How the First World War ended

Professor David Stevenson explains how the war came to an end, and why Germany accepted the harsh terms of the armistice.

To understand how and why the First World War terminated, we should remember why it failed to end sooner. In its middle years the conflict became a triple stalemate, at once military (neither side could achieve a breakthrough), diplomatic (the two sides' objectives diverged too widely to allow peace through compromise), and domestic political (until the Bolshevik Revolution of November 1917, governments in all the Great Power belligerents remained committed to victory). In contrast, on the Eastern Front the crucial development, which enabled Soviet Russia's withdrawal from the war (formalised by the signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty of March 1918), was that a majority of the Bolshevik leaders was willing to concede all the Central Powers' demands rather than risk being overthrown. In any case, much of the Russian army deserted after the Bolshevik takeover, rendering organised resistance impossible. Even so, the Brest-Litovsk treaty did not halt operations. In the summer of 1918, the Central Powers overran the Baltic coast, Ukraine and the Crimea, and sent troops to Finland and Georgia. Right up until November, hundreds of thousands of their forces stayed in the east.

The end of the war in Western Europe

By contrast, in Western Europe the key variable that changed was military: once the strategic balance shifted decisively, Germany applied for a ceasefire and for a peace settlement based on the American President Woodrow Wilson 's 'Fourteen Points' of January 1918, which Germany had initially rejected. Only after the German Government had publicly admitted that the war could not be won did revolution follow, and rule out further resistance to the victors' terms.

Germany in 1918 was not a dictatorship, but the army high command (Paul von Hindenburg as Chief of the General Staff and Erich Ludendorff as First Quartermaster-General) held a veto over key decisions in foreign policy. Wilhelm II feared confronting them, and by threatening to resign they

could remove officials whom they thought too moderate. The key development on the road to the armistice therefore came on 28 September, when Ludendorff suffered a breakdown. That evening he told Hindenburg that an early ceasefire was imperative, and Hindenburg agreed. Ludendorff had been under strain for months, but developments in the Balkans, France and in the German army precipitated his collapse.

The trigger was a ceasefire appeal by Germany's smallest partner. Starting on 15 September, Allied forces in Macedonia had attacked and routed the Bulgarian army. If Bulgaria dropped out, the Central Powers would geographically split in two, separating Ottoman Turkey from Austria-Hungary and Germany. In addition, Allied forces could threaten the Ploesti oilfield in Romania. Bulgaria therefore mattered in its own right. But it surrendered partly because of wider developments in the war. German and Austro-Hungarian forces had withdrawn from Macedonia to fight elsewhere, and the Balkan crisis coincided with a larger crisis on the Western Front. Between March and July 1918 five German all-out assaults – the 'Ludendorff offensives' – had advanced up to 50 miles (80 kilometres) towards the Channel ports and Paris, but compelled neither Britain nor France to make peace before the American army arrived in strength. Between July and November the Allies drove Germany back, expelling it from most of France and much of Belgium. On 26 September Allied forces opened a sequence of attacks along a huge sector between the Argonne forest and Flanders, and on 29 September British Empire troops broke through the strongest German defence position, the Hindenburg Line. The German army could neither overwhelm its enemies in an all-out offensive, nor halt their advance through defensive attrition. The situation on the Western Front had altered fundamentally since the stalemate of 1915–17.

Allied advantages

Technology was one factor. The Allies possessed hundreds of tanks against Germany's dozens. The German high command cited tanks as one reason why a ceasefire was needed: they were used

in massed attacks on the Marne on 18 July and near Amiens on 8 August. Yet the tanks advanced only at walking pace and were vulnerable to breakdown and to German fire. They were a supplementary advantage rather than a war-winning weapon. More important was Allied artillery. This meant particularly heavy guns, which could destroy trenches and dugouts, and if guided by aerial reconnaissance and photographs could silence Germany's guns by surprise bombardments. At the same time, lighter field-gun batteries laid down a 'creeping barrage' that stifled the German machine guns until the Allied infantry were upon them. The British and French possessed a flexible logistical system that used roads as well as railways, enabling them to shuttle forces rapidly from sector to sector, whereas by late September Germany's lateral trunk line was paralysed. Behind the barbed wire lay the home fronts, where British and French factories delivered machine guns, artillery, gas, tanks and aircraft in extraordinary quantities, backed by American, oil, steel, machinery and finance. Equally crucial was command of the Atlantic, across which North American troops and commodities were transported. In 1917 the U-boats threatened to starve Britain into surrender; by 1918 they were contained.

A further Allied advantage was in 'manpower', as it was called at the time. Britain and France had greater success than Germany in recruiting women to make munitions; the German army had to release hundreds of thousands of troops into arms production. During 1918 the German army suffered a million casualties in the offensives from March to July; and nearly as many again between July and November. Although Britain and France were also running short of soldiers, American military personnel in France rose between March and November from some 250,000 to nearly two million. The German army was not only outnumbered but also demoralised; tens of thousands of its troops surrendered every month from August onwards, while comparable numbers deserted.

Agreeing the terms of peace

Ludendorff feared that if revolution followed defeat, the soldiers would refuse to keep order. His

response was to seek damage limitation. He hoped to win a breathing space and regroup. Advised by the Foreign Minister, Paul von Hintze, he envisaged appealing not to Germany's enemies collectively but to the American President, whom the Germans thought the weak link in the opposing chain. They asked Wilson for a ceasefire prior to a peace based on the Fourteen Points (his moderate and idealistic peace programme announced in January 1918) and on his other speeches. They stage-managed a 'revolution from above', forming a government under Prince Max of Baden (who had a reputation as a liberal), and including the Socialist, Catholic and Progressive parties who commanded a Reichstag majority. Wilson responded by engaging with the Germans in a public exchange of notes, while consulting the European Allies privately. Eventually, not only did the Germans sign up to the Fourteen Points, but so apparently did Britain, France and Italy, at the Paris conference of 29 October–4 November. Just as it had taken two sides to start the war, so too all the parties had to be persuaded that stopping the conflict was in their interests. Even so, it is less surprising that the Germans requested a ceasefire than that the Americans and the European Allies conceded one, when at last the military operations were moving their way.

Part of the explanation for this paradox is that America, Britain and France were wary of each other as well as of their enemies, and all saw arguments against continuing into 1919. In Washington the issue was partly financial: Treasury Secretary William G McAdoo warned that the war was becoming prohibitively expensive even for America. Moreover, Wilson faced midterm elections in which his Democratic party was likely to lose ground to his Republican critics. He feared the xenophobia of the American Home Front would hamper him in brokering a moderate peace. This would apply still more if Germany were so completely beaten that Britain and France no longer needed American assistance. In Europe, in contrast, Italy would follow a Franco-British lead, and both Paris and London feared that a victory won in 1919 would be dominated by America, which would gain a corresponding dominance at the peace conference. And although Wilson insisted on the Fourteen Points becoming the political framework of the armistice, he left the technical terms to the European

Allies. The naval terms were shaped by the British Admiralty, which insisted on Germany surrendering all its submarines and its most modern battleships. The land terms were decided mainly by the Allied General-in-Chief, Ferdinand Foch, who required the Germans to withdraw so quickly that they abandoned much of their heavy equipment, enabling the Allies to occupy Belgium (a central British concern), Alsace-Lorraine (a central French one), and the west bank of the Rhine, as well as bridgeheads on the east bank. Furthermore, Germany had to abandon all its gains in Russia, while the Italians under their ceasefire with Austria could occupy Trieste and the Trentino. Germany had also to evacuate German East Africa, the one overseas colony where its forces continued to resist. The European Allies used the peace agreement to install their forces in the territories to which they had pretensions, and to weaken Germany to such an extent that it could not renew hostilities.

Why did Germany accept an armistice with such severe terms?

The question remains why Germany accepted terms that were much less favourable than Hindenburg and Ludendorff had envisaged. Part of the answer is that Wilhelm II dismissed Ludendorff on 17 October, while ordering Hindenburg to stay in post and thereby splitting the two generals. As Ludendorff was replaced by the more conciliatory and realistic Wilhelm Groener, the military veto over foreign policy was lifted. Ludendorff lost credibility with the German politicians by urging them to reject an armistice once he realised its conditions would be severe, and Wilson's pressure for democratisation within Germany may also have contributed to the change in the high command. Two further developments completed the destruction of Berlin's bargaining position. The first was a series of nationalist revolutions in Austria-Hungary at the end of October. Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia emerged at the former Dual Monarchy's expense, while the remainders of its Austrian and Hungarian halves separated. On 31 October Ottoman Turkey also signed a ceasefire, partly because Bulgaria's surrender had opened the road for Allied armies to reach Istanbul. If Germany fought on now, it would do so alone. But the final blow was revolution in

Germany itself. It began when the navy prepared a suicidal final sortie against the Thames estuary and London. Once the battleships began to get up steam, their crews mutinied. The warships put in to shore at Kiel, and the sailors joined hands with munitions workers to raise the red flag. Revolution spread across north Germany and on 9 November a republic was proclaimed in Berlin, under a socialist provisional government, while Wilhelm fled into exile. Groener advised the new authorities to conclude a ceasefire on any terms available, which they did.

The armistice offered Germany apparently lenient political terms, based on the Fourteen Points, but stringent naval and military conditions. Almost immediately some Allied leaders felt the war had been halted too soon – as the American commander, John J Pershing, had warned before the ceasefire was signed. Germany's forces still stood everywhere on foreign territory, and only four months previously its territorial conquests had reached their maximum. German nationalists soon propagated the myth that the defeat was bogus, and that German Jews and communists, as well as the socialist provisional government, had stabbed the warrior heroes in the back. If the Allies had demanded unconditional surrender or had paraded through Berlin, they might have hammered home that Germany really had been beaten, undercutting the far right. Yet at the time none of the Allied political chiefs wished to occupy the German interior. In the pre-ceasefire discussions Pershing had been countered by Foch, who warned that fighting on would cost tens of thousands of lives for advantages that were nebulous. Indeed, the armistice conditions weakened Germany sufficiently for the Allies to be able seven months later to impose the Versailles Treaty over vehement German opposition, and if the victors had held together to uphold the Treaty's disarmament clauses, no second world war need have followed. But this was for the future. In November 1918 leaders in Washington, Paris and London judged that now that fighting no longer served a political purpose, no further loss of life was justified and the bloodshed they had endured for so long could finally come to an end.