

Daniel Schönpflug

Kometenjahre

1918: Die Welt im Aufbruch

Comet Years

1918: A World on the Cusp

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A story of these unique moments, when after the horrors of war, everything seemed possible.

November 1918. The Great War has reduced the old world to rubble; rarely was the fate of humans so open. New possibilities and dreams shine brightly, the struggle for the future begins.

Cossack Marina Yurlova opposes the revolution in Siberia, Käthe Kollwitz turns her pain into art, Rudolf Höß marches with the volunteer corps, Virginia Woolf revolutionises the novel, Walter Gropius wants to change society through architecture and the publisher Louise Weiss passionately promotes a united Europe in Paris.

Daniel Schönpflug virtuously portrays this unique moment and the years that followed from the perspective of those people who discovered, shaped and experienced them. A brilliantly written landscape covering a unique era that shifts between enthusiasm and disappointment, between euphoria and destruction.

Daniel Schönpflug, born in 1969, is Professor for History at the Free University Berlin and Academic Coordinator at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. His specialism is 18th – 20th Century European History. His highly praised biography '*Luise von Preußen – Queen of Hearts*' was on the bestseller list for several weeks. He is involved with several international co-productions as author and co-author and in this way has advanced the genre documentary drama for historical conveyance.

»Daniel Schönpflug writes in a way that entices the reader to follow him into the incredible year 1918. He reopens this era with great delicacy, a wonderful eye for detail and huge stylistic ability and allows his readers to rediscover themselves and the 20th century on these pages.«

Philipp Blom, Historian and author of the bestseller »The Reeling Continent: Europe 1900 – 1914«

The People:

MARINA YURLOWA (1900–1984) fought for the tsars until the Russian Revolution ended their reign. While peace was being concluded in Western Europe, this Cossack woman went out to the battlefields of a bloody civil war.

KÄTHE KOLLWITZ (1867–1945) lost her son in the war. The sculptress transformed her pain into art, developing forms for a collective mourning that for a long time found no other expression in the German public sphere.

RUDOLF HÖSS (1900–1947) fought in Turkey and Palestine during the war. After the “shameful peace of Versailles,” he thirsted for revenge, joining first the paramilitary Freikorps Rossbach and then the Nazi Party. In 1923, he was involved in the political murder of the teacher Walter Kadow.

NGUYEN TAT THANH (1890–1969), later known as Ho Chi Minh, travelled as a kitchen worker on a gigantic ship from Vietnam to Europe. He saw the peace negotiations in Versailles as a once-in-a-lifetime chance to free his homeland from French colonialism.

LOUISE WEISS (1893–1983) concluded from her experiences of the war that the age of nation-states was inevitably coming to an end. As a journalist in Paris, she worked for a united, peaceful Europe.

CROWN PRINCE WILHELM OF PRUSSIA (1882–1951) renounced the throne of the German Empire in 1918. But from his Dutch exile, he secretly hoped that the Weimar Republic would be overthrown.

MATTHIAS ERZBERGER (1875–1921) was charged with signing the armistice in the name of the German Empire. That made hi one of the most hated politicians of the Weimar Republic. In 1921, he was murdered by the right-wing extremist Organization Consul.

VIRGINIA WOOLF (1882–1941) was present for the victory celebrations in London in 1918 but remained unconvinced that defense of ossified British society was worth so many casualties. As a novelist, she liberated her characters and ultimately herself as a woman from the shackles of a crippling tradition.

MOINA MICHAEL (1869–1944), a house mother at a college in Georgia, came up with the idea during the victory celebrations in New York of using the symbol of the poppy to collect donations for the victims of the First World War. It was the beginning of a groundbreaking campaign that enjoyed success all over the world.

THOMAS E. LAWRENCE (1888–1935) was celebrated as a war hero during the liberation of Damascus. But the wheels of international diplomacy crushed the dream of Arab independence, for which “Lawrence of Arabia” fought.

MOHANDAS GANDHI (1869–1948) challenged British colonial authority in India with his strategy of non-violence. But during his mass triumphs at the end of the war, the “Mahatma” had to acknowledge that even his peaceful intentions led to violence and death. In 1922, he was incarcerated for his activities.

ARTHUR LITTLE was an officer with the Harlem Hellfighters, a group of African-American soldiers who fought with great distinction in the war. Peacetime would disappoint their hopes of a life of equality in the United States.

HARRY S. TRUMAN (1884–1972) opened a men’s haberdashery in Kansas after the war. But the Great Depression destroyed the business, leaving him with nothing but a mountain of debt.

GEORGE GROSZ (1893–1959) chronicled post-war Berlin in a series of paintings that depicted the city as a Gomorrah of intoxication and murder. For Grosz, the world war had brought out the worst of humanity. His answer was the nihilism of Dada.

SOGHOMON TEHLIRIAN (1887–1960) was forced as a child to witness the murder of his parents during the massacre of Armenians. He decided to revenge himself on

the man he held responsible. On 15 March 1921, on Berlin's Hardenbergstrasse, he gunned down Taalat Pascha, a former government minister in the Ottoman Empire.

TERENCE MACSWINEY (1879–1920) fought for Irish independence in his home city of Cork. After being repeatedly imprisoned by the British, he commenced a hunger strike that attracted the world's attention. He rejected all attempts to force feed him and died after 47 days of malnutrition.

RICHARD STUMPF (1892–1958) experienced the beginnings of the German Revolution of 1918 as a navy man. But his enthusiasm for the rebellion by workers and soldiers was soon overshadowed by his anger at Germany's military defeat. Stumpf joined a troop of Freikorps and fought against the Bavarian Soviet Republic.

ALVIN YORK fought as a soldier despite his Christian faith, which commanded "Thou shalt not kill." Paradoxically, York became a war hero on the battlefields of France. After returning to his native Tennessee, he found himself asking what he should do with his life.

FERDINAND FOCH (1851–1929) helped win victory for France as the commander of the allied forces. He was so bitterly disappointed by the peace negotiations that he refused to go to Versailles for the final ceremony.

WALTER GROPIUS (1883–1969) discovered upon returning from the war that his wife Alma Mahler-Gropius (1879–1964) had started an affair. He immersed himself in his work, inspired by the dream of using modern architecture to create a new society.

ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG (1874–1951) was inspired by the prospect of being able to start anew after the inferno of the war to pursue a radical new form of music composing: the twelve-tone technique. He believed that his fame was assured, but at the time, he increasingly felt himself excluded from the mainstream as a Jew.

Prologue: The Comet's Core

Early in the morning on 11 November 1918, the German Kaiser was strung up between two skyscrapers in New York. Lifeless, the German monarch fluttered at the end of a long rope, while confetti swirled in the sunlight overhead. Of course, it was not the real Wilhelm II but an effigy, a larger-than-life cloth puppet replete with a moustache and a pointed "Pickelhaube" helmet. People from the upper stories of the skyscrapers tossed long white paper streamers over it. They snagged on the point, hanging down into the concrete ravine between the buildings and swaying with majestic torpor.

At 6 am Eastern Standard Time, the armistice between the Allies and the German Empire came into force. The "Huns," as the Germans were often called in the US even before the war, had been brought to their knees after four years of bitter fighting. The First World War, which cost more than 16 million people around the world their lives, was won. New Yorkers learned the news from the morning editions of the papers, and thousands took to the streets. Between the skyscrapers teemed a sea of people, ceremoniously dressed in suits and bowler hats, their Sunday best attire, military and nurses uniforms. Shoulder to shoulder, arm in arm, they saluted one another and embraced. The ringing of bells, volleys of ammunition, march music and fanfares intermingled with millions of gleefully singing and chanting voices to form a din like that of a furious surf. Automobiles with flags being waved enthusiastically above their roofs, rolled by at a crawl through the masses, while the drivers honked their horns. The city celebrated an ad hoc festival of hand-painted posters, self-appointed popular orators, musical groups and people dancing with abandon in the streets. Working life came to a halt in New York on this day of victory, which convinced people that peace would soon rule over the entire world.

Moina Michael had been fired from her job as a housemother at a women's college in Georgia a short while before 11 November 1918. For a few weeks, this solidly built woman of almost fifty had been working for the YWCA, the Young Women's Christian Association. In the buildings of Columbia University in Manhattan, Michael helped young women and men get prepared for their deployment overseas in Europe. After such brief preparations, the best among them would cross the Atlantic as civilian helpers establishing provision stations for soldiers behind the front lines. Two days before the end of the war, Michael happened to get hold of a copy of

the *Ladies' Home Journal* featuring the war poem "In Flanders Fields" by the Canadian lieutenant John McCrae. It began: "In Flanders fields the poppies blow/Between the crosses, row on row." The page in the magazine was elaborately decorated with heroic soldier figures gazing at the heavens. Michael raptly read the poem to its conclusion, in which McCrae conjured up the image of a dying soldier whose ever weakening hands pass on the torch the torch of battle to the survivors. As the words and images echoed inside her, it was as though the poem were written especially for her, as though the voice of the dead were speaking directly to her through these verses. *She* must be the one meant! *She* must extend her hand and grasp the sinking torch of peace and liberty! *She* must become an instrument that keeps the faith! *She* must ensure that the memories of millions of victims never fade, so that they won't have fought in vain and their deaths won't be senseless!

Michael was so moved by the poem and her putative mission that she took up a pencil and jotted down on a yellow envelope verses of her own to the poppy flower. As though swearing a vow in rhyme, she pledged to pass on the "lesson from the fields of Flanders" to survivors: "And now the Torch and Poppy Red/We wear in honor of our dead./Fear not that ye have died for naught;/We'll teach the lesson that ye wrought/In Flanders Fields."

While she was writing down these words, a deputation of young men appeared before her desk. They had collected ten dollars as an expression of gratitude for her help in furnishing their YMCA quarters. As she accepted the check, everything came together in her head. She doesn't want her thoughts to remain mere words, no matter how well rhymed. Her poem must become reality! "I'm going to use the money to buy red poppies," she told the dumbfounded young men. "From now on I'm always wearing a red poppy." She showed them McCrae's poem and, after a bit of hesitation, recited her own. The men reacted with enthusiasm. They, too, pledged to wear red poppies, and Michael promised to get them some. So it happened that she spent the remaining hours until the armistice took effect scouring New York shops for artificial poppies. It turned out that the great metropolis was rich in fake flowers of all colors and forms, but that the selection of bright red *papaver rhoeas* so lauded in verse was rather limited. Finally she located some in Wanamaker's, one of those gigantic New York department stores that sold everything from notions to automobiles and that even had a crystal tea room. There she purchased a large artificial poppy for her desk and two dozen four-petal blossoms. Back at the YMCA,

she pinned them to the lapels of the young men who she thought would soon depart to do their duty in France. Such was the humble beginning of a triumphant symbol. In a few years, remembrance poppies would become the epitome of remembering the dead of the First World War throughout the English-speaking world.

In 1918, German artist Paul Klee created the symbolic picture *The Comet of Paris*. The title was somewhat imprecise. The watercolor pen drawing by the soldier in the Royal Bavarian Aviation School depicts not one, but two comets: a green one with a long, curved tail and a second one in the form of a star of David. They both orbit the head of a high-wire artist with a pole balanced upon an invisible wire high above the Eiffel Tower. It is one of the many Klee works from this time that featured stars above cities, and here as elsewhere, the artist was working as an "illustrator of ideas." In this picture, faraway Paris - the capital of the enemy but also of art - appears as a modern Bethlehem. As always, and especially in the fragile, fraught atmosphere of the early twentieth century, the comet is a cipher for the unexpected, a herald of great events, profound changes and even catastrophes. The comet stands for the brief illumination of unimagined possibility on the horizon, for unknown futures. The little sister of the comet, the shooting star, invites viewers to make wishes. But the meteorite falling to earth - a closely related heavenly phenomenon - scares people with its destructive power. Not that long ago, in 1910, the Earth had crossed the paths of the Johannesburg and Halley's comets, and the more fearful of the planet's inhabitants had begun readying themselves for the end of the world. These events and reports of the impact of the Richardton meteorite in North Dakota on 30 June 1918 may have inspired Klee.

Klee's high-wire artist balances halfway between the man-made wonder of the Eiffel Tower and those promising, if also threatening heavenly bodies. He is suspended in an intermediary position, belonging to neither of the two spheres. His head is in the stars, and he's constantly in danger of losing his balance and falling. His rolled eyes almost seemed to intimate that the stars which orbit his head make him dizzy and increase the chances of him plummeting down below.

A figure like Moina Michael moved between the spheres in similar fashion. On the one hand, her remembrance poppies were a stern reminder to take a close look at the reality of the immediate past. They became part of a worldwide culture of memorializing within which ceremonies were held, monuments constructed, and the

names of fallen comrades were chiseled onto stone plaques in schools, government offices and military barracks. At the same time, the initiative pointed the way toward the future. In Michael's view, the blood that had been shed and the masses that had been sacrificed gave survivors a duty concerning what was to come. Flowers were supposed to bloom on the victim's graves. For Michael as well as many others at the time, the end of the war raised the question of what the future would bring. It released visions of a better life and gave birth to revolutionary ideas, dreams and desires.

In his painting, Klee created an emblematic image of the year 1918 that oscillated between enthusiasm and defeatism, hopes and fears, high-flying visions and cold, hard realities. Anyone inclined to believe that comets were signs of the future could see 11 November 1918 - the day of armistice on which old Europe lay in ruins and celebrated, and in whose direct wake revolutions took place, empires fell and a world order was shaken - as the fulfillment of such prophecies. The events of that November had the force of a meteorite impact. Rarely had history seemed more open, contingent and dependent on human action. Rarely had it appeared so crucial to quickly transform the lessons learned from past mistakes into plans for the future. New political ideas, a new society, a new art and culture and a new thinking were conceived. A new man, a man of the twentieth century, born in the flames of war and liberated from the shackles of the old world, was proclaimed. Like the proverbial phoenix, Europe, and indeed the entire world, was to rise from the ashes.

The people depicted on the pages to come were all high-wire artists. Their thoroughly subjective perspective on events can be gleaned from how they depicted themselves in their autobiographies, diaries and correspondence. They experienced with astonished eyes both the flickering of dreams in the firmament and the quick dying of those dreams and the massive impact of cosmic rock when it smashed into reality. They all carefully made their way along the narrow connector across the abyss. Some of them like Moina Michael succeeded in retaining their balance despite the elevation, while others - like Kaiser Wilhelm II, for whom, at least in effigy, the thin wire became a hangman's noose - crashed to earth.

The events and memories contemporaries documented illustrate the almost unbearable tension that charged the days immediately following the First World War. Visions, dreams and desires did more than inspire people living through the rupture between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They also drove those people apart.

Some versions of the future were diametrically opposed, were deemed (at least by many new soothsayers) mutually exclusive and could only be realized if others were destroyed. A bitter struggle for a better future developed, and the peace people had longed for so passionately was soon under threat.

Chapter 2: One Day, One Hour

On 11 November 1918, a few minutes after 11 am, journalist Louise Weiss was startled by unexpected noise in her confined office on Paris' Rue de Lille. At first it was only the sound of chairs being dragged around and doors and windows thrown open. Then came voices, cries and the ringing of bells. The staff of *L'Europe nouvelle* poured across the courtyard out into the street. Was the hour finally at hand?

At the start of the First World War, Louise Weiss was 21 years old. After passing her university exams with flying colors, she had travelled with her siblings to the peaceful village of Saint-Quay in Brittany. The summer landscape seemed lovelier than ever. It was only when her beloved older brother left by train to join the war against Germany, and Louise was left standing, numb and surrounded by smoke from the locomotive, on the platform, that she realized a new era had begun. Would she also have been willing to make such a sacrifice? She sensed that the answer to this question was "no." But her brother hadn't been asked whether he was willing or not.

A few months after the start of the fighting, French losses in the early battles on the French-German border had caused a wave of refugees to flee to the west of the country. For Louise there was no question but that she would volunteer to help. Overcoming her natural shyness, she asked the local priest to provide a space, begged money from her uncle and got Mother Hertel, the head of the moving company in the area, to put a truck at her disposal. With that vehicle, she made the rounds in the village, collecting mattresses, bed linens, chairs, pots, firewood and coal. Hardly had she gotten such necessities together than the first families arrived.

It was difficult to provide for refugee families, day by day, but Louise kept finding generous donors. Soon the arrivals were even needier: soldiers who had been wounded in the Battle of the Marne in September 1914. Louise got them quartered in the villa belonging to a spinster named Mademoiselle Vallée. The troop, which included several Moroccans and Senegalese, caused quite a stir in the Breton village. Nonetheless, the villagers donated everything the soldiers needed and more, and the convalescent military unit publicly expressed its gratitude before it moved on.

After a couple of detours, Louise made her way back to Paris, where she worked as a secretary in a senator's office. This was hardly a glamorous job for a young woman with a university degree, but Paris was at least a place where she met

interesting people and could imbibe a lot of information about current politics. It was at the senator's office that the journalist and publisher Hyazinthe Philouze turned up in search of some juicy news. Philouze had acquired a dubious reputation as a political turncoat whose various newspaper projects were subject to financial ups and downs. One day, when the senator wasn't there, Louise and Philouze got to talking. In the course of the conversation, he told her a story about a friend who had come into a small fortune after the death of an army buddy and who didn't know how to invest it. Did Louise really want to spend the rest of her life working as a secretary for a doddering old senator? Maybe she had an idea of something sensible that could be done with the money? Louise shot back that she would start a weekly political newspaper to spread democracy in the world and advance the cause of independence for the peoples of the Habsburg monarchy. It could be called *L'Europe nouvelle* - the new Europe.

"I like it!" cried Philouze. "That's a capital idea!" When she offered more details, he answered: "It's a deal!" Much to the general surprise, Philouze was true to his word. Louise Weiss left the senator's office and moved into the editorial spaces of a new newspaper she herself had helped conceive. Officially her title was "secretary to the editorial board," but in reality she did the bob of editor-in-chief who was responsible for the paper's overall content. The first edition appeared in January 1918. It must have also been around this time that Louise Weiss cut her hair short. Henceforth she would wear it that way, its wispy curls playing around her round face with its defiant, stiff upper lip.

On 11 November 1918, Louise Weiss was brooding over the articles in the next issue of *L'Europe nouvelle*, a special issue devoted to the hot topic at the moment, the end of the war. Perhaps she was working on her open letter to George Clenceau, which would appear there. In it, she would congratulate the French president on his impressive victories but warn that, with the end of the war, the time of Europe's national peoples would be at hand. In the current issue, the journal had reported extensively on the situation of the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, where old monarchies had collapsed. One long article described how the idea of a "community of nations," already being debated by the Allies in London, could be realized. It was essential, argued the article's author Jules Rais, to quickly establish the foundations of a better future atop the ruins of old Europe. The danger was too great that after all the years of war hatred would persist and lead to further conflict.

There was also the threatening scenario that economic competition among European states would doom peace. A way out to escape this danger had to be sought in a number of areas, first and foremost in the education of young people, who were to be taught foreign languages and learn about other cultures in exchange programs. Rais also proposed a common system of state credit in which big countries would help smaller ones procure loans at favorable conditions. In a situation in which many countries had gotten themselves massively in debt to finance the war, this could be the basis of a new European solidarity, commonality of interests and lasting peace.

As Louise went through her article, word for word, sentence for sentence, the commotion in the building increased. She knew what that meant: an armistice! Four days too soon! The next issue couldn't be put to press until 15 November! It hadn't been edited yet! Instead of joining in the celebrations of her enthusiastic colleagues, Louise Weiss shut her office windows to block out the tolling of the bells and din of voices from a huge crowd of people.

At 10:30 am on 11 November 1918, artillery officer Harry S. Truman was still asking himself how the Germans would likely react to Allied proposals for an armistice. He didn't know that that very morning, with the ink still wet on the ceasefire agreement, Allied Supreme Commander Ferdinand Foch had sent a telegram to all the spots where fighting was still going on. "Hostilities will cease on the entire front November 11 at 11 a.m. French time," it read. Crossing the front line was forbidden. The state of territorial gains and losses at that moment was to be preserved. No contact with the enemy was permitted.

The telegram took several hours to reach all parts of the front, and until it reached him, Truman seems to have hoped that war against Germany would continue. In a letter to Bess Wallache, who would later become his wife, he wrote: "It is a shame we can't go in and detonate Germany and cut off a few of the Dutch kids hands and feet and scalp a few of thier [sic] old men but I guess it will be better to make them work for France and Belgium for fifty years." With satisfaction, Truman calculated that during the final offensive he must have fired 10,000 rounds of ammunition at "the Hun," concluding that this must have had "a slight effect." He wasn't alone in wanting to continue the bombardment right up until the war's final minute. A nearby battery, he wrote, "seems to want to get rid of all of its ammunition before the time is up."

Truman's position wasn't the only point on the front where fighting continued until the absolute bitter end. The final hours and minutes of the war would claim many lives. At 9:30 am, a miner from Leeds named George Ellison was shot dead while on patrol. At five minutes to 11, several hundreds of kilometers northwest of Compiègne in the Ardennes, where the armistice was signed, a German bullet killed a shepherd called Augustin Trébouchon. Two minutes before the armistice came into force, Canadian Lawrence Price lost his life near Belgium's Canal de Centre.

But at long last, the hour hand on the clock reached eleven. The day and the hour appointed by military leaders and diplomats in a forest not far from Paris arrived. The armistice became international law, and there dawned one of those rare moments of history. For the rest of their lives, millions of people all over the world would be able to remember what they were doing at 11am on 11 November 1918.

Foch had left the historic clearing in the woods near Compiègne soon after the armistice agree was signed. He described the moment in which war gave way to peace in solemn terms: "An impressive silence followed 53 weeks of uninterrupted battle." Full of pathos he praised the Allied armies "who won the greatest battle in history and defending the holiest of holies: the freedom of the world!" He added: "Be proud! You have covered your standards with eternal glory! Posterity will thank you for it." Back in Paris, Foch immediately sought out the French President in the Champs d'Élysée. Then he made his way back home where his wife was waiting for him. It took him a while since he had to get through crowds of people congratulating him, celebrating and weeping with joy. When he finally arrived home, he was compelled to hold an impromptu speech. His apartment was covered in bouquets of flowers sent by both important personalities and people he didn't even know. During lunch, he repeatedly had to go to the window to greet the masses that had congregated in the street below.

Arthur Little was already feeling euphoric the day before, on 10 November 1918. An officer in the 369th American infantry regiment, he had taken a day's leave from the front for a very special excursion, driving in a borrowed car to a tank unit about eight kilometers outside the small city of Langres. After arriving there, he made contact with the commanding officer, explained what he wanted and was invited to lunch. A certain Sergeant Little was summoned. A young man appeared, saluted

Arthur Little and began to give a report. Suddenly, in mid-sentence, he faltered. With astonished eyes, he stared at the older man, and a couple of second passed before he recovered enough composure to speak. "Oh, father, I'm so glad to see you. They told me you were dead!" The two men embraced.

Together they drove to Langres and sent a telegram to the mother of the family in America. They also a large dinner, went to the theater and spent the night at a YMCA quarters. The young man had come directly from the battlefield. He hadn't slept in weeks. As soon as his head hit the pillow, he sank into such a deep sleep that the next morning his father can't wake up. He left his son in bed, secure in the knowledge that he could sleep in peace. Nothing bad could happen to him any longer. It was 11 November 1918. Father Little knew that his son would not be returning to battle.

With this happy certainty in mind, Arthur Little returned to his battalion. It was not just any other unit. The American soldiers who served in it were under French command and came from the New York National Guard. Most of them are African-Americans from Harlem. It hadn't been easy for the US to allow black people to become soldiers. The only reason they were deployed abroad was the shortage of manpower. They hadn't received the same sort of basic training other soldiers had. They had to train in public squares, gymnasiums and dancehalls, with shovels and broomsticks instead of weapons. Only a very few were given command positions. How many funny looks, denigrating remarks and insulting gestures had they been forced to endure in a country where slavery was still a fairly recent memory and racial discrimination and conflict were omnipresent. The black soldiers hadn't been allowed to take part in a parade of the New York National Guard, the Rainbow Regiment. There was no black in the rainbow, organizers said. On the other side of the Atlantic as well, black soldiers were initially regarded as useless and ordered to unload ships, dig trenches and bury the casualties who fell in bloody battles. The situation only changed when the 369th infantry regiment was put under French command. The French had considerable experience with deploying soldiers from their African colonies. They didn't hesitate to give black troops rifles and send them to the frontlines. Before long the men from Harlem showed that they were every bit the equals of their white comrades-in-arms, proving to be fierce warriors who inspired fear in their German enemies. The battalion became known as the "Harlem

Hellfighters.” It was a title of respect, and some of the men in the unit became legends.

The greatest of the unit’s heroes was Henry Johnson. Small in stature, he had worked as a porter at the train station in Albany before the war. During training and his first months in the war, the only thing that had attracted attention was his big mouth. But one night, while keeping watch, he did something extraordinary. A German commando had made out the position Johnson had taken up with a comrade and attacked. The other soldier immediately took a bullet, leaving Johnson all on his own. But he was determined to hold his position and save his comrade’s life. With his rifle, a few grenades, a pistol and a knife, he had killed more than twenty Germans and forced the enemy to retreat. Johnson was wounded all over, but he had become America’s first black war hero. Even the *Saturday Evening Post* reported about the deeds of the man nicknamed “Black Death.”

Another man whose fame extended well beyond the ranks of the Harlem Hellfighters was a black officer named James Reese Europe, the director of the regimental band. Before the war, he had been the leader of the popular New York ragtime outfit called the Society Orchestra, which played syncopated, “hot” versions of marches, dance numbers and popular songs. The Society Orchestra was one of the first groups to feature the saxophone. The band played fox trots, a style of music that scandalized the white middle classes but brought Harlem night clubs to a veritable boil. Europe was one of the first black musicians to make a record - and for no less than the big label Radio Corporation of America, RCA. The band leader joined the war effort as one of the first black lieutenants and had a military band with more than forty members under his command. Hardly had he arrived in the town of Brest, than he came up with a jazz version of the Marseilles that caused French audiences to break out in a sweat. But that was only the beginning. After five months on the frontlines, in which Europe became acquainted with the ugliest side of trench warfare and which would inspired him to composed the ragtime song “On Patrol in No Man’s Land,” the military leadership decided that the war effort needed jazz more urgently than forty extra black and Puerto Rican soldiers. The Harlem Hellfighters band was redeployed to Paris. For several months, it performed in theaters, concert halls, parks and hospitals. The effect on French people was unbelievable. Parisians had never heard jazz before. The driving rhythms, off-beats and syncopation of ragtime, the blue notes and glissandi of the melodies, the triumphant saxophones

and nasal sound of muted trumpets sent audiences into rapture. Whenever and wherever the band appeared, French people watched electrified as black people played on stage, improvising without any sheet music, their bodies relaxed, their eyes half-shut, moving their arms and legs in time with the music and sometimes twitching convulsively. This was an example of a new mode of existence, the harbinger of a nascent twentieth-century era. It was a type of modernity that was pleasantly surprising and different than machine guns, submarines and tanks were.

The Harlem Hellfighters experienced 11 November 1918 in a camp in the Vosges, where they were enjoying leave after 191 straight days of combat. Arthur Little described the moment, when at 11am Central Europe Time the war ended, as one of quiet satisfaction. A French interpreter came by with two bottles of champagne. Toasts, relieved if not relaxed, were made. As Little described it in his memoirs, there was no comparison with the lunacy that erupted that day in New York, London or Paris. For Little, peace came as a moment of calm and brightness in which the burden of responsibility he had felt for weeks dropped from his shoulders. The men from Harlem were amused to see how the people of Alsace took to the streets in their traditional rural garb and celebrated liberation from German occupation by drinking great quantities of Riesling. A lieutenant colonel named Hayward summed it up best, saying that, after the day Jesus was born, this was the second best day in all of history.