

Background Digest

Dr. Van Royen describes European battle fronts

Geographer avers Maginot line, German west wall well adapted to French, Rhineland territories

BY W. VAN ROYEN.
(Assistant professor of geography.)

An advantageous position on the terrain, the possession of certain "dominating heights," used to be considered as important prerequisites to victory in a battle, and a good general had to have a sharp eye for the physical geography of the land.

Modern guns are often hidden in valleys and ravines and fire with astounding accuracy upon objects the gunners never see, mechanized divisions move with a speed and a certainty greater than that of the best cavalry, modern reconnaissance planes and bombers are entirely independent of all surface features. What then is left of the military significance formerly attached to hills and valleys, gateways and river barriers?

Notwithstanding all new types of armament, the first world war proved conclusively that land form plays as great a role as ever. Present mechanical equipment does not differ in essentials from that used in the years 1914-1918, with the exception that airplanes play a relatively greater role. However, provided there is approximate parity in the air, in any new war the role of the physical geography of the land will be as important as ever.

Germans had advantage.

While in the recent Polish campaign the Germans had the advantage of complete mobilization, where the Poles, probably on advice of the Allies, had postponed full mobilization in order not to "provoke" the Germans, while they formerly had absolute mastery of the air, and a great superiority in modern mechanized equipment, the main factor which made their campaign so eminently successful was the flat, featureless Polish plain. For hundreds of

be forced back from the Rhine, they would still have the line of the Vosges, which is easy to defend because of a gentle ascent from the west and a steep drop to the east. The narrow Gate of Belfort between the Vosges and the Jura was never forced during the last war.

Also the Siegfried line evidently makes good use of the terrain. To the north of the Saar region lie the high Hunsruock and the eifel which are difficult to invade. The valley of the Moselle is deeply entrenched and meandering, thus fairly easy to defend. Besides, it leads into the deeply-cut, narrow portion of the Rhine valley between Bingen and Bonn, is for all practical purposes a dead end street. Opposite the Vosges, lies the Black Forest, and farther north the Odenwald. Both of these rise steeply above the flat middle Rhine Valley, and have a gentle east slope. Thus they are easy to defend against attacks from the west. Access to southern Germany would have to be through the somewhat lower, but still very difficult Neckar Hills of the Kraichgau between Karlsruhe and Heidelberg. Unfortunately, this gap is flanked by difficult terrain and dominated to the last by the lower ramparts of the German Jura. The only avenue to the northeast leads by Frankfurt am Main, but back of this city again there lies the maze of hills and mountains of Hesse.

Factors favor stalemate.

Thus all geographic factors appear to be in favor of a stalemate on the western front as it exists at present. Quick success may be expected to come from flanking movements only.

There are two possibilities: In the south and in the north. The route through Switzerland is difficult, but an invasion here might necessitate a complete reorganization of French positions. An advance over the ancient northern route, perhaps coupled with an attempt at a minor thrust through Switzerland, still appears to be the most logical.

The gap through which the Germans invaded Belgium in 1914 between the Dutch border and the higher portions of the Ardennes south of Spa is now probably considerably better fortified. Besides, the element of surprise is lacking. The Belgian position is weaker along the Albert Canal between the Dutch city of Maastricht and Antwerp. While some of the land near Antwerp can be flooded, the largest part of the area is too high for that. At the same time these dry, sandy lands are sufficiently level for rapid and large scale movement of mechanized forces.

The same holds true for the adjacent Dutch provinces of South Limburg and North Brabant, where there are also good east-west railroads.

Dutch weakness.

The Dutch system of defense is very weak along the entire Limburg boundary with Germany. The main fortifications of the Netherlands, aided by flooding of the low polder lands, lie to the north of the Waal, the principal delta branch of the Rhine river. This leaves a gap, approximately 70 miles wide, through which German troops could advance rapidly upon the weakest portion of the Albert Canal line in Belgium.

The portion of the Netherlands behind the so-called "water line," is the most densely populated part of the country. Here lie the great cities of Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam, and Utrecht. Long distance bombardment by guns established in the dry, sandy hills to the east and a ferocious air bombardment would immobilize the Dutch and would prevent any threats to the advancing German right flank. Economically, the position may prove untenable for any length of time because of the very large civilian population, the impossibility of constructing underground shelters in most places, and the fact that food supplies can be brought in easily only in two places: at IJmuiden, the port of Amsterdam, and at Hook of

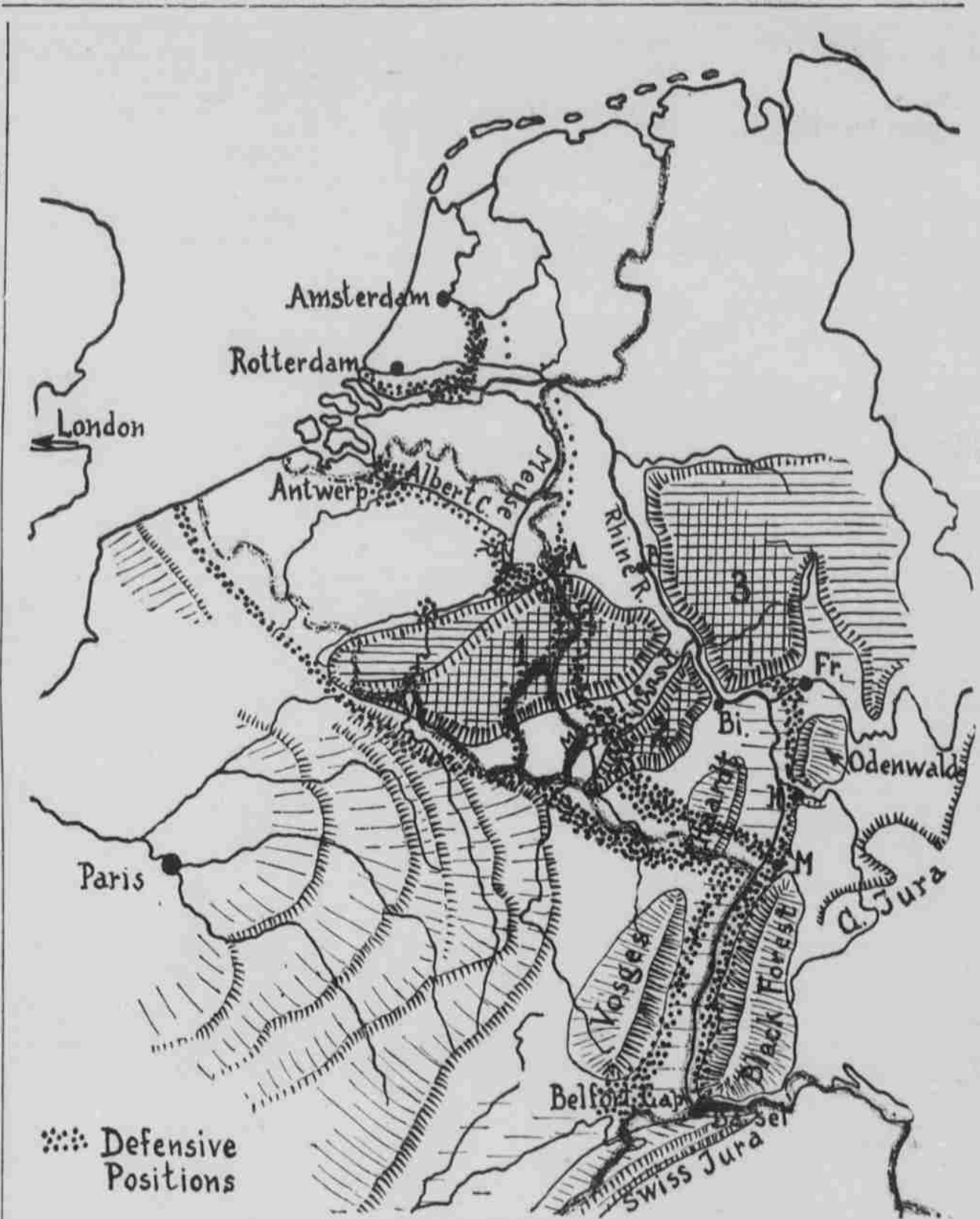
—Lincoln Journal and Star.
ASST. PROF. W. VAN ROYEN.



miles there is not a range of hills of any importance which stands in the way of an invasion from the west and north. In fact, broad west-east glacial valleys facilitate movements from the west. Possession of Slovakia gave the Germans mastery of the Beskides mountains to the south and all their forces had to do there was to move down the slopes to the plain. The first defensible line is that formed by the Narew, Vistula, and San rivers in the heart of Poland. As seems probable now, a fatal mistake of one of the Polish commanders made this line of rivers untenable, and the intervention of Russia only sealed the doom of the Polish defense.

Western conditions different.

In the west conditions are radically different. On the basis of all information available, there is now approximate parity in the air. There is no great featureless plain between Germany and France. On the contrary, the French Maginot line seems to be not only very strong, but eminently adapted to the physical geography of the land. Behind this line lie the series of east-facing escarpments which played such an important role in the last war. If the French should



What of international law among belligerent states?

Hill observes violations, predicts activities most objectionable to codes of warfare

BY N. L. HILL.
(Professor of Political Science.)

The regulation of war by law seems, at first glance, an anomaly, for war is not a procedure at law but an appeal to force for the settlement of a dispute. The law of war finds ample justification, however, in its humanitarian objects of preventing unnecessary suffering and in the need of some definition of the rights and duties of neutrals. It has always been under strain and frequently violated, either because of the desperation of a belligerent or because of the invention of some new instrument of war, such as the submarine. The World war of 1914-1918 saw many violations of the law by both sides.

Hostilities mild so far.

It is, of course, much too early to write comprehensively about violations of law during the present war. Hostilities, thus far, have

Holland. The port of IJmuiden, being largely artificial, with a canal and locks, can be put out of commission from the air.

Conquest of the Netherlands and the early possession of the northern provinces, which are indefensible, would give the Germans air bases considerably closer to England for the large-scale bombing raids which can be expected if war really starts. Thus the future for the small neutrals, the Netherlands, Belgium, and even Switzerland, appears extremely dark, as complete ruthlessness may be expected from the Germans to whom time means so much more than it does to the Allies.

been mild. Both sides have been cautious, more so than during the last war, perhaps because the spectre of defeat has not yet frightened either side, perhaps to avoid shocking neutral opinion.

Several observations may, however, be made even at this early date. It is clear that Great Britain will, as usual, rely on the so-called "blockade" as her main weapon. This is not, in reality, a blockade. There has been no blockade proclaimed. Following the practice of 1914-1918, Great Britain is stopping goods en route to Germany under the rules of contraband. As before, she has defined contraband broadly so as to be able to impoverish her enemy as much as possible. She is capturing goods going to neutral ports to be transhipped to Germany and is assuming to judge the legitimate needs of neutrals. The United States protested in 1914-1917, as a neutral, against British contraband warfare as in violation of international law, but when we became a belligerent, we acquiesced. Consequently, we are no longer in a position to question the British practice.

Prediction possible.

At this early date, it is possible to predict with some confidence the belligerent activities which will prove most objectionable, both as violations of the law of war and as barbarous inhumanities.

As in 1914-1918, undefended cities probably will be bombed. There is no law requiring that bombardment be limited to military objectives, but a recommendation to this effect was made by an international commission shortly after the last war. The war against Poland showed the impossibility of distinguishing between military

LEGEND FOR MAP ACCOMPANYING GEOGRAPHIC ARTICLE.

CITIES.

- A.—Aachen.
- B.—Bonn.
- Bi.—Bingen.
- H.—Heidelberg.
- Fr.—Frankfort am Main.
- M.—Mannheim.

REGIONS.

- 1.—Ardennes and Eifel.
- 2.—Hunsruock.
- 3.—Westerwald.

The cross hatchet marks on the map are the highest regions.
Map drawn by W. Van Royen.

objectives and innocent civilians or property.

It seems probable that the submarine will not visit and search before sinking merchantmen as international law requires. This law has been affirmed twice since the World war. The sinking of the Athenia suggests the probable ruthlessness of future submarine warfare.

All in all, we may expect that the present war will be marked by many violations of the laws of warfare. Neutrals will feel the pinch at many points. Their first major protective measure in this hemisphere for a 300 mile zone in the high seas is without precedent in international law, and will doubtless be controlled.

Recent visitors inspect KU geography department

Recent visitors at the department of geography were Prof. Guy R. Buzzard, chairman of the department of state teachers college, Emporia, Kas.; Prof. Durfee Larson of Kearney state teachers college; Richard Buzzard of the federal conservation service, Boise, Ida.; Herbert Kollmorgen of the federal conservation service, recently of Fort Worth, Tex.; and Philip M. Johnston, instructor in geography at McCook junior college.