

Michelin's illustrated guide to the battlefields of the Yser and the Belgian coast (1920)

Guidebook, field manual or architectural compendium?

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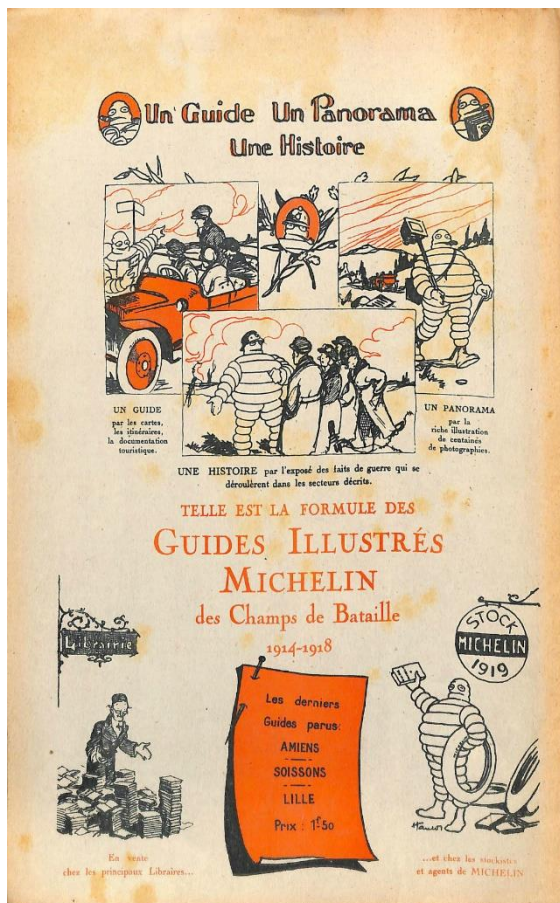
0 INTRODUCTION

*Ce n'est qu'un bout de sol dans l'infini du monde...
Ce n'est qu'un bout de sol étroit,
Mais qui renferme encore et sa reine et son roi
Et l'amour condensé d'un peuple qui les aime...
Dixmude et ses remparts, Nieuport et ses canaux,
Et Furnes, avec sa tour pareille à un flambeau,
Vivent encore ou sont défunts sous la mitraille.¹*

This edited excerpt from the wartime poem *Un lambeau de patrie* [A Shred of Homeland] by Belgian symbolist author Emile Verhaeren, is the departure of a remarkable “panoramic history and guide”² to the battlefields of the Yser and the Belgian coast, published by French tyre manufacturer Michelin as part of an entire series of travel guides to the Western Front. Just when the dust of the centennial commemoration of the First World War has started to settle, it becomes increasingly clear how the past years of intensified scholarly work have opened up new fields of inquiry, the focus now drifting away from military operational history towards the conflict's global and local dimension (ranging between empire and home front studies), as well as its far-reaching societal, cultural and economic impact. A study on the Michelin battlefield guidebook fits within this diversified landscape, touching upon different research domains and blurring the boundaries between interrelated categories: material, memorial and print culture through its medium; environmental, architectural and construction history through its scope; and industrial and military history through its origin and background.

¹ Emile Verhaeren, "Un lambeau de patrie," in *Les ailes rouges de la guerre* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1916); quoted in Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, Illustrated Michelin Guides to the Battle-Fields (1914-1918) (Clermont-Ferrand: Michelin & Cie, 1920), title page. Verhaeren's gravestone in Adinkerke is included further on in the travel itinerary (actually his body had been transferred to nearby Wulveringem by the time of publication in 1920, where it was again exhumed before ending up in a monumental tomb in his native town of Sint-Amands in 1927). Ibid., 36.

² Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, front cover. The English translation radiates somewhat less ambition than the French "Un guide. Un panorama. Une histoire."



Left: Fig. 1. "A guide; through maps, itineraries, tourist documentation. A History; through the report of war events that unfolded in the described regions. A panorama; abundantly illustrated with hundreds of photographs. Such is the format of Michelin's illustrated guides to the battlefields." Translation by author. Publicity for Michelin's battlefield guides, 1919.



Right: Fig. 2. "The frontline drawn out by Michelin's illustrated guides to the battlefields." Translation by author. Publicity for Michelin's battlefield guides, 1920.

The following text offers three critical prisms through which we can reassess the Michelin guide's novel approach towards travel guide writing. The first perspective is a digression on the new "geopolitics of the guidebook" that is defined by the conditions of war. It looks deeper into nationalist and patriotic motives of the battlefield guidebook and the Michelin series between 1917-25 in particular. Next, we will consider the specific operational method, a "tactical reading" that is, of the Michelin battlefield guide through a military lens, as to assess the impact of wartime technological evolutions on travel guide writing. The third prism is offered by the surprisingly modern representation of the conflict landscape throughout the guidebook and the subsequent selection of sightworthy material war remnants described in the guide's travel itinerary. Combined, they offer an alternative reading of the conflict patrimony in the westernmost region of the frontline and its hinterland.

1 GUIDEBOOKS GO TO WAR

Even before the guns went silent in late 1918, Michelin published the first from a series of guidebooks to the battlefields along the Western and Italian Front. Just one among many battlefield guides to appear in the aftermath of the Great War, the Michelin guides responded to an increasing demand for information about reaching and touring the battered landscape and the ruins left by the conflict. Committed to the private automobile as a means of touring, the Michelin guide series aimed to

become an informative complement to in-person visits to the memorials and relicts of the conflict by veterans, families and tourists. Its style and format makes the Michelin series stand out against its contemporaries during a veritable boom of battlefield guidebook publications in the slipstream of the war.³ At the same time these battlefield guides would provide a radical departure from the approach adopted in earlier Michelin Red Guides, as published from 1900 onwards, which were essentially listings of tourist accommodations and amenities for the motorised traveller.⁴ With over 1,400,000 copies sold by January 1922⁵ and translations from French into English, as well as incidentally into Italian and German,⁶ the series was an enormous success. Even so, the front cover of every single volume in the French edition claims that “all profits that the Michelin company would draw from the sale of the present guide will be donated to the *Œuvre de la Repopulation française*.”⁷

If the publication of battlefield guidebooks so soon after the slaughter of so many young men may seem gruesome or even inappropriate at first, one should consider that a genuine desire to comprehend the horror of the events and, most importantly, personal loss created their need.⁸ Nonetheless, the genesis of the battlefield guidebooks is also firmly rooted in the boosted nationalism and patriotism that existed in the years before, during and immediately after the war.⁹ As for the Michelin company, this patriotism already came to the fore in the early 1900s and it was instigated by a veritable patent war between French Michelin and German tyre manufacturer Continental,¹⁰ a dispute that quickly expanded into mutual accusations of espionage and military intelligence gathering through both companies’ respective guidebooks.¹¹ In the hands of warring governments, travel guides subsequently evolved into active propaganda instruments, to the extent that their publication constituted no less than a territorial (re)claim towards occupied or lost ground, if not an all too obvious attempt to normalise this situation.¹² The same goes for the Michelin battlefield guidebook series, whose first double issue on the by then mythical Marne battlefields, where the German advance was halted in 1914, appeared as early as May 1917,¹³ with war still raging on all fronts. However, Michelin’s first contribution to the battlefield guide’s new theatre of operations was a 1915 guidebook to western

³ James R. Akerman, "Mapping, Battlefield Guidebooks, and Remembering the Great War," in *History of Military Cartography*, ed. Elri Liebenberg, Imre Josef Demhardt, and Soetkin Vervust (Cham, Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London: Springer, 2016), 160.

⁴ A complete company history of Michelin and the development of the Michelin guidebook is outlined in Herbert R. Lottmann, *The Michelin Men : Driving an Empire* (London ; New York : I.B. Tauris, 2003).

⁵ Akerman, "Mapping, Battlefield Guidebooks, and Remembering the Great War," 164.

⁶ Jean-Louis Le Bail, *Catalogue des guides Michelin des champs de bataille* [Catalogue of the Michelin Guides to the Battlefields], 2nd ed. (Le Havre: Association des Collectionneurs de Guides et Cartes Michelin, 2017), 85-91. German translations (on Verdun and Argonne) would appear as late as 1929.

⁷ Translation by author. The *Œuvre de la Repopulation française* or *Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française* [National association for the growth of the French population] was a natalist movement with roots in social catholicism, whose aim was to bridge the gap in birth rates between France and Germany. During the war, the association propagated the idea that Germany might not have attacked France if the latter would have disposed of a more numerous population and therefore a larger army. *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁸ Akerman, "Mapping, Battlefield Guidebooks, and Remembering the Great War," 160.

⁹ André Michelin later explained how he started working on the battlefield guides on request by the French propaganda services. See Lottmann, *The Michelin Men : Driving an Empire*, 125, 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46-50.

¹¹ By 1918, Michelin guides were in fact dispatched as intelligence to soldiers of the (heavily motorised) American Expeditionary Force in France. *Ibid.*, 190. The use of guidebooks as a source for military intelligence would continue during the Second World War, with Michelin guide facsimiles issued to allied troops prior to the Normandy landings, and Baedeker guides used for air raid targeting during the Battle of Britain, the infamous “Baedeker Blitz.”

¹² See, for instance, *Deutscher Soldaten-Führer Durch Gent*, [German Soldier's Guide to Ghent] (Berlin : Wilhelm Pilz, 1916).

¹³ Le Bail, *Catalogue des guides Michelin des champs de bataille*, 22.

Germany, in anticipation of an allied offensive in this direction and responding to a persistent rumour that Baedeker was planning a similar travel guide on northern France.¹⁴

Out of twenty-nine different published Michelin battlefield guidebooks to the former frontline,¹⁵ no less than four volumes are devoted to the Belgian territory: the region around Ypres (1919)¹⁶ was followed by the Yser and Belgian coast (1920),¹⁷ and finally by the city of Antwerp¹⁸ and a combined guide to Brussels and Louvain (1921).¹⁹ Like the remainder of the Michelin battlefield guidebooks, the Belgian guides are structured along the same format: a –sometimes highly detailed- introductory essay on the war events in the concerning region, followed by an itinerary along the former battlefield, without neglecting traditional touristic highlights. In contrast to the heavily devastated Yser and Ypres regions, the cities of Brussels and Antwerp, in the rear area of the front, passed relatively unscathed through the war.²⁰ As it turns out, the combined guide to Brussels and Louvain seems to justify its existence only by the then heavily mediatised destructions in the town centre of Louvain early on in the war.²¹ Consequently, the Michelin guides to Brussels, Louvain and Antwerp, both about half the length of the Ypres and Yser guides, tend to adopt a more classical format in their choice of including only historical landmarks in their travel itineraries. In sharp contrast, the Michelin guide to the Yser and the Belgian coast, for reasons that we will treat more in depth in our further inquiry, displays Michelin's keen interest in the modernity of the conflict, as well as its spatial ramifications, throughout the travel itinerary.

2 TACTICAL READING OF THE MICHELIN GUIDE

After this brief outline of its “strategic” setting,²² let us move on to have a closer look into the modus operandi of Michelin's battlefield guides from the perspective of the tourist/soldier's field manual. After all, the target audience of the guidebook is the tourist *armed* with a camera to *shoot* pictures.²³ And in the case of the battlefield guide, war veterans, their families, and relatives of war casualties would constitute a considerable part of this audience.

Beyond the bridge, at the fork, take the right-hand road (in bad condition) to Mannekensvere. A few heaps of stones and debris are all that remains of Mannekensvere. To visit St. Georges, cross

¹⁴ Akerman, "Mapping, Battlefield Guidebooks, and Remembering the Great War," 165.

¹⁵ Le Bail, *Catalogue des guides Michelin des champs de bataille*, 25.

¹⁶ Michelin, *Ypres and the Battles for Ypres*, Illustrated Michelin Guides to the Battle-Fields (1914-1918) (Clermont-Ferrand: Michelin & Cie, 1919).

¹⁷ *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*.

¹⁸ Michelin, *Anvers*, Guides illustrés Michelin des champs de bataille: 1914-1918 (Clermont-Ferrand: Michelin & Cie, 1921).

¹⁹ Michelin, *Bruxelles, Louvain*, Guides illustrés Michelin des champs de bataille: 1914-1918 (Clermont-Ferrand: Michelin & Cie, 1921).

²⁰ In contrast, some smaller towns behind the frontline suffered severe damage during the German advance in 1914. The introductory essay in the Antwerp guide mentions the destructions in Mechelen and Liege. Michelin, *Anvers*, 9.

²¹ Curiously, no Michelin travel guide was published on the city of Liège, theatre of fierce fighting in the opening weeks of the war and cradle of the myth of “brave little Belgium.”

²² In military textbooks, tactics is defined as the art to operationalise the available means in battle, in order to achieve the goals set by military strategy. Strategy, on a higher echelon, is then described as the art through which a state deploys its means of power to achieve its political goals. As such, tactics is subject to systemic, technological and scientific methods, whereas strategy, through its greater dependence on circumstances, requires a more qualitative approach, less constrained by conventions.

²³ This nexus between the soldier and the tourist is treated in depth in the incisive introductory essay to Eliabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, eds., *Back to the Front: Tourisms of War* (Caen: F.R.A.C. Basse Normandie, 1994).

the Yser by a small wooden footbridge, near the place where the Pont de l'Union used to stand. (It is impossible for vehicles to cross the river). Between the Yser and St. Georges, follow a "boyau" (by-trench) to the first Belgian and German lines, marked by many concrete shelters pierced with loop-holes.²⁴

Such is the tone of Michelin's 1920 travel guide to the battlefields of the Yser and the Belgian coast, providing directions for a four-day itinerary along the westernmost part of the former frontline, from Dunkerque in the west all the way to the Belgian-Dutch frontier, before visiting Bruges and ending up in Dixmude. The distinctive "Michelin style,"²⁵ maintained throughout the entire 127 pages of the volume, could best be described as slightly imperative, direct but always logical; the whole abundantly illustrated with annotated campaign maps and what looks like reconnaissance photographs, as if taken directly from a military intelligence document. All the same, of course, while keeping a watchful but surprisingly light-hearted eye on the logistics of such an operation: upon leaving Ostend, the anonymous writer goes in great length to promote the qualities of the local oyster ("of world-wide repute amongst gourmets") before describing the troublesome closure of the oyster-beds during the war.²⁶ However, the same page displays a military-style annotated panorama of Ostend (pointing out the cathedral and the belfry, as well as a powder magazine) and includes pictures of *HMS Sirius*,

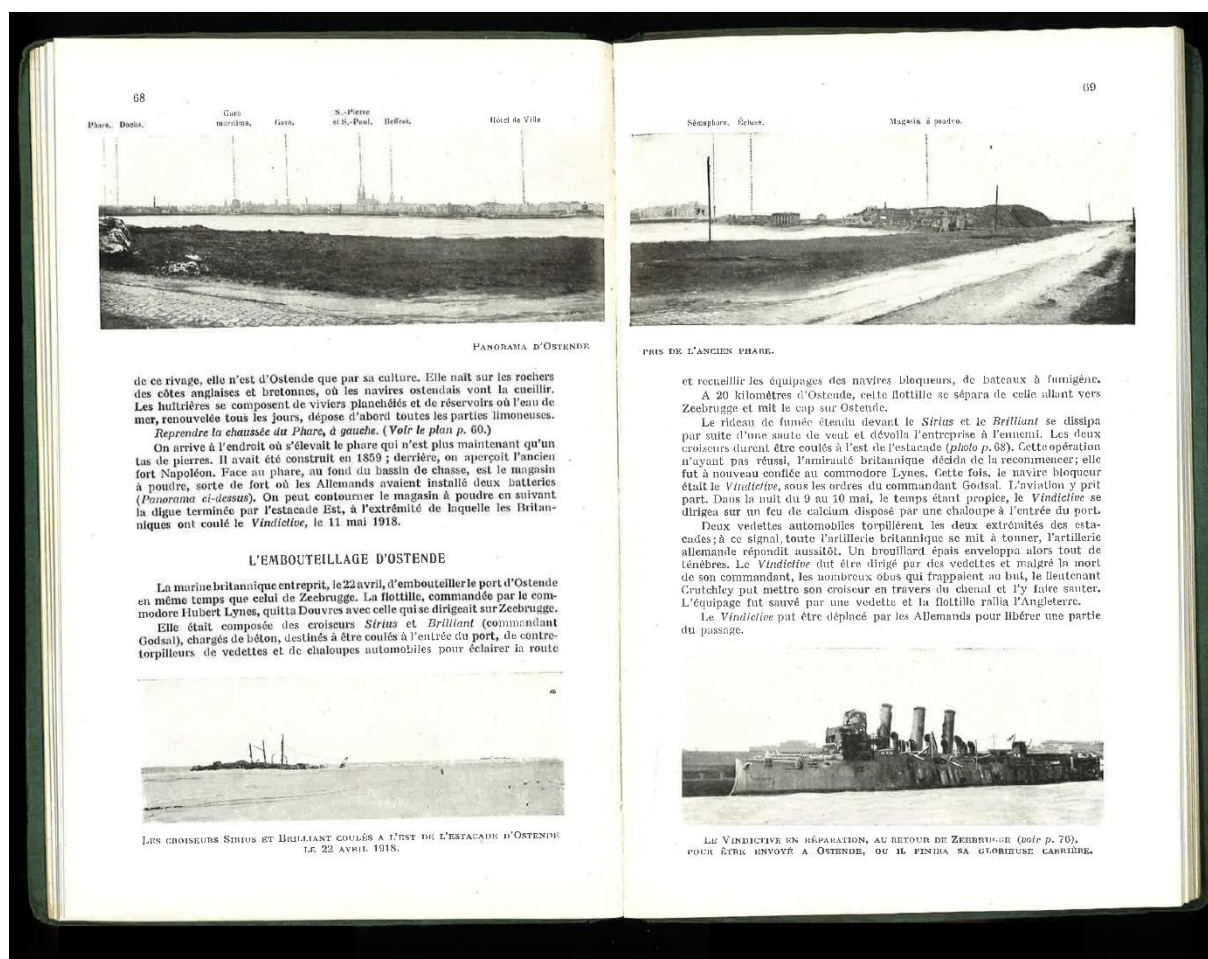


Fig. 3. Panorama of Ostend and sunken block ships *HMS Sirius*, *Brilliant* and *Vindictive*. *L'Yser et la Côte belge*, 68-69.

²⁴ Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, 114.

²⁵ Lottmann, *The Michelin Men : Driving an Empire*, 17.

²⁶ Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, 68-69.

Brilliant and *Vindictive*, three block ships scuttled by the Royal Navy in the course of the ill-fated raid on the port of Ostend in 1918.

What sets the Michelin guides' operational method apart from their contemporary competitors, is the combined use of exactly those techniques that the military had applied so extensively during the war: top-notch detailed maps, high-quality photographs and spot-on information for motorised traffic. All three aspects are advertised or credited on the booklet's front and back endpapers, and the different methods are often combined on a single page in intricate layouts with edited photographic insets and map fragments that together contribute to an unexpected aesthetic graphic atmosphere.

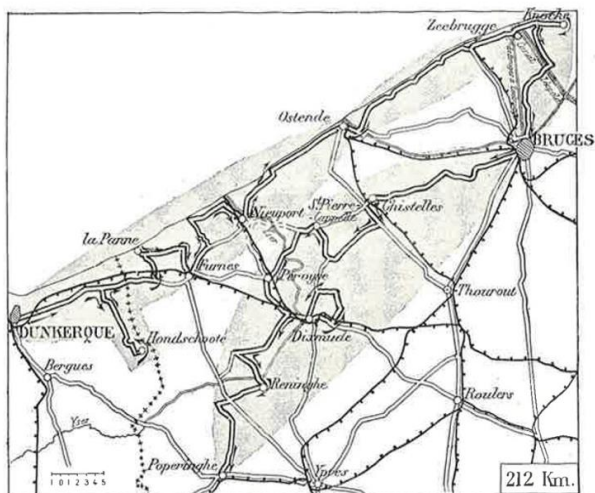
Mapping techniques improved greatly in the war theatre of the Western Front. An enormous survey and triangulation campaign during the early war years, necessitated by the unforeseen immobility of trench warfare and the lack of usable maps by the outbreak of the conflict, resulted in the increasing availability of small-scale topographical maps to both German and Allied army commanders.²⁷ Towards the end of the war, edited maps, complete with coloured overlays, were printed by specialised battalions in the heat of the battlefield in modified trucks and railway cars. The particular conditions of the static war in the west, combined with new forms of mechanised warfare in a now three-dimensional battlespace, generated an entire range of novel map types (examples are: trench maps, artillery barrage maps, aerial traffic maps, tank route maps, and even the more sinister body count maps). Similarly, high-quality and purpose-drawn maps appear extensively throughout the entire Michelin guidebook. After all, André Michelin (one of the company's founding brothers and responsible for the marketing and mapping department) had been in service of the cartography department of the French Interior Ministry before the war.²⁸ Significantly, there is no real difference in the map graphics of the guidebook's introductory essay (describing the military operations during the war years), and the maps in the main body of the booklet (describing the travel itinerary).²⁹ Similar map shadings used to illustrate the development of military operations are applied to establish the contours of the four-day excursion on the former battlefields. Arrows represent troop movements as well as travel directions, provoking an ironic awareness of the fact that post-war tourism would involve frequent travelling along and crossing of frontlines that were hard-fought and remained static during most of the war years.³⁰

²⁷ For a comprehensive study on the advancement of mapping techniques during World War I, see Peter Chasseaud, *Mapping the First World War : The Great War through Maps from 1914-1918* (Glasgow: Collins, 2013).

²⁸ Lottmann, *The Michelin Men : Driving an Empire*, 45.

²⁹ One particular map of the Zeebrugge raid even goes as far as graphically picturing a submarine exploding against the mole. Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, 77.

³⁰ Akerman, "Mapping, Battlefield Guidebooks, and Remembering the Great War," 175.



L'ITINÉRAIRE PART DE DUNKERQUE ET EST TRACÉ EN 4 JOURNÉES.



Top left: Fig. 4. Order of battle of German and Allied troops on the eve of the Battle of the Yser. *L'Yser et la Côte belge*, 9.

Top right: Fig. 5. Overview of the 4-day itinerary along the former battlefield. *L'Yser et la Côte belge*, 23.

Bottom left: Fig. 6. General situation of the Flanders front before the Hundred Days Offensive of 1918. *L'Yser et la Côte belge*, 22.

Bottom right: Fig. 7. Touristic map of the surroundings of the Bruges beguinage. *L'Yser et la Côte belge*, 104.

Note the parallels in map graphics, directive arrows and coloured overlays.

Unlike, for instance, Muirhead's 1920 guide to Belgium and the Western Front,³¹ the Michelin guides rely heavily on photographs, offering a more sensorial and less-detached perspective on the battlefields. Besides protagonists such as military commanders, local heroes or the Belgian royal couple, the Michelin guide also portrays the common soldier at the front. To a lesser degree, the guide pays attention to the sufferings of the local population, showing images of civilians clearing debris and

³¹ Findlay Muirhead, *Belgium and the Western Front* (London: Macmillan, 1920).



Fig. 8. Aerial photograph of the Zeebrugge mole. *L'Yser et la Côte belge*, 76-77.

in one exceptional case that almost tends towards sentimentalism, a mother holding her mutilated baby.³² However, the lion's share of photographs is dedicated to the portrayal of the mangled landscape, military constructions, architectural objects and occasionally sites of remembrance, such as war cemeteries. In parallel, novel photographic techniques that were developed or disseminated at the battlefield, are applied throughout the guide. So, the Michelin guide uses eye-level photography enhanced with directive arrows or before-and-after juxtaposition, aerial photographs of the front and panoramic images with labelled landmarks, in the same manner as they would appear in military intelligence reports, mission (de)briefings, damage reports or reconnaissance files.³³ The annotated panoramic view from King Albert's hotel³⁴ is a particularly striking example of such use, as it reproduces in a nearly literal way the perspective of the military commander on the front landscape. Considering the fact that most common soldiers were not in a position to overlook the battlefield in this way, the reconstruction of the battlefield that Michelin offers could be considered a limited "officer's view."³⁵ More often than not, the guidebook uses pictures originating from the French army's photographic services as illustrative material, as is acknowledged in the image credits on the back endpaper of the French edition.³⁶ Well aware of the touristic potential of the portable camera, Michelin already indicated the availability of dark rooms for film development in the hotel descriptions of its pre-war Red Guides, amidst all other practicalities for motorised tourists, such as the presence of garage facilities or flushing toilets. The immense military photographic production during the war, combined with the dissemination of private portable cameras in the trenches (such as Kodak's Vest Pocket, advertised as "the soldier's camera" in contemporary publicity) turned the First World War into the first heavily photographed and mediatised conflict, and the Michelin guides were quick to jump on this trend.³⁷

³² Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, 33.

³³ For an in-depth analysis of military photography, see Antoine Bousquet, *The Eye of War: Military Perception from the Telescope to the Drone* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 81-110.

³⁴ Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, 46-47.

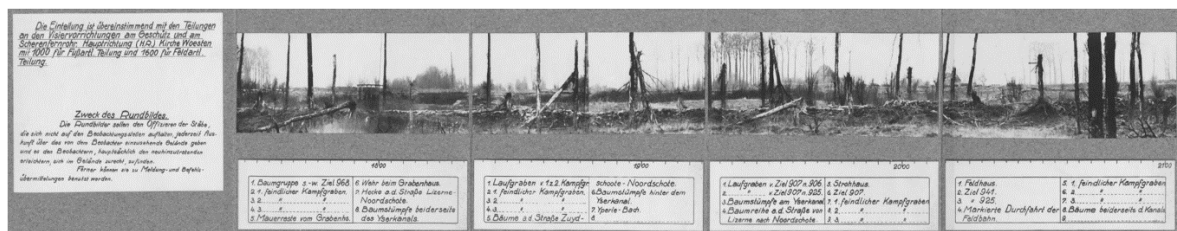
³⁵ Akerman, "Mapping, Battlefield Guidebooks, and Remembering the Great War," 165.

³⁶ Michelin, *L'Yser et la Côte belge*, Guides illustrés Michelin des champs de bataille: 1914-1918 (Clermont-Ferrand: Michelin & Cie, 1920), back endpaper.

³⁷ On the role of photography in World War I, see Mark Holborn and Hilary Roberts, *The Great War: A Photographic Narrative* (London: Imperial War Museum, 2013).



VUE PANORAMIQUE DES RUINES DE NIEUPOORT, PRISE DE L'HOTEL KING ALBERT'S.



Top: Fig. 9. Annotated panorama of the ruins of Nieuport from King Albert's hotel. *L'Yser et la Côte belge*, 46-47.

Bottom: Fig. 10. Annotated German artillery chart near Woesten. *Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv PH18/230*.

Motorised traffic, and by extension the replaceable rubber wheel, personified by Michelin's iconic *Bibendum* figure, was of course at the very core of Michelin's imperium since its founding in 1889; and the private motorcar tourist was the Michelin guide's primary targeted audience. At the same time, the Michelin tyre was the most-used tyre at the Western Front, resulting in a production peak at the factory in Clermont-Ferrand. Bibendum himself, this time in the tenue of a French *poilu*, promotes the Michelin wheel in the French edition of the guidebook: "It's strong. The only wheel which held out on all fronts during the War."³⁸ But Michelin's participation in the war effort would not stop with tyre manufacturing. In 1918, André Michelin went as far as lecturing on post-war reconstruction and planning of the French road network, promoting ring roads around urban agglomerations to facilitate car mobility.³⁹ In doing so, he anticipated later debates on road "corrections" for car traffic in the reconstruction plans of, for instance, Louvain and Ypres. During the war years, the Michelin company almost doubled its number of employees and transformed itself into a development centre and production facility for munitions and bomber planes.⁴⁰ André Michelin had already taken a keen interest in aviation before the war: quickly realising its military potential beyond reconnaissance and tactical use, he developed his own doctrine on strategic aerial bombing of civilian targets and its impact on spatial planning, long before military strategists and theoreticians such as Giulio Douhet, Alexander de Seversky and Paul Vauthier did so in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴¹ In March 1919, during the preparatory debates on the Versailles Treaty, the Michelin brothers even tried to weigh in on the question of the annihilation of German (civil) aviation through an open letter to French president Poincaré.⁴² To prove his aerial warfare doctrine, André Michelin became the instigator of an aerial precision bombing

³⁸ Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, frontispiece. Interestingly, the advertisement in the English edition doesn't feature Bibendum, whereas the French edition states, in a somewhat less strong terminology: "It's strong; it proved itself along the roads of the front." Translation by author.

³⁹ Lottmann, *The Michelin Men : Driving an Empire*, 132.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 122.

⁴¹ André Michelin and Edouard Michelin, *Notre avenir est dans l'air* [Our future is in the air] (Sceaux: Charaire, 1912).

⁴² Lottmann, *The Michelin Men : Driving an Empire*, 134.



Fig. 11. Bibendum as poilu, promoting the Michelin wheel. On the right page, below the book title: excerpt of Emile Verhaeren's "Un Lambeau de patrie." *L'Yser et la Côte belge*, frontispiece and title page.

contest on the Puy de Dome. He became involved in the development of rubberised canvas as cladding for planes and airships, bombsights, and bomb launchers for military aircraft. Michelin even financed the development of military planes: during the war, André collaborated with French aeronautical constructor Breguet to design and produce over one thousand long-range bomber planes, which were subsequently commissioned by the French army as the "Michelin squadron."⁴³ Thus, by 1918, the Michelin company saw itself active in most branches of motorised and mechanised traffic, be it on the ground or in the air.

In conclusion, we could argue that the operational method of the Michelin battlefield guide, by using a military format of mapping and photography to promote the products for motorised traffic it had produced so successfully during the war, was a logical next step in the company's travel guide development. In contrast, the decline of some competing travel guides immediately after the war can, to some extent, be explained by the lack of such a direct visual and sensorial narrative. It has been observed that, for instance, the Baedeker guide's text-centered and encyclopaedical style proved incapable to adequately describe the conditions set by the Great War.⁴⁴ Remarkably, a small 1921

⁴³ Ibid., 115-23.

⁴⁴ Mark D. Larabee, "Baedekers as Casualty: Great War Nationalism and the Fate of Travel Writing," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71, no. 3 (2010).

guidebook to the Yser published by the *Grand Quartier Générale* of the Belgian army itself,⁴⁵ takes yet another approach: Michelin's direct photographic "realism" is completely abandoned in favour of hand-drawn sketches that contribute to a surprisingly poetic charm and serenity which seems at odds with its military background. In the end, Michelin's novel approach towards travel writing would become the trademark of Michelin guides for decades to come, paving the way for the regional travel guides that would finally develop into the *Guide Vert* series from 1926 onwards.⁴⁶

From the perspective of the veteran, this military format of the guidebook would not have seemed as far-fetched as one might imagine today. By June 1920, the publication date of the issue on the Yser and Belgian coast, the wartime landscape that despite its temporary condition had become so familiar to soldiers during four long years, was already in full regeneration and reconstruction. Without any doubt veterans now turned into tourists would have had a hard time negotiating this new and unfamiliar post-war landscape. The plains of the Yser, no longer inundated and its fertile grounds destroyed by the salty water, rapidly evolved into barren and desolate clay flats, pockmarked with the remnants of wartime island outposts, abandoned equipment, timber footbridges and an occasional dot of reed vegetation on higher ground.⁴⁷ This regenerating landscape quickly became the object of tensions between local populations, wanting to restore their environment to its pre-war state without delay, tourists who wished to see the sites of the war in person, and pilgrims who visited the battlefield from a mourning and commemorating perspective.⁴⁸ Here, the Michelin guide fulfils the double role of capturing exactly this momentary transition of the landscape, while at the same time providing intelligence, tailored to the former soldier who could discover the *bleu horizon*⁴⁹ book cover with gilded lettering under the guide's paper wrap. To paraphrase a famous aphorism by military theoretician von Clausewitz: "Tourism is the mere continuation of war by other means."⁵⁰

3 A MODERN APPROACH TOWARDS CONFLICT PATRIMONY

The Michelin battlefield guide also dramatically expanded the scope of what is selected as conflict patrimony, or at least as sightworthy war relict. Let us move on now to some of the guide's content, to fully grasp the novel and modern ways it suggests to qualify this war landscape and patrimony.

Earlier battlefield guidebooks would look towards the battle space as a passive backdrop for military events. The choice of the battlefield was however rarely an entirely accidental one. More often than not, military commanders would try to take the initiative to come to battle on familiar terrain of their own choice, after careful consideration of the topographical conditions of the landscape.⁵¹ Battlefield guidebooks would then provide the necessary contextual information to the untrained non-military

⁴⁵ Urbain Wernaers and Grand Quartier Générale, *Aux champs de gloire: Le front belge de l'Yser* [On the Field of Honour: The Belgian Yser Front] (Service de Presse et de Publicité du Ministère des Chemins de fer, Marine, Postes et Télégraphes, 1921).

⁴⁶ Lottmann, *The Michelin Men : Driving an Empire*, 149-50.

⁴⁷ Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, 115. This changing landscape is also strikingly portrayed by, among others, Belgian modernist architect Huib Hoste, wartime correspondent for the Dutch newspaper *The Amsterdammer* and *Bouwkundig Weekblad*. See Huib Hoste, "Schetsen uit verwoest Vlaanderen," *Bouwkundig Weekblad*, 25 January 1919.

⁴⁸ Johan Meire, *De stilte van de Salient : De herinnering aan de Eerste Wereldoorlog rond Ieper* [The silence of the salient : the memory of the First World War around Ypres] (Tielt : Lannoo, 2003), 195-224.

⁴⁹ *Bleu horizon* was the colour of the French soldier's tenue from 1915 onwards.

⁵⁰ In its original form: "War is the mere continuation of politics by other means." Carl von Clausewitz et al., *On War* (Princeton (N.J.) : Princeton university press, 1976), 87.

⁵¹ Peter Doyle and Matthew R. Bennett, "Terrain in Military History: An Introduction," in *Fields of Battle*, ed. Peter Doyle and Matthew R. Bennett, The GeoJournal Library (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002), 1-7.

eye of the tourist to fully comprehend the topographical conditions of the former battlefield. However, military events had hitherto been confined in time and space, i.e. within the constraints of a delimited campaign or codified siege warfare. The Great War would change both temporality and spatiality of traditional warfare through the unforeseen and unprecedented stalemate of the Western Front that persisted between November 1914 and August 1918.

The inundated plain of the Yser was exactly the place where the war of movement came to a standstill in October 1914, after the series of outflanking attempts by German and Allied armies that became known as the Race to the Sea. The enduring deadlock turned temporary fieldworks into permanent spatial interventions and transformed the landscape into a space to be planned, modified, constructed and urbanised — in short *designed*, on different levels of scale. The Michelin battlefield guide responds accordingly, establishing at the same time new qualifications of the military landscape as an urban landscape, and on the other hand of military relicts as war patrimony. We will look closer into both aspects before elaborating on an example from the Michelin guide on the Yser and the Belgian coast.

The pictures in the guidebook are testimony of a temporary urbanity imposed on the rural areas of the Western Front. This urban project is described more thoroughly in another battlefield guide that covers roughly the same area (i.e. the Belgian-occupied front, between the coast and Dixmude). The concerning guidebook is a two-volume 1919 travel guide, issued by de *Touring-Club de Belgique* and

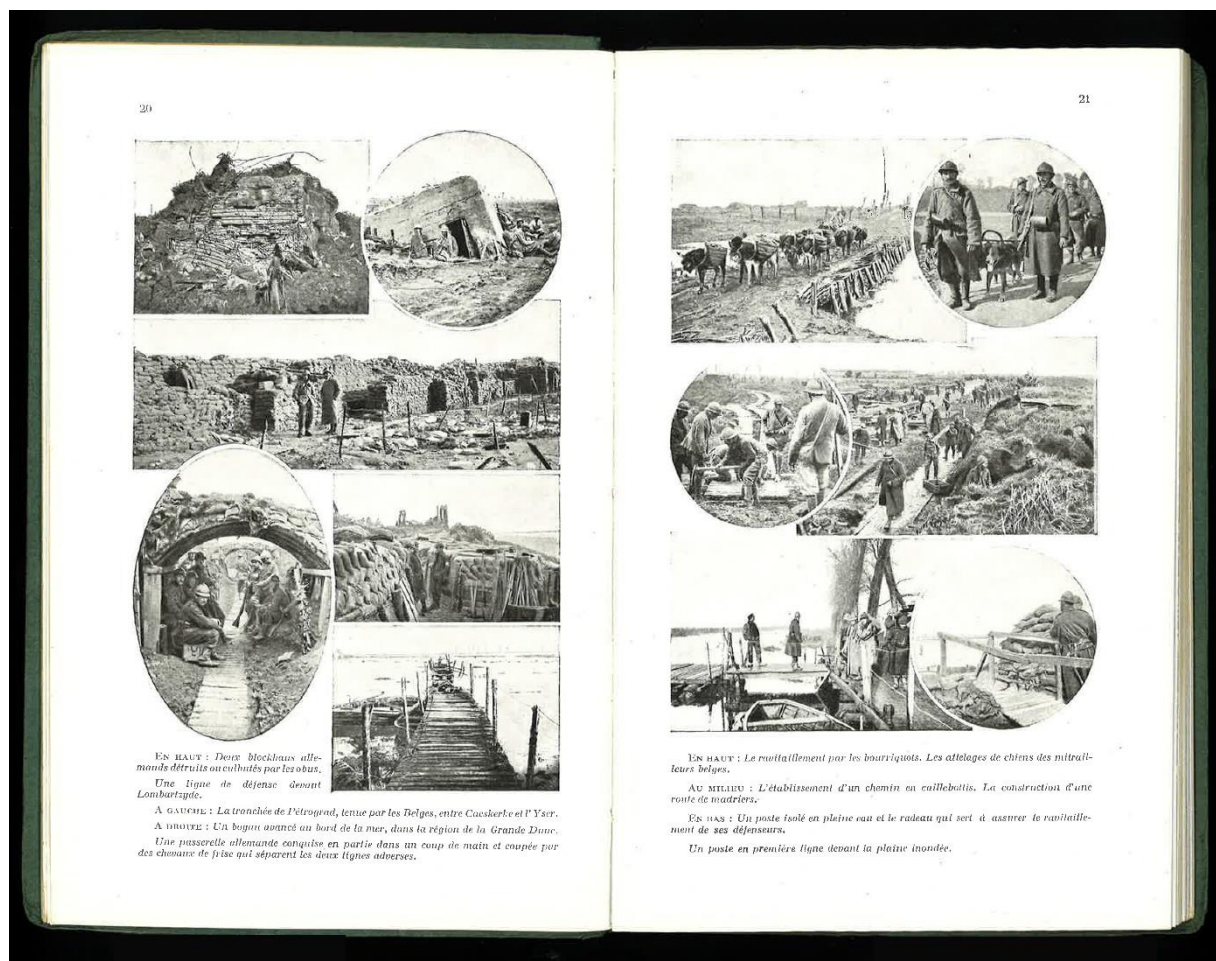


Fig. 12. Construction works at the Yser front. L'Yser et la Côte belge, 20-21.

titled “*Ce qu’il faut voir sur les champs de bataille et dans les villes détruites de Belgique*.”⁵² The second volume kicks off with a lengthy geological and topographical survey of the terrain, followed by a summary of the Belgian military construction effort. So the book mentions, for this sector alone: 350,000 to 400,000 cubic metres of concrete for shelters and outposts; 180 kilometres of new railroads (as well as several hundreds of kilometres of narrow-gauge rails); tens of kilometres of wooden plank bridges over the inundations; 400 kilometres of roads for motorised traffic; housing for 100,000 men and 15,000 horses (in dispersed order of course, as to avoid easy targeting by enemy air raids); health care facilities and hospitals with thousands of beds; airfields; tens of thousands of square meters camouflage material; a network to supply and dispatch drinking water from the hinterland; and finally a telephone network comprising some 22,000 kilometres of wire (mostly buried below ground). Everything to be constructed and maintained under the constant threat of shells and aerial bombs. Clearly the Great War in the west was an urban war, and not a rural one, taking the form of a multicultural⁵³ linear city that spawned modernity and urbanity on previously rural areas. In part, it was a war of labour; fought with the shovel as weapon.⁵⁴ The geographical extent and shape of this urban project, and directions on how to navigate it, are provided in Michelin’s own publicity for the battlefield guides shown in figure 2, bringing together the different itineraries on the Western Front and the respective Michelin roadmaps in overlay.

As the Michelin guide on the Yser neatly illustrates, this was even more true in the Belgian coastal plain, where the low topography of the terrain (mostly below sea level at high tide) had facilitated an “liquid landscape”⁵⁵ of inundations that prevented any digging.⁵⁶ No underground tunnelling and trenches here; but linear constructions and covered walkways constructed above ground level (“superstructures” in Michelin’s words),⁵⁷ as some form of *architectural* approach towards military fieldworks. This aspect clearly distinguishes the Yser front from the rest of the Western Front with its undulated and hilly topography, visible in other volumes from the Michelin series. The most striking examples of this architectural condition however, are the numerous existing buildings along the frontline that, offering easy construction and camouflage, were being transformed into military strongpoints. Blurring the distinction between military construction and civil architecture, these militarised constructions are testimony of the far-reaching transformation of both public and private space and patrimony during the war. So the guide mentions gun nests and rooftop observation posts in churches, farms and seaside houses; villas as military command hubs; a sanatorium turned into military hospital; sea promenades transformed into trenches and the Middelkerke Kursaal building converted into a military headquarters.

⁵² Jean Massart, *Ce qu’il faut voir sur les champs de bataille et dans les villes détruites de Belgique* [What to See on the Battlefields and in the Destroyed Towns in Belgium], vol. 2 (Brussels: Touring-club de Belgique Société Royale, 1919), 44-48. Massart, a prominent botanist-photographer and member of the Royal Commission on Monuments and Sites, earlier photographed hundreds of Flemish landscapes and made a selection – strictly on scientific grounds – of images that gave a specific rendering of natural vegetation or cultivation related to the geography of the site.

⁵³ In this respect, the Yser guide mentions the contributions of two battalions of *Tirailleurs sénégalais* in Dixmude and the deployment of *Tirailleurs zouaves* in Nieuport. However, the presence of Chinese, Russian, Romanian, Italian and Portuguese worker and prisoner battalions at the Belgian front has been documented alongside regular Belgian, German, French and British troops, as well as soldiers from the French and British colonial empires, see Jan Vancoillie, Frans Descamps, and Luc Vandeweyer, *Ten oorlog met schop en houweel* [To War with Pick and Shovel] (Ypres: Western Front Association, 2009).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Meire, *De stilte van de Salient*, 50.

⁵⁶ Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, 18, 19-21.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 18.

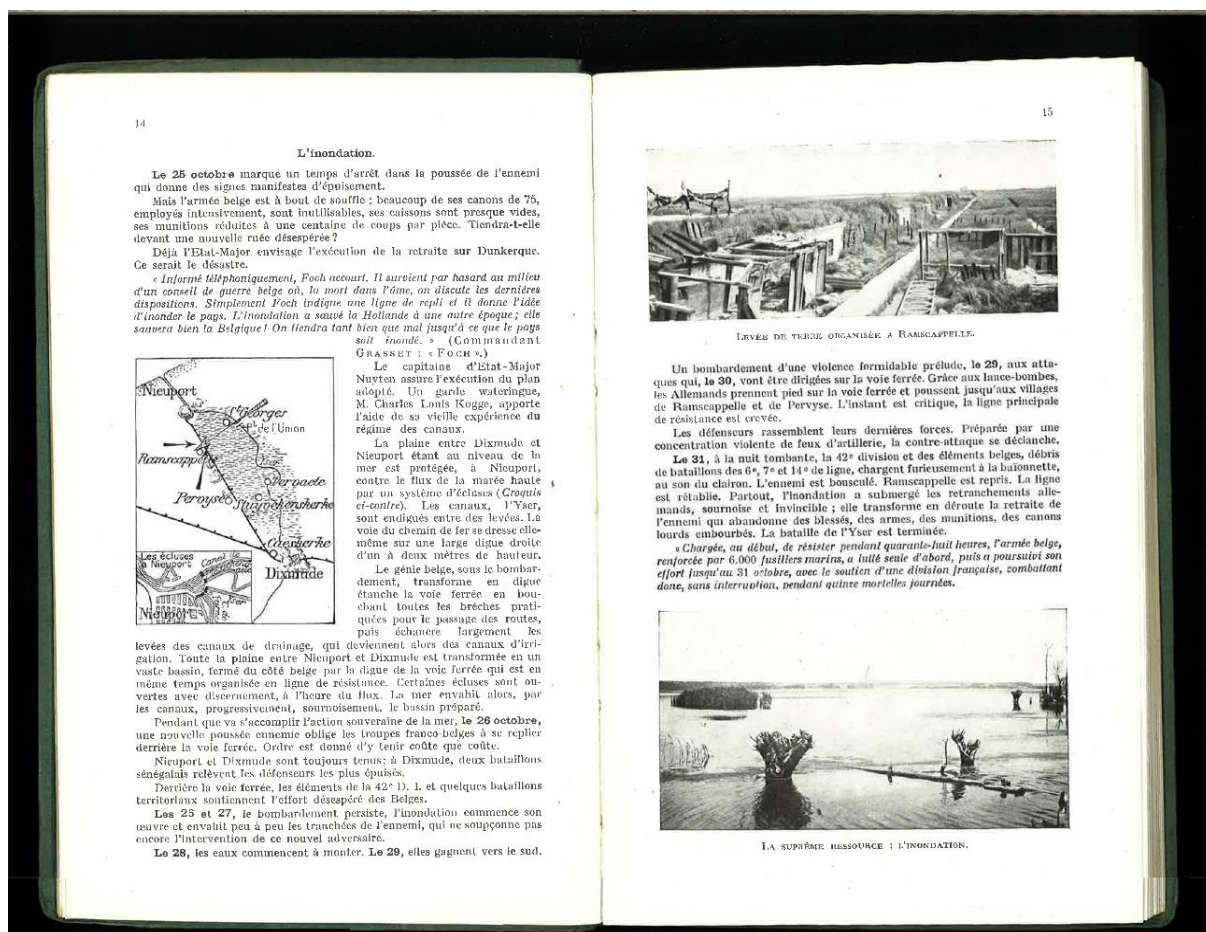


Fig. 13. Topographical conditions and inundations of the Yser plain. L'Yser et la Côte belge, 14-15.

In terms of qualifying objects and sites as patrimony and conflict heritage, the Michelin guides take on a quite unique position. Certainly, the Michelin guide contains the before-and-after pictures of towns and villages destroyed beyond recognition that can also be found in other contemporary guidebooks or military damage surveys. But the Michelin guide also bulks with photographs of military constructions, juxtaposed to images of canonical historical heritage. Thus, pictures of the monumental coastal battery *Kaiser Wilhelm II* appear on the same pages as the picturesque canals and belfry of Bruges. By adopting such distinctionless and neutral stance, military relicts are placed at the same footing as traditional historical monuments, or equally worth visiting at least. On the other hand, one cannot help pondering if this fascination with contrasting images is dictated by the author's urge to provoke a certain shock with the reader, or if it also implies the connotation of the changed spatial order in the post-war era, embodied by the suppression of the historical city by modern infrastructure. Considering Michelin's own war efforts, military involvement and industrial interests, this editorial attitude can only seem a logical one. The same goes for the guide's picturing of the ruins. Besides the few instances in which they are described in terms of heroism or martyrdom, ruins are usually mentioned as annoying obstacles to the motorised traveller. In that case, the guidebook is kind enough to provide annotated pictures on how to negotiate and circumvent them, following Michelin's motto: "Le pneu Michelin boit l'obstacle" [The Michelin tyre drinks (i.e. overcomes) the obstacle].⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Lottmann, *The Michelin Men : Driving an Empire*, 42.

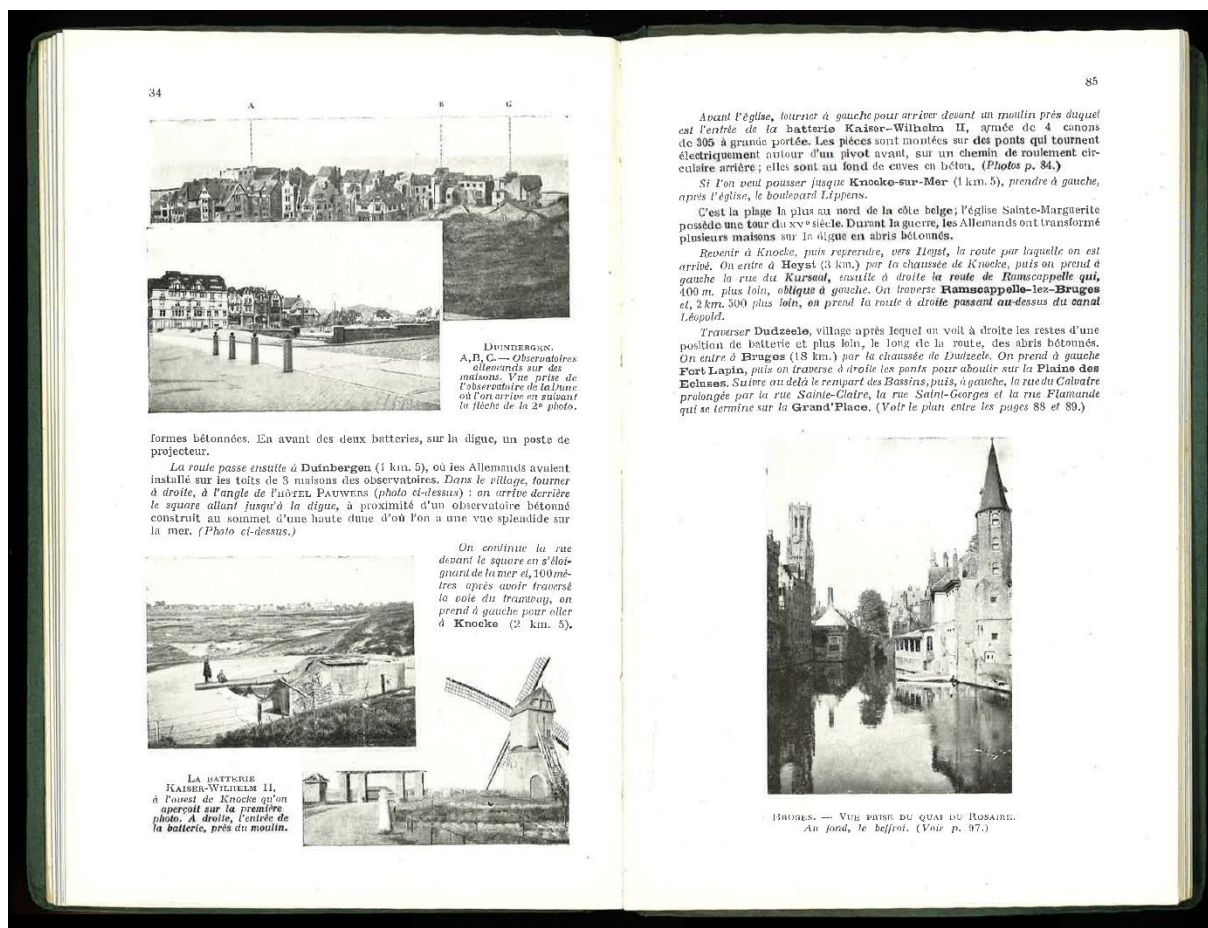


Fig. 14. Juxtaposition of German observation posts, coastal batteries and the belfry of Bruges. L'Yser et la Côte belge, 84-85.

To elaborate on just one example that touches on both the urbanity and the monumental status of military relicts, we can look closer into the guidebook's representation of the military port of Bruges, part of the second-day journey and just before the traveller is invited to enter the historical city centre.

The bombardments did little damage. The maritime quarter, in which were the Imperial workshops, only received a number of aeroplane bombs. It was in this strictly guarded arsenal that the Germans assembled and repaired their submarines. Armour-protected shelters and concrete-covered docks for the submarines not on active service, provided security for the enemy's intense activities. Immense reservoirs of crude oil furnished the boats with fuel. Before leaving, the Germans destroyed these works. The floating-docks, drags, cranes, and port machinery, etc., belonging to Belgium, were wrecked. Sunken hulls blocked up the channels. Huge quantities of stores, including girders, reinforced concrete, sand, etc., were left behind on the wharves.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, 88.

The mentioning of the maritime installations in the hinterland by itself is quite significant: by the very choice to include them in the guidebook as sightworthy, Michelin acknowledges the expanded spatial scope of the battlefield and the war's urban and industrial dimension. This approach challenges the conventional geography of the conflict, through its emphasis on the mobilisation of resources and the lines of logistics in areas quite remote from the immediate frontline. From what could be called an urban geographical perspective,⁶⁰ military relicts in the port are framed in the wider economic, global and technological context of the war (the naval blockades and atrocities of unrestricted submarine warfare)⁶¹ without neglecting its local consequences (the strategic allied bombing of Bruges and the "reign of terror under which Belgium suffered for four long years,"⁶² that constituted the forced labour in the dockyards and on the building sites of the *Kaiserliche Marinewerft*).⁶³ Yet, the guide also points out the submarine shelter itself. As an experimental concrete construction and intricate example of a

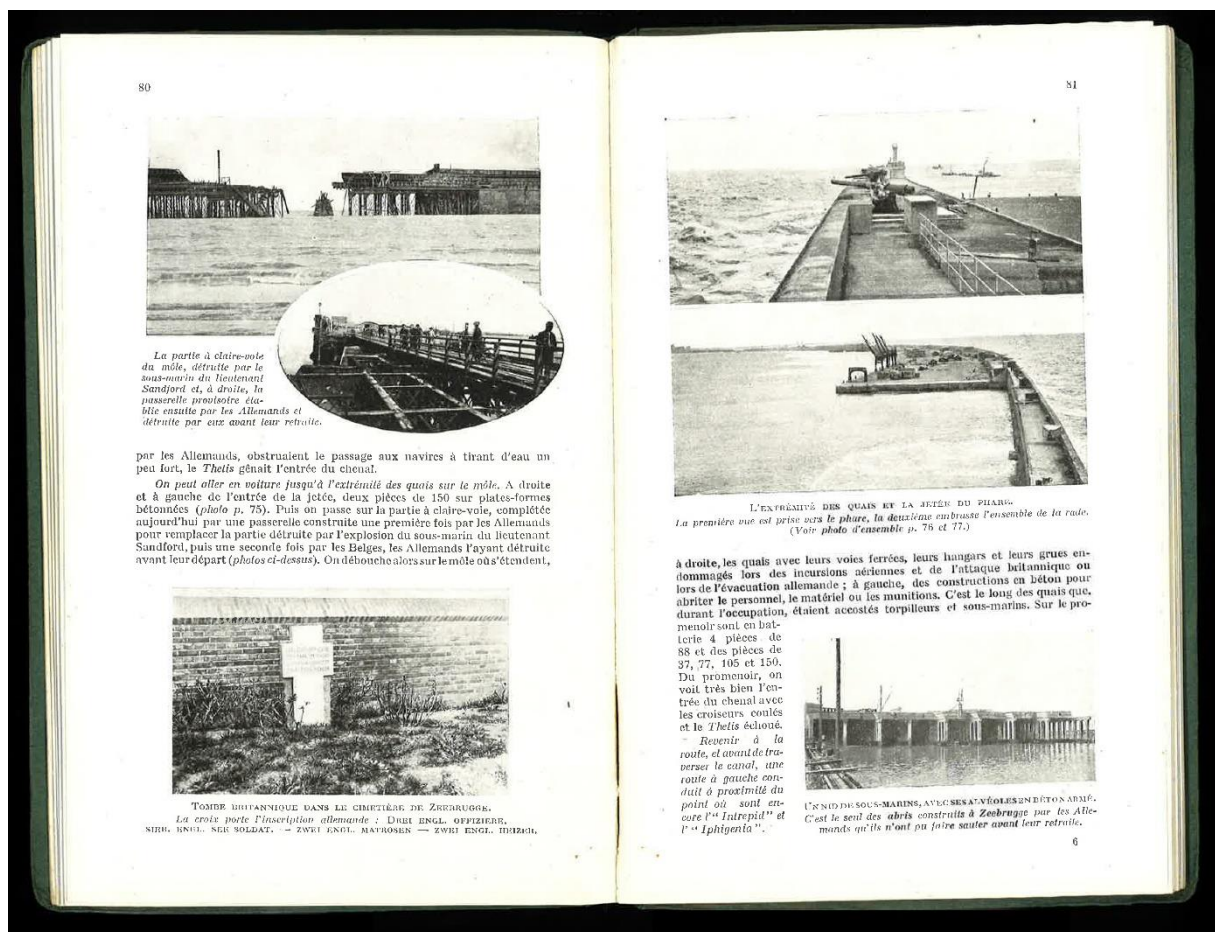


Fig. 15. Maritime installations in the ports of Zeebrugge and Bruges. Bottom right a view of the concrete submarine shelters in the inner port of Bruges. L'Yser et la Côte belge, 80-81.

⁶⁰ Pierre Purseigle, "An Urban Geography of the World at War, 1911-1923," in *Nations, Identities and the First World War*, ed. Nico Wouters and Laurence van Ypersele (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 238-40.

⁶¹ Mark D. Karau, *The Naval Flank of the Western Front: The German Marinekorps Flandern, 1914-1918* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2014).

⁶² Michelin, *The Yser and the Belgian Coast*, 87. The French text is somewhat more explicit and speaks of "le régime d'esclavage" [the reign of slavery].

⁶³ Sophie De Schaepdrijver, "Occupied Bruges and the Marinegebiet (Marine Area), 1914-1918," *Cahiers bruxellois, Revue d'histoire urbaine - Brusselse Cahiers, Tijdschrift voor stadsgeschiedenis* XLVI, no. Theme Issue 1914-1918: Cities at War (2014).

scientifically managed construction site,⁶⁴ it might have aroused Michelin's interest, following the company's introduction to industrial Taylorism when manufacturing gas masks during the war.⁶⁵ In the same year as the publication of the Yser guide, these submarine pens, and the lessons that architects should learn from wartime construction in general, were the subject of a lecture to the RIBA by Sir Frank Baines, architect attached to the British Ministry of Munitions during the war and later chief architect at the Office of Works.⁶⁶ Whether the Michelin guide describes the construction efforts in the port of Bruges, or the coastal batteries between Dunkerque and Knocke, it is hard to ignore the author's awe and sharp observations towards some of the innovative opportunities offered by the conflict, and its impact on building practice, more in particular through the repeated mentioning of reinforced concrete. Indeed, concrete's widespread use in military construction during the First World War was the first implementation of the material on such a vast scale,⁶⁷ establishing a firm connection between war and reinforced concrete in people's minds.⁶⁸

Relying upon contemporary travel guides as well as on post-war military surveys, the Belgian army in the early 1920s established its own classification and preservation list of wartime constructions, albeit from a military-strategic perspective. This process was further accelerated by the increasing pressure on military relicts exerted by private actors, such as land owners and building promoters, wanting to reoccupy the terrains that the military had claimed during the war.⁶⁹ Interestingly, the published preservation list of war sites by the Belgian Ministry of Defence,⁷⁰ corresponds to a large degree with the military relicts mentioned in a number of battlefield guides; a unique convergence of touristic and military interest.⁷¹ In that sense, battlefield guides were to some degree instrumental in "patrimonising" the material remnants of the war.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Below the surface of the guidebook genre, a diverse landscape of parallels and tensions converges in Michelin's illustrated guide to the battlefields of the Yser and the Belgian coast. Returning to the initial question, we can see how the battlefield guide stretches the agenda of the genre. Far from being neutral travel guides, and beyond mere commemoration, the Michelin battlefield guides fit within the "grand strategy" of belligerent nations and adopt a tactical format that results in a modern "target selection." Considering the Michelin brothers' patriotic motives and the company's war effort, the question remains if Michelin's novel approach is triggered by its active involvement in the conflict, or if it is a mere adaptation of the genre to the extreme conditions of its object.

To answer this question, it suffices to reconsider how Michelin's active involvement in the development and production of wartime technology and mapping techniques offered the guidebook's

⁶⁴ Willem Bekers and Ronald De Meyer, "Concrete Matter: Building the Bruges Submarine Pens (1917-18)," in *Building Knowledge, Constructing Histories*, ed. Ine Wouters, et al. (Leiden: CRC Press/Balkema, 2018).

⁶⁵ Francesca Tesi, "Michelin et le taylorisme," [Michelin and Taylorism.] *Histoire, Economie et Société*, no. 3 (2008): 111-26; Lottmann, *The Michelin Men : Driving an Empire*, 109.

⁶⁶ H.F. Murell, "German War Construction: Submarine Shelters and Zeppelin Sheds," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* Third series, Vol. 27, no. 20 (1920); C.C. Pond, "Baines, Sir Frank," in *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶⁷ Keith Mallory and Arvid Ottar, *The Architecture of War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 51.

⁶⁸ Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture : A Material History* (London: Reaktion books, 2012), 169-70.

⁶⁹ Archives of the Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History (KLM-RMA), Brussels, 185/2490.

⁷⁰ *De verrichtingen van het Belgisch Leger 1914-1918: De behouden oorlogsoorden*, [Military Operations of the Belgian Army 1914-1918: The Preserved War Sites], vol. 1, Uitgaven Van Den Dienst Der Oorlogsoorden (Brussels: Ministerie van landsverdediging, 1924).

⁷¹ The Michelin guide on the Yser and the Belgian coast mentions 10 out of 25 sites from this list.

creators a favourable starting position, or a firm finger at the pulse at least, to absorb military-inspired representational techniques and to reform the genre. André Michelin's patriotism and the company's industrial potential gave the creators of the battlefield guide a direct access to government and military officials, and not in the least provided them with a competitive advantage and sales market for their material and print production.

This systemic approach of the Michelin guide, even if elitist in its embrace of the private motorcar and the adoption of an officer's view, results in a military perspective that would be comprehensible and familiar also to the war veteran. This military lens sheds a new light on the qualification of the material remnants of the war, blurring the distinction between conflict landscape, military and militarised constructions, and heritage. The resulting patrimonial compendium, biased by the background of Michelin's war experience, fully acknowledges the spatial, technological and economic impact of the conflict, even if implicitly or even unconsciously. In doing so, a novel and modern perspective on the urbanity and building practice of the conflict in the Belgian context is being established; a modernity that goes beyond the modern-versus-traditional dialectics in the debates on post-war reconstruction. Published in just over a year after the ceasing of the hostilities, this modern approach surely is a remarkable feat, as history was written down while history was still in the making.

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