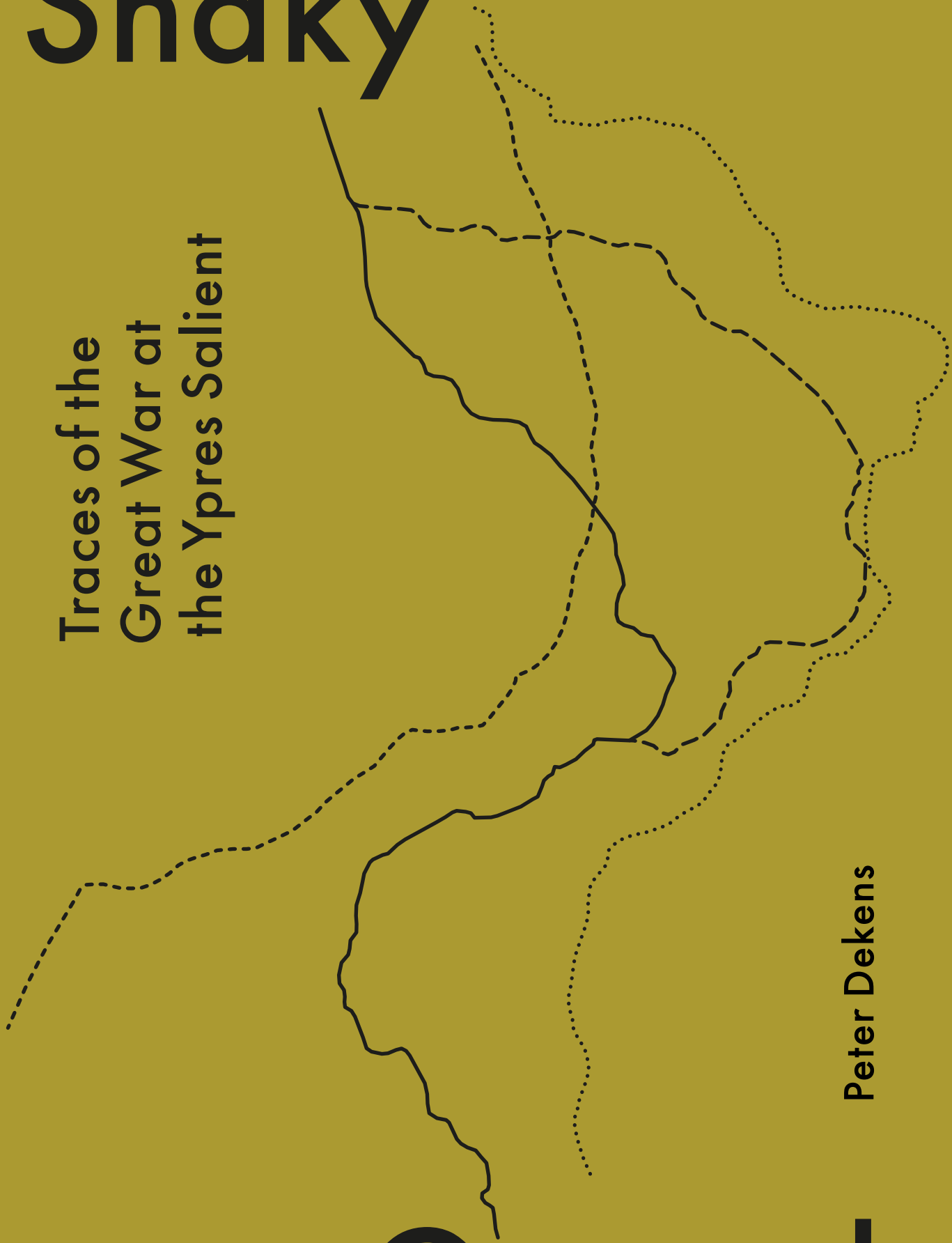


Shaky

Traces of the
Great War at
the Ypres Salient



Peter Dekens

Ground

“The next morning at dawn, we had a first view of our surroundings. Just over the parapet about 40 yards away lay over 300 dead Germans, who had been lying there since last October and when the sun rose, believe me, the stench was simply awful. Also in our trench there were hundreds of Germans and French just buried about a foot deep and you could not dig to improve [the] trench without striking a dead body.”

Shaky Ground

**Traces of the
Great War at
the Ypres Salient**

Peter Dekens



A childhood snapshot with my mother and grandparents; my father took the photo.

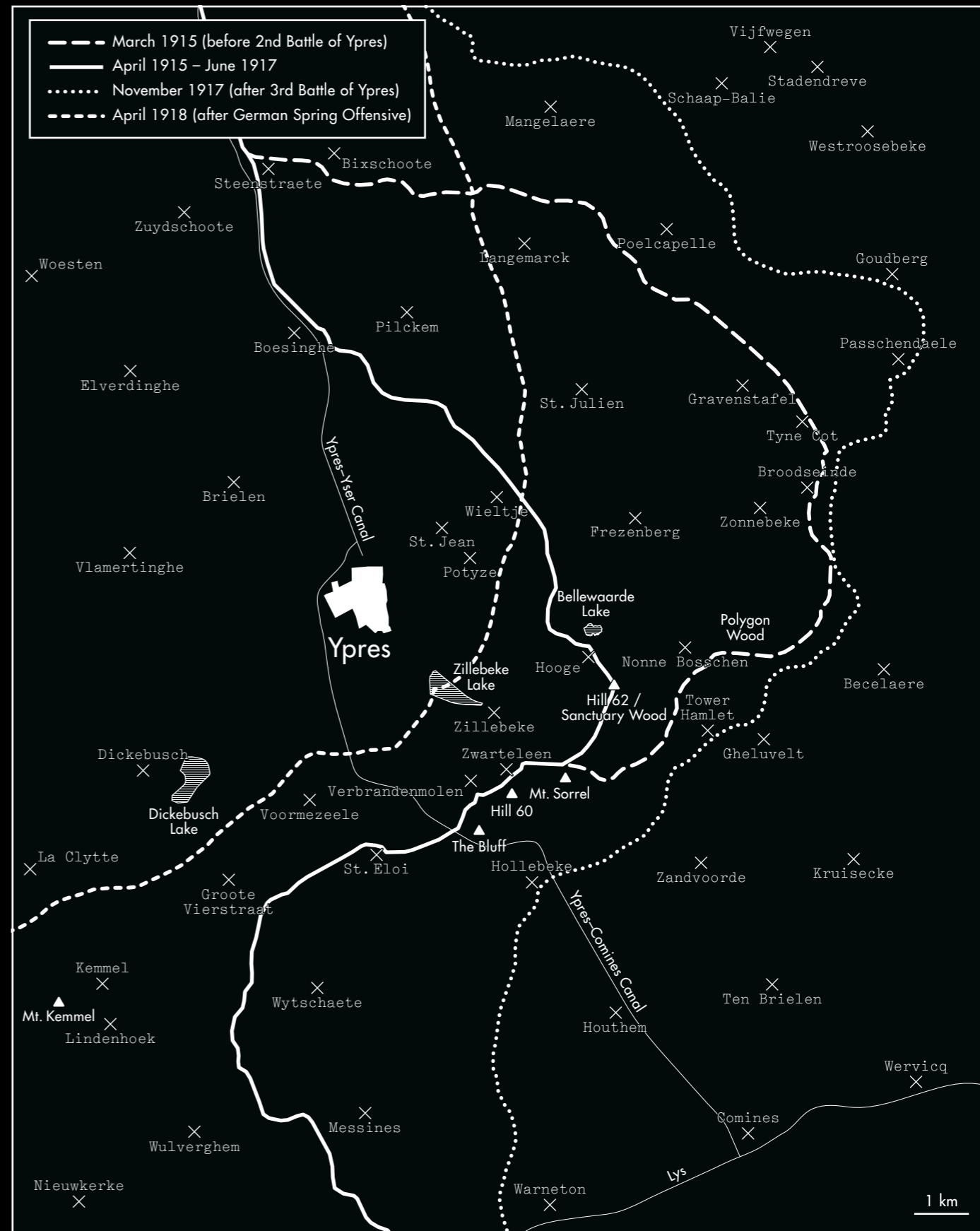
My very earliest memory associated with the First World War dates back to 31 May 1979. I can still see myself back then, at the tender age of 12, rushing off with my parents and grandparents to go to family in Ypres. When we arrived, I could see everyone was in shock. One of the other grandchildren had tried to dismantle an unexploded shell from the First World War. He was badly injured and died that same evening in the hospital.



My cousin's home in Ypres was partly destroyed by the explosion. (Source: Photo from 'De Weekbode', Year 33, 1 June 1979)

Driving along the curve of the Ypres Front Line now, 38 years later, it's nearly impossible to imagine that one of the most horrific wars of all time was waged here one hundred years ago. The traces of the Great War have been almost completely erased from the landscape, at least above ground. After the war, thousands of Chinese workers spent a year cleaning and restoring the landscape as much as possible. Over the course of decades, hundreds of bunkers were removed; the cleanup process continued for generations. To this very day, human remains and projectiles are still found every time someone sticks a spade into the soil. Somewhere beneath the sod, tens of thousands of missing soldiers are presumed to lie undiscovered, along with hundreds of thousands of unexploded shells. An estimated thirty per cent of the 1.5 billion projectiles fired during the First World War never went off. Some of the people who live in the area have developed a sixth sense for this hidden history: where tens of thousands of tourists and travellers pass by unknowing, the locals know that the slightest raise or dip in the road could be an indication that war remnants still lie uneasy beneath the earth.

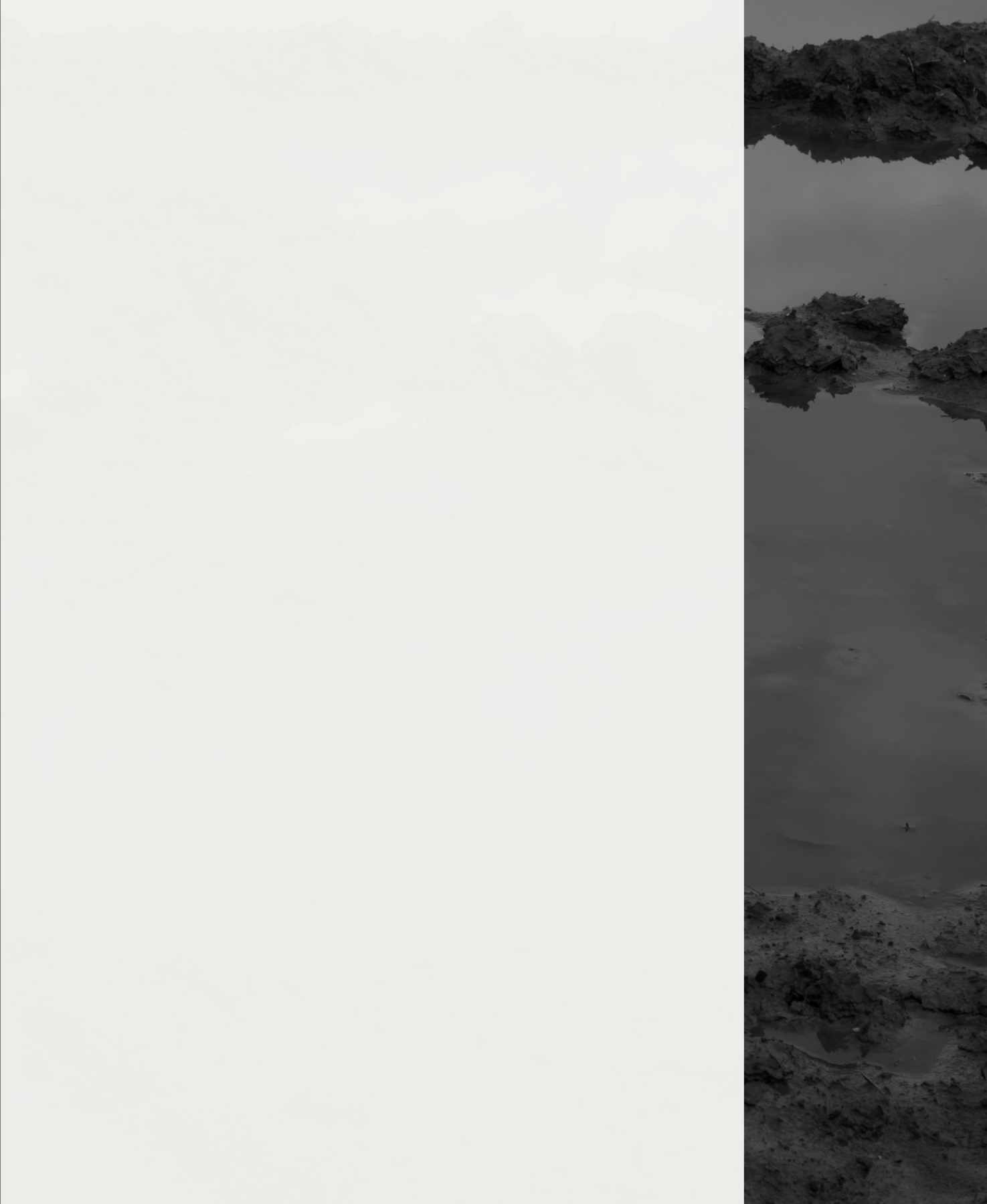
For centuries, Europe was a divided continent with countless wars and infinite redefinitions of shared borders. It briefly seemed as though the First World War would be the very last, the 'war to end all wars'. Ultimately, however, those years planted the first seeds of the Second World War. Long-lasting peace, prosperity and progress did not come to Europe until after 1945. The establishment of the European Community was envisioned as an affirmation of permanent peace in Europe. With the recent developments towards Brexit and the current political dynamics on the European continent, it seems that the awareness of the importance of unity stands on shaky ground again. The traces of a history of war seem to be fading rapidly from memory.



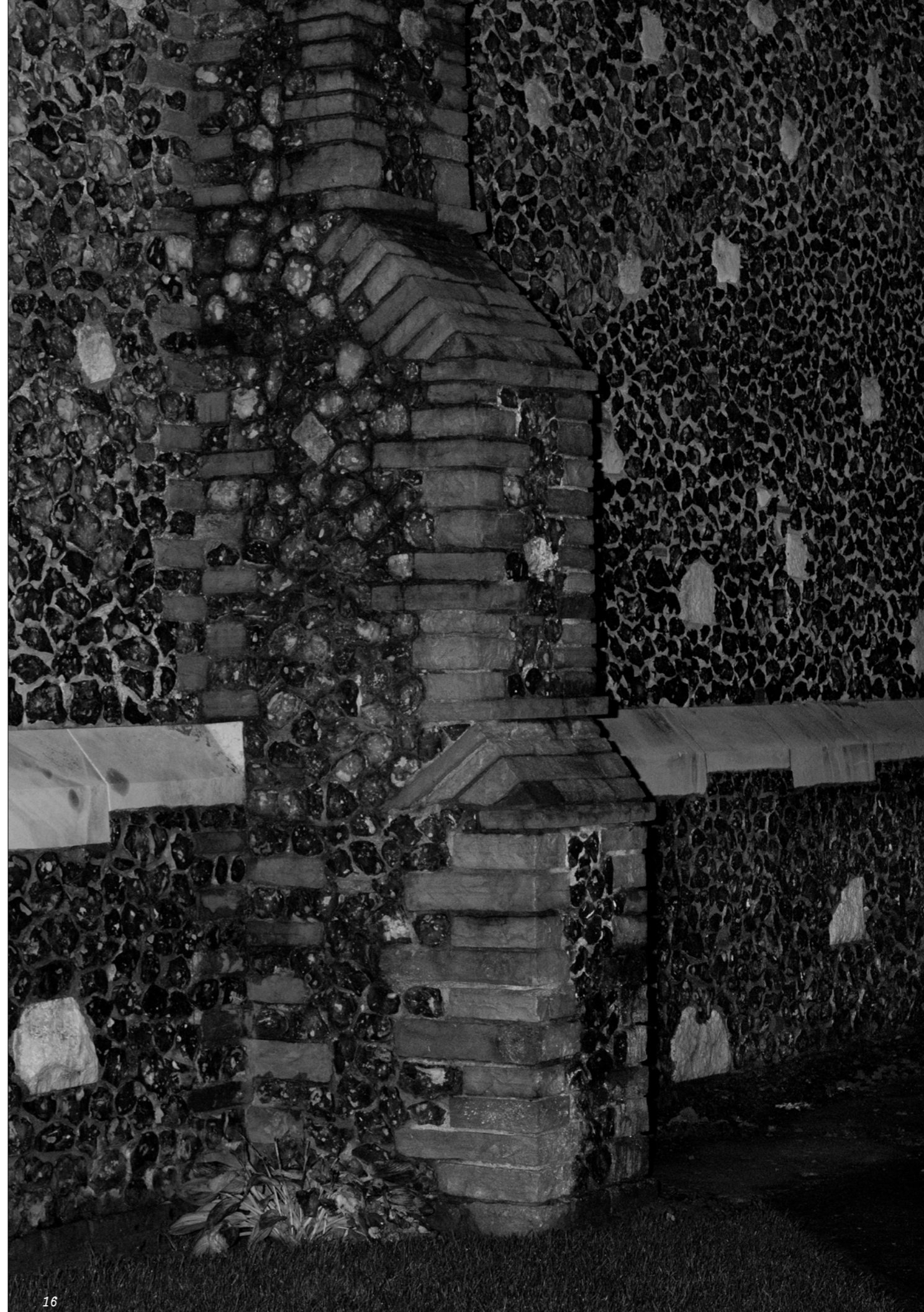




“The most hellish heavy rains fell and made one great bog in which every crater was a deep pool. They were like lakes in some places, filled with slimy water and dead bodies.” 11









“Of Corporal Everett we found no trace; he must have been struck by the shell and blown to atoms. Bennett was badly shattered and most of his head was gone, whilst Hollins, who had been sitting with his rifle between his knees, was unrecognizable and the twisted rifle was buried in the front of his body.”^{iv}

“Horrid sounds they make, you hear the whistle and hiss for some 40 seconds, coming nearer and nearer and wonder when it will stop. Then a nerve-shattering window-breaking explosion.”^v

25 J 21 MENIN ROAD





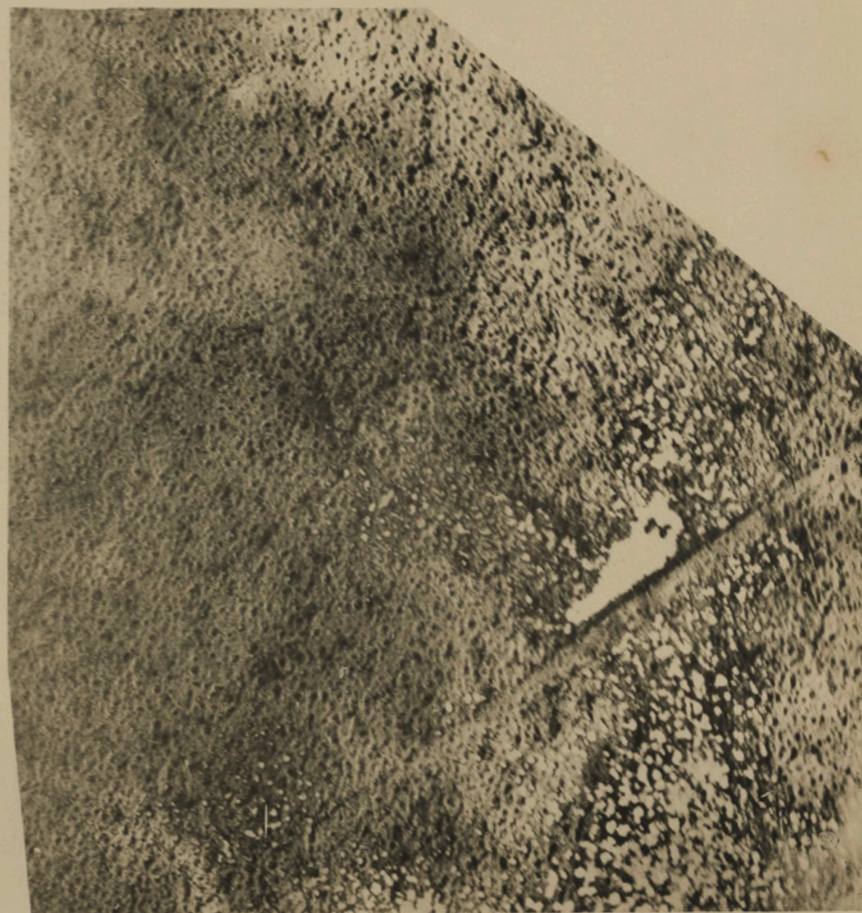
1 BLACK WATCH CORNER
2 VERBEEK FM 3 LONE HOUSE



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28 J 14 D. INVERNESS COPSE & MENIN R^D



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“Every day the tunnellers worked with the constant fear of sudden death. Carbon monoxide poisoning and tunnel collapse were an ever-present risk, as was the abrupt explosion of any mines they had already set.”

“But their biggest concerns were being blown up or buried alive by the enemy’s tunnellers, or having to fight them hand-to-hand in the dark. The trick was to spot the German tunnellers before they spotted you, and to do this they used a wide range of listening devices.”^{xii}







“The enemy were using 17-inch Howitzers to shell Ypres and the shells sounded almost like freight trains as they passed over. Looking back into the city you could see several houses disintegrate when a single shell exploded.”

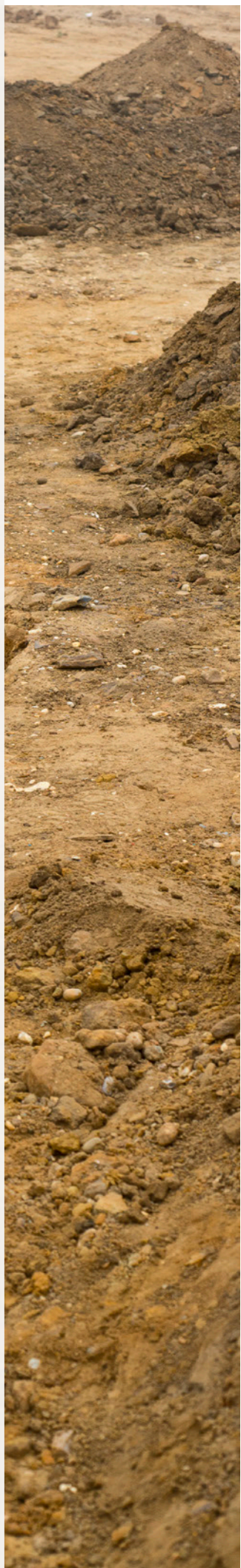
“Day and night, and with remorseless energy, their big guns searched the salient. Firing from artillery charts on which targets had been accurately plotted from peacetime ordnance survey maps, they shelled every farm that might possibly be defended and every chateau that might be in use as headquarters.”^{xiii}







“Soldiers suffered from frostbite and exposure, causing them to lose fingers. The trenches did little to provide shelter or warmth from the extreme low temperatures, especially at night, when even clothes and blankets froze solid. The muddy walls became hard as bricks, and any food and water became almost impossible to eat.”^{xiv}







71

In 2015, during an exploratory dig, a team of archaeologists discovered a well-preserved German fortification on a ridge (Hill 80 near the village of Wijtschate – or ‘Whitesheet’, as it was known to the British). Wijtschate was taken by the Germans at the end of 1914 and expanded into an imposing fortress; it was only in 1917 that it was destroyed and overtaken during the Battle of Messines. The remains of 130 soldiers from the First World War were found during excavations in mid-2018. (Wijtschate, Heuvelland)

72-73

The cross-section on the left is from a German trench that was used from 1915 – 1917 to defend the ridge at Wijtschate. The cross-section on the right – just a few dozen metres from the German lines – shows a British tunnel built at the end of 1917 which leads to a tunnel or dugout. The earth that had been excavated to build the tunnels and dugouts was used after the war to level out the cratered landscape. This soil was a different colour, after having been mixed for four years with rain, organic material, and rubble from ruined buildings from the surrounding area. (Wijtschate, Heuvelland)

74

Excavation recording form filled out by an archaeologist for one of the six skeletons found in the trench. “Legs were 1.5m apart from upper body. No pelvis or sacrum. Shell impact crater between torso and legs.” (Wijtschate, Heuvelland)

75

This trench dates back to the First Battle of Ypres (1914). This type of trench was uneven in shape and did not have reinforced walls. At the start of the war, these trenches were often nothing more than foxholes that had been extended to link them for added cover. (Wijtschate, Heuvelland)

76

Everything is revealed by the archaeologists, down to the last little detail, and then registered and photographed. It is all systematically removed for preservation. The exposed trenches and ruined buildings are removed after the archaeologists move on, if a new residential neighbourhood is going to be built on this site. (Wijtschate, Heuvelland)

77

A German soldier’s full kit was found in a trench and meticulously catalogued: Canteen, spiked helmet, full ammo pouch, standard issue belt. The kit was either left behind by the soldier, or abandoned after he was killed and his body was removed. The blue markers ensure that the photos taken by the archaeologists can be converted into 3D images later using software. The entire site and the items found here will be mapped using 3D imaging for further research after the dig is over. (Wijtschate, Heuvelland)

78-79

An excavator is used to scrape off a few centimetres at a time, layer by layer, and each discovery is investigated further. Objects that are revealed on the surface of a layer often presage a significant archaeological find underneath. (Wijtschate, Heuvelland)

80

The British shrapnel shell (18 pounder) contains 374 tiny spherical bullets (shrapnel). The time fuze on the shell was set to go off so the shrapnel would fly through the air before impact, sowing death and destruction at ground level (up to 270 metres away). This was one of the most frequently used projectiles during the course of the First World War. (Wijtschate, Heuvelland)

81

Stijn Butaye and his father found so many 18 pounder shells and other war relics in their fields that they decided to make a replica of an English 18 pounder field gun, using these empty shrapnel shells and other objects. The farm was on the German side for most of the war, so the British shelled the area heavily with this type of ordnance, especially during the Third Battle of Ypres at the end of 1917. (Langemark-Poelkapelle)

82

During excavation works when the street was opened up, the remains of the Zonnebeke Five were found beside this wall. These five Australian soldiers were killed in battle in 1917 and buried here side by side. The poppy came to symbolise the war remembrance, as poppies grew wild and plentiful on the battlefields after the widespread destruction of war. Poppies are a pioneer plant: the first vegetation to take root on freshly turned earth or spoiled, depleted soil, on ground where other plants have a more difficult time. The seeds that have been in the soil for years sprout again. (Zonnebeke)

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Shaky Ground
Peter Dekens

concept and photography:
Peter Dekens

text:
Peter Dekens

copyediting and proofreading:
Joy Phillips

narrative construction:
Peter Dekens and Rob van Hoesel

design:
Studio Rob van Hoesel

cartography:
Carel Fransen

lithography:
Colour&Books,
Sebastiaan Hanekroot

production:
Fine Books, Jos Morree

paper:
120 grs Biotop 3 next
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'Shaky Ground' originates from a childhood memory associated with the First World War. When one of Peter Dekens' cousins tried to dismantle an unexploded shell, he was badly injured and died that same evening in the hospital.

To this very day, human remains and projectiles are still found every time someone sticks a spade into the soil at the area in Belgium known as the Ypres Salient. Some of the people who live here have developed a sixth sense for this hidden history: where tens of thousands of tourists and travellers pass by unknowing, the locals know that the slightest rise or dip in the road could be an indication that war remnants still lie uneasy beneath the earth.

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