the outcome. So there are limits to what studying him can tell us. For instance, his contribution to grand strategy, the level of war where politicians set overall aims and allocate resources, was, as we shall see, limited. He did, however, know all the key decision-makers and was extremely well informed. Consequently, he is a useful source of information about the direction of the war. We will see that the German leadership made strategic mistakes at every stage. Few historians would disagree with that. The more interesting question is: why?

Rupprecht himself spent the war fighting on the Western Front, working at the operational level of war. This is where generals construct and fight campaigns, design and sequence battles, allocate resources and manage reserves to achieve the mission they have been set by the strategists. Below the level of operations lies that of tactics, where soldiers fight their battles. Get the tactics right, and you win battles. Get the operational art right, and you win campaigns. Get the strategy right, too, and you win wars. The Western Front was one campaign of a larger war and for both sides winning there was necessary, even if it was not sufficient, for victory. Control of France and Belgium was precisely what many thought they were fighting for in the first place and it was here that both sides deployed their most powerful forces. The focus of this book, therefore, is on the operational level of war on the Western Front, where seeing events through Rupprecht's eyes can be very helpful.

This is an aspect of Germany's war which historians have tended to neglect, concentrating instead either on the view of the supreme commander or of the individual soldier in the trench.[6] Germany has even less of a tradition of operational military history than British academia.[7] In neither English nor German has any historian yet followed a single senior German general, and the formations he commanded, through the whole war as this book does. Doing so shows how the German military reacted to the stresses of conflict and the need for rapid and sometimes radical change. Many military historians tend to assume that the German army of the first half of the

twentieth century was highly skilled tactically, largely because it operated a flexible system of command known as Auftragstaktik ('mission command') which delegated authority and ensured that the man best placed to make any decision was the one issuing the orders. Other strengths included high levels of training and motivation. However misguided or downright evil the purposes to which the army was put, they argue, it constituted a fine technical instrument. Here I challenge that interpretation and suggest that the German army of 1914–18 had structural weaknesses and conceptual shortcomings which inhibited innovation, distorted decision-making, and eventually helped destroy it. Some of those weaknesses were unique to the military, but others carried over from broader German society.[8] Studying armies as institutions in their own right is interesting but when, as in the two world wars, they are mass citizen forces, they open a window onto society as a whole which allows analysis of the military to take on wider significance.

If historians have sometimes overlooked the operational art of the German army, the same cannot be said of the BEF, which has been studied under the finest of microscopes. One of the most influential and persistent myths in history, first sketched out by Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George and enthusiastically developed and promulgated by Basil Liddell Hart and others, is that which sees the Western Front primarily in terms of British failure.[9] The traditional narrative assumes that what went wrong on the Western Front did so because the generals were too stupid, or the army too hidebound, to adjust to the modern reality of barbed wire and the machine gun. The commemorations of the war's centenary have repeated the stereotypes encapsulated in *Oh! What a Lovely War* and *Blackadder* more often than they have challenged them, showing how deeply seared into the public consciousness this myth is. The gulf between popular perceptions of the war and recent academic research has never been wider, because since the 1980s a generation of British and Commonwealth military historians have been mining the archives to revise that traditional view. They have dissected almost every aspect of the BEF in minute detail and argue that its leaders were not, on the whole, fatheads and knaves who never learnt a thing. Instead, the British army did remarkably well to overcome the immense challenges it faced and adapt to radical change in the most trying conditions, by marrying the best civilian expertise with military know-how to climb a metaphorical 'learning curve', until by 1918 it was capable of fighting the toughest army in the world toe-to-toe—and beating it.[10]

The 'learning curve' idea captures the central truth that the British army of 1918 was certainly more effective than it had been even a year or two previously. It is not without problems, however, largely stemming from exploring the BEF in isolation without sufficient comparative research into the French and German armies. This is understandable given the mass of detail involved in the study of just one army, much less three, even before taking into account the language barrier. Nonetheless, this risks making British learning look exceptional. Also, it can exaggerate the British achievement by ascribing too much of the BEF's success to its learning curve and taking insufficient account of any deterioration in the German army. One of my core contentions here is that it is a mistake to see the war as a one-sided (British) struggle to learn a new way of fighting and break the stalemate. Although the front was deadlocked for much of the war, it was so only because there was a continuous dynamic of push and pull, measure and counter-measure, between the two sides. This produced a deceptively stable equilibrium. This book argues that the battlefield defeat of the German army in 1918 was at least as much the result of the Germans getting worse as it was of the British getting better. It therefore challenges us to revise our views of the BEF, which was neither a collection of 'butchers and bunglers' nor an institution made up exclusively of forward-thinking quick learners, but somewhere between the two.

So, Rupprecht's war enables us to see the war and the armies which fought it in a fresh way. It also prompts us to think again about the relationship between the First World War, modernity, and the agency of the individual. One of the things that first attracted me to Rupprecht was that he seemed to stand for a generation which was destroyed by the events of 1914–18. By the time the war finished, his eldest son and many of his friends were dead. He had lost his throne and, instead of leading a triumphant homecoming parade, he sneaked back into Bavaria incognito. The threat of trial for war crimes hung over his head for years. Never again would he enjoy true power or influence. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s he watched as political violence convulsed his fatherland. Under Hitler, he lost his home, his family, and nearly his life. Like the cosmopolitan aristocrats of central Europe so vividly evoked in Patrick Leigh Fermor's travel books, Rupprecht can be seen as one of the many relics of a bygone age swept away by the tsunami of modernity.[11] How far does such a romantic picture correspond to reality, though?

Seeing Rupprecht as a victim fits neatly into popular perceptions of both the First World War and modernity itself. Most of us first encounter the war

at school, through poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. The worm's-eye view they offer inevitably drains meaning from the existence of the soldiers they depict. Unable to discern the larger patterns which make sense of their lives—and deaths—of course the war seems bewildering and futile. These poets were keen to reject what they saw as the twee conservative pastoralism of Edwardian Britain and so they eagerly highlighted the impersonal, the mechanical, and the modern in ways which have further influenced our view of the war. In Owen's poem, the Western Front is where, amid the monstrous clamour of modern industrial warfare, 'doomed youth' are herded to their deaths with all the passivity of cattle. Similarly, it is a mark of the insignificance of the individual in *All Quiet on the Western Front* that the novel's ironic title derives from the official bulletin issued on the day its everyman hero dies. In other self-consciously modern depictions of the war, such as C. R. W. Nevinson's painting 'La Mitrailleuse', soldiers have lost their humanity altogether. Flesh and steel fuse into war-fighting machines. The fact that we concentrate our commemorations today on memorials to those who were killed, not those who survived, only reinforces the victimhood motif. Also, to view the participants as victims rather than agents has the advantage of being psychologically easier on us.[12] The victimhood we ascribe to the soldiers of the First World War is, therefore, multi-faceted: it combines inevitable and pointless death with a sense of alienation from a modern world increasingly dominated by the machine, where humans have shrunk to insignificance and have no control over their own destiny. For all the efforts of some historians to correct it, this perception of the ordinary soldier as victim remains firmly dug in.[13]

Even if it is correct that 'the soldier in the trenches can be characterized as the victim of modern warfare *par excellence*', does that apply equally to all? Were there active subjects, as well as passive objects, on the First World War battlefield? To whom can we ascribe moral responsibility?[14] Was Rupprecht entirely caught up by forces he could neither understand nor control? Did he conform to the romantic stereotype? Or was what happened to him the consequence of his own decisions?[15]

The sources this book draws on are mostly new to an English-speaking audience. I have worked through a range of archival collections, primarily in Germany. First, Crown Prince Rupprecht kept a war diary, which is preserved in the Bavarian Household Privy Archive in Munich. It extends to 4,197 handwritten pages and was mainly put together as the war went on. There are two exceptions: he reconstructed the first few months of 1914

from notes over the following winter, and he also had to re-write the last week of the war, having burned the original pages before going on the run. This manuscript diary is full of detail, not only about what was going on in his sector but also about the wider war. The entry for a typical day, 1 October 1917, for example, covers: his tactical and logistical situation (one page); an intelligence report concerning a recent top-level Anglo-French meeting to discuss offensive plans (another page); diplomatic developments (one page); and the domestic situations in Britain, France, Russia, and the United States of America (nearly six pages). During the 1920s Rupprecht's generalship in August and September 1914 attracted criticism in the early volumes of the German official history. The retired staff officers at the Reichsarchiv in Potsdam who were compiling it blamed errors he made for the failure of the Schlieffen Plan. To put his side in the long-running controversy which ensued, Rupprecht decided to publish a version of his diaries. He asked some of his former staff officers to read and check the manuscript, which was then edited down to a quarter of its original length and published in three volumes in 1929. Much of the material cut out was repetitive or, like the sometimes lengthy domestic and foreign press summaries Rupprecht used to write up, not relevant. On the whole, the published diary maintains the sense of the original closely, although on occasion Rupprecht was unable to resist tweaking it to make himself look better, as we shall see. He also toned down, or left out completely, some of his criticisms of individuals. Some historians have drawn on the published diary, but few have bothered with the manuscript version, or with other unpublished papers including Rupprecht's correspondence with his family, friends, and politicians.[16]

Another major source was the official records of the formations Rupprecht led: Sixth Army and Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht. These are held in the Bavarian State War Archive, also in Munich, and cover most aspects of both day-to-day operations and longer-range policy in considerable detail.[17] They relate not only to Bavarian formations but also to all those under his command, so they give us a broad view across the German army. The after-action reports compiled by units at all levels after battle, in an effort to learn lessons for next time, proved particularly valuable. These papers were supplemented by other official documents from the federal military archives in Freiburg-im-Breisgau, where any surviving records from Potsdam are stored, along with other private papers belonging to Rupprecht's associates and subordinates. Published primary sources include the fourteen-volume German official history, *Der Weltkrieg*, the Bavarian

official history, *Die Bayern im Großen Kriege 1914–1918*, the series of battle monographs compiled by the Reichsarchiv between the wars, German regimental histories and officers' memoirs, and, of course, the voluminous French and British official histories.[18]

This book is divided into five Parts. The first four tell the story of Rupprecht's war from the beginning through to the end. Seeing the Western Front through German eyes in this way invites us to review existing, largely British, narratives of the battles fought there. We will discover, for instance, that battles which loom large in British military history sometimes hardly even feature as footnotes in the German equivalent. This also enables us to explore some of the broader themes already mentioned. Prominent among these is how the character of warfare evolved and the different armies adapted to change. Many chapters conclude with a section on this strand. Another recurring theme is the nature of command on the First World War battlefield. Such themes help explain both the war's outcome and the underlying strengths and weaknesses of the forces fighting it. The fifth and final Part assesses Rupprecht as military commander and political actor and offers answers to some of the questions raised in this Introduction. An Appendix on military terminology seeks to guide readers who want help telling the difference between a corporal and a colonel or a company and a corps.

The war which emerges from this book is one of radical and dynamic change where the ability to out-think your enemy was just as important as being able to out-muscle him. It took both sides time and immense effort to adapt to the new ways of war, not least because every time they came close to an answer, the enemy changed the question. Eventually, however, the German army was dragged down by its inherent weaknesses and fell behind in the race to adapt. The results were disastrous. Sometimes Rupprecht and his colleagues were constrained in the choices they could make, but the decisions they took were nonetheless too often poor. The First World War was not just a war of bodies and a war of machines: it was a war of brains, too. The Germans lost all three.

PART I

To War 1914

I

Rupprecht's Road to War

Prince Rupprecht Maria Luitpold Ferdinand was born in Munich shortly before nine o'clock on the morning of 18 May 1869.[1] He was the newest member of the Wittelsbachs, the dynasty which had ruled Bavaria for nearly 700 years. Rupprecht was the first of thirteen children born to Prince Ludwig and his wife, the Habsburg Princess Maria Therese. Rupprecht was related to most of the crowned heads of Catholic Europe: not only the Habsburgs but also the Braganzas, the house of Luxembourg, and even the Stuarts. Indeed, some saw his mother as the rightful Stuart heir, tracing her ancestry back to Charles I. When Rupprecht visited London for Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897, members of the Jacobite Order of the White Rose tried to pay homage to him as the future King Robert I and IV. Rupprecht never took this claim seriously, but his very name had a Stuart link: King Charles I's nephew and famous cavalry commander during the English Civil War, Prince Rupert of the Rhine, was a Wittelsbach ancestor.

Rupprecht was not born to the throne. The King of Bavaria in 1869 was his great-uncle, Ludwig II. Just twenty-three years old, he appeared perfectly vigorous and there seemed no reason why he should not live long and build a family of his own. In fact, however, Ludwig's enthusiasms lay elsewhere. He was Richard Wagner's patron and was more interested in building fairy-tale castles than in continuing the royal line. The towers of his castle at Neuschwanstein later inspired Walt Disney. Known as 'Mad King Ludwig', he died in murky circumstances in 1886, childless and unmarried. His brother Otto succeeded to the throne. Unfortunately, while there was room for doubt about Ludwig's mental health, there was none in Otto's case. He was indisputably insane. He had already been locked away for years and remained so until he eventually died in 1916. The uncle of Otto and Ludwig, and grandfather of Rupprecht, Prince Luitpold became the real ruler of

Bavaria as regent. When he died, in 1912, Rupprecht's father took over, finally setting Otto aside and declaring himself King Ludwig III the next year. Thus, at the age of forty-four, Rupprecht became heir to the throne and acquired the title by which he was known for the rest of his life: Crown Prince of Bavaria.

The throne which Rupprecht should one day inherit was a constitutional, rather than absolute, monarchy. The King was supposed to stand above politics and rule by consensus with his government and the two houses of the Bavarian parliament, the Landtag. In reality, he wielded considerable power. Although from 1906 the Lower House was elected by universal male suffrage, the King dominated the Upper House, appointed and dismissed the government at will, and dominated policy.[2] The biggest constraint on Bavarian royal power was external, rather than internal. In 1871 Bavaria became part of the new imperial Germany. She was now just the second state among many, lying far behind Prussia in importance. Of the total German population, over 60 per cent were Prussian, while only a little over 10 per cent came from Bavaria. Prussia had the power to veto constitutional change on her own whereas Bavaria could only do the same by building a broad coalition of the smaller states. That said, the government in Munich retained considerable powers and rights, including control over direct taxation. In peacetime it remained responsible for raising and running its own army. Officers pledged allegiance to the Bavarian King, rather than the German Kaiser. The army, however, was built on Prussian lines and in the event of war the Kaiser would become Supreme War Lord of all the German armies. Most crucially of all, the decision to declare war belonged to the Kaiser alone.

The first half of Rupprecht's life saw dramatic change for all Germany, with rapid population growth, a rush to the cities, and huge industrial expansion. Bavaria was affected too, but differences in the patterns of growth and development across the new country exacerbated pre-existing regional tensions. For example, although the population of Munich grew six-fold between 1850 and 1910, towns such as Essen in the Ruhr expanded more than thirty times over. Bavaria remained the least urban of the major German states, and invested less in industry and scientific research. Overall, Bavaria could not match the pace of growth in the north. In 1870, the population of Bavaria had been 4.8 million. By 1910, it had increased by 40 per cent, to 6.9 million. This was huge growth in a short period, but remained well below the German average of 60 per cent.

Bavaria retained deep cultural roots in its agrarian past. Seventy per cent of the population was Catholic, with 28 per cent Protestant. In Prussia, the religious proportions were almost exactly reversed. At the risk of generalization, Bavaria remained relatively agricultural, Catholic, and conservative even as Germany as a whole was becoming increasingly urban, Protestant, and socially progressive. Even her conservatism, founded in the values of the smallholder farmer, was very different from the Junker- and industrialist-dominated conservatism of the imperial ruling class. All these differences, new and old, created fault-lines which divided Bavaria and Prussia. Even in peacetime, the relationship between the two was not always easy. Prussians tended to treat Bavarians with condescension, while the latter were prickly about anything which seemed to be eroding their rights and privileges. As we shall see, wartime only made these tensions worse.[3]

Rupprecht later complained that his childhood was a strict one and to modern eyes his upbringing seems indeed to have been harsh. It is not clear that it was particularly so by the royal standards of the time, however. As a young child he saw his parents only at mealtimes, had lessons daily from eight a.m. until five p.m., and was frequently beaten, both by his short-tempered father and by his tutor. In the finest tradition of German royalty, his relationship with his father remained difficult throughout his life. It is perhaps telling also that he reacted against the religious atmosphere of home in later life: at least as a young man his Catholicism did not go much beyond observing the proprieties. At thirteen he became the first member of the Bavarian royal family to be educated at a public school. He graduated from high school in 1886 and was commissioned into the Regiment of Foot Guards. He later also spent time serving in artillery and cavalry regiments. He seems to have enjoyed to the full the relative freedom of life in the subalterns' mess, as well as the perks of being a young royal prince. Alongside his military duties he spent several terms studying at universities in Munich and Berlin. He also began his public career. For instance, he attended Kaiser Wilhelm I's funeral in March 1888.

When fully grown, Rupprecht was rather taller than average, at five feet ten inches. He took immaculate care over his appearance and carried himself with the upright bearing of the natural athlete. In his youth he had enjoyed swimming and skating and throughout his life remained a devotee of physical exercise and gymnastics. Well into middle age he could sit down on the ground and get up again without using his hands or arms. He was a keen sportsman, in the old, aristocratic sense: nothing so vulgar or English