

## The final offensive on the Western Front

It was eventually agreed among the Allied commanders that Pershing's American troops should advance across the difficult terrain of the Argonne Forest, so that the combined Allied offensive would consist of converging attacks against the whole German position west of a line drawn from Ypres to Verdun. Thus, the Americans from the front northwest of Verdun and the French from eastern Champagne, the former on the west bank of the Meuse, the latter west of the Argonne Forest, were to launch attacks on September 26, with Mézières as their objective, in order to threaten not only the Germans' supply line along the Mézières–Sedan–Montmédy railway and the natural line of retreat across Lorraine but also the hinge of the Antwerp–Meuse defensive line that the Germans were now preparing. The British were to attack the Hindenburg Line between Cambrai and Saint-Quentin on September 27 and to try to reach the key rail junction of Maubeuge, so as to threaten the Germans' line of retreat through the Liège gap. The Belgians, with Allied support, were to begin a drive from Ypres toward Ghent on September 28.

The Americans took Vauquois and Montfaucon in the first two days of their offensive but were soon slowed down, and on October 14, when their attack was suspended, they had only reached Grandpré, less than halfway to Mézières. The French advance meanwhile was halted on the Aisne. The British, though they had broken through the German defenses by October 5 and thenceforward had open country in front of them, could not pursue the Germans fast enough to endanger their withdrawal. Nevertheless, the piercing of the Hindenburg Line unnerved the German supreme command. The Belgians were in possession of all the heights around Ypres by September 30.

## The end of the German war

Georg von Hertling, who had taken the place of Michaelis as Germany's chancellor in November 1917 but had proved no more capable than he of restraining Ludendorff and Hindenburg, tendered

his resignation on Sept. 29, 1918, the day of the Bulgarian armistice and of the major development of the British attack on the Western Front. Pending the appointment of a new chancellor, Ludendorff and Hindenburg obtained the Emperor's consent to an immediate peace move. On October 1 they even disclosed their despondency to a meeting of the leaders of all the national political parties, thus undermining the German home front by a sudden revelation of facts long hidden from the public and its civilian leaders. This new and bleak honesty about Germany's deteriorating military situation gave an immense impetus to the native German forces of pacifism and internal discord. On October 3 the new chancellor was appointed: he was Prince Maximilian of Baden, internationally known for his moderation and honorability. Though Max demanded a few days' interval lest Germany's overture for peace should appear too obviously an admission of imminent collapse, the military leaders insisted on an immediate move. A German note to Wilson, requesting an armistice and negotiations on the basis of Wilson's own pronouncements, was sent off in the night of October 3–4.

The U.S. answer of October 8 required Germany's preliminary assent (1) to negotiations on the sole question of the means of putting Wilson's principles into practice and (2) to the withdrawal of German forces from Allied soil. The German government's note of October 12 accepted these requirements and suggested a mixed commission to arrange the postulated evacuation. On October 14, however, the U.S. government sent a second note, which coupled allusions to Germany's "illegal and inhuman" methods of warfare with demands that the conditions of the armistice and of the evacuation be determined unilaterally by its own and the Allies' military advisers and that the "arbitrary power" of the German regime be removed in order that the forthcoming negotiations could be conducted with a government representative of the German people.

By this time the German supreme command had become more cheerful, even optimistic, as it saw that the piercing of the Hindenburg Line had not been followed by an actual Allied breakthrough. More encouragement came from reports of a slackening in the force of the Allies' attacks, largely

because they had advanced too far ahead of their supply lines. Ludendorff still wanted an armistice, but only to give his troops a rest as a prelude to further resistance and to ensure a secure withdrawal to a shortened defensive line on the frontier. By October 17 he even felt that his troops could do without a rest. It was less that the situation had changed than that his impression of it had been revised; it had never been quite so bad as he had pictured it on September 29. But his dismal first impression had now spread throughout German political circles and the public. Though they had endured increasing privations and were half-starved due to the Allied blockade by mid-1918, the German people had retained their morale surprisingly well as long as they believed Germany had a prospect of achieving victory on the Western Front. When this hope collapsed in October 1918, many, and perhaps even most, Germans wished only that the war would end, though it might mean their nation would have to accept unfavourable peace terms. German public opinion, having been more suddenly disillusioned, was now far more radically defeatist than the supreme command.

A third German note to the United States, sent on October 20, agreed to the unilateral settlement of conditions for the armistice and for the evacuation, in the express belief that Wilson would allow no affront to Germany's honour. The answering U.S. note of October 23 conceded Wilson's readiness to propose an armistice to the Allies but added that the terms must be such as to make Germany incapable of renewing hostilities. Ludendorff saw this, militarily, as a demand for unconditional surrender and would therefore have continued resistance. But the situation had passed beyond his control, and on October 26 he was made to resign by the Emperor, on Prince Max's advice. On October 27 Germany acknowledged the U.S. note.

Wilson now began to persuade the Allies to agree to an armistice and negotiations according to the U.S.–German correspondence. They agreed, with two reservations: they would not subscribe to the second of the Fourteen Points (on the freedom of the seas); and they wanted “compensation...for damage done to the civilian population...and their property by the aggression of Germany.” Wilson's

note of November 5 apprised the Germans of these reservations and stated that Foch would communicate armistice terms to Germany's accredited representatives. On November 8 a German delegation, led by Matthias Erzberger, arrived at Rethondes, in the Forest of Compiègne, where the Germans met face to face with Foch and his party and were informed of the Allies' peace terms.

Meanwhile, revolution was shaking Germany. It began with a sailors' mutiny at Kiel on October 29 in reaction to the naval command's order for the High Seas Fleet to go out into the North Sea for a conclusive battle. Though the U-boat crews remained loyal, the mutiny of the surface-ship crews spread to other units of the fleet, developed into armed insurrection on November 3, and progressed to open revolution the next day. There were disturbances in Hamburg and in Bremen; "councils of soldiers and workers," like the Russian soviets, were formed in inland industrial centres; and in the night of November 7–8 a "democratic and socialist Republic of Bavaria" was proclaimed. The Social Democrats of the Reichstag withdrew their support from Prince Max's government in order to be free to contend against the Communists for the leadership of the revolution. While William II, at Spa, was still wondering whether he could abdicate his imperial German title but remain king of Prussia, Prince Max, in Berlin on November 9, on his own initiative, announced William's abdication of both titles. The Hohenzollern monarchy thus came to an end, joining those of the Habsburgs and the Romanovs. Prince Max handed his powers as chancellor over to Friedrich Ebert, a Majority Social Democrat, who formed a provisional government. A member of this government, Philipp Scheidemann, hastily proclaimed a republic. On November 10 William II took refuge in the neutral Netherlands, where on November 28 he signed his own abdication of his sovereign rights.

## The Armistice

The Allies' armistice terms presented in the railway carriage at Rethondes were stiff. Germany was required to evacuate not only Belgium, France, and Alsace-Lorraine but also all the rest of the left (west) bank of the Rhine, and it had to neutralize that river's right bank between the Netherlands and Switzerland. The German troops in East Africa were to surrender; the German armies in eastern

Europe were to withdraw to the prewar German frontier; the treaties of Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest were to be annulled; and the Germans were to repatriate all prisoners of war and hand over to the Allies a large quantity of war materials, including 5,000 pieces of artillery, 25,000 machine guns, 1,700 aircraft, 5,000 locomotives, and 150,000 railroad cars. And meanwhile, the Allies' blockade of Germany was to continue.

Pleading the danger of Bolshevism in a nation on the verge of collapse, the German delegation obtained some mitigation of these terms: a suggestion that the blockade might be relaxed, a reduction in the quantity of armaments to be handed over, and permission for the German forces in eastern Europe to stay put for the time being. The Germans might have held out longer for further concessions if the fact of revolution on their home front had not been coupled with the imminence of a new blow from the west.

Though the Allied advance was continuing and seemed in some sectors even to be accelerating, the main German forces had managed to retreat ahead of it. The Germans' destruction of roads and railways along the routes of their evacuation made it impossible for supplies to keep pace with the advancing Allied troops; a pause in the advance would occur while Allied communications were being repaired, and that would give the Germans a breathing space in which to rally their resistance. By November 11 the Allied advance on the northern sectors of the front had come more or less to a standstill on a line running from Pont-à-Mousson through Sedan, Mézières, and Mons to Ghent. Foch, however, now had a Franco-U.S. force of 28 divisions and 600 tanks in the south ready to strike through Metz into northeastern Lorraine. Since Foch's general offensive had absorbed the Germans' reserves, this new offensive would fall on their bared left flank and held the promise of outflanking their whole new line of defense (from Antwerp to the line of the Meuse) and of intercepting any German retreat. By this time the number of U.S. divisions in France had risen to 42. In addition, the British were about to bomb Berlin on a scale hitherto unattempted in air warfare.

Whether the Allies' projected final offensive, intended for November 14, would have achieved a

breakthrough can never be known. At 5:00 AM on Nov. 11, 1918, the Armistice document was signed in Foch's railway carriage at Rethondes. At 11:00 AM on the same day, World War I came to an end.

The fact that Matthias Erzberger, who was a civilian politician rather than a soldier, headed the German armistice delegation became an integral part of the legend of the "stab in the back" (Dolchstoß im Rücken). This legend's theme was that the German Army was "undefeated in the field" (unbesiegt im Felde) and had been "stabbed in the back"—i.e., had been denied support at the crucial moment by a weary and defeatist civilian population and their leaders. This theme was adopted soon after the war's end by Ludendorff himself and by other German generals who were unwilling to admit the hopelessness of Germany's military situation in November 1918 and who wanted to vindicate the honour of German arms. The "stab in the back" legend soon found its way into German historiography and was picked up by German right-wing political agitators who claimed that Allied propaganda in Germany in the last stages of the war had undermined civilian morale and that traitors among the politicians had been at hand ready to do the Allies' bidding by signing the Armistice. Adolf Hitler eventually became the foremost of these political agitators, branding Erzberger and the leaders of the Social Democrats as the "November criminals" and advocating militaristic and expansionist policies by which Germany could redeem its defeat in the war, gain vengeance upon its enemies, and become the preeminent power in Europe.

[Learn More!](#)

Killed, wounded, and missing

The casualties suffered by the participants in World War I dwarfed those of previous wars: some 8,500,000 soldiers died as a result of wounds and/or disease. The greatest number of casualties and wounds were inflicted by artillery, followed by small arms, and then by poison gas. The bayonet, which was relied on by the prewar French Army as the decisive weapon, actually produced few casualties. War was increasingly mechanized from 1914 and produced casualties even when

nothing important was happening. On even a quiet day on the Western Front, many hundreds of Allied and German soldiers died. The heaviest loss of life for a single day occurred on July 1, 1916, during the Battle of the Somme, when the British Army suffered 57,470 casualties.

Sir Winston Churchill once described the battles of the Somme and Verdun, which were typical of trench warfare in their futile and indiscriminate slaughter, as being waged between double or triple walls of cannons fed by mountains of shells. In an open space surrounded by masses of these guns large numbers of infantry divisions collided. They fought in this dangerous position until battered into a state of uselessness. Then they were replaced by other divisions. So many men were lost in the process and shattered beyond recognition that there is a French monument at Verdun to the 150,000 unlocated dead who are assumed to be buried in the vicinity.

This kind of war made it difficult to prepare accurate casualty lists. There were revolutions in four of the warring countries in 1918, and the attention of the new governments was shifted away from the grim problem of war losses. A completely accurate table of losses may never be compiled. The best available estimates of World War I military casualties are assembled in Table 4.

Similar uncertainties exist about the number of civilian deaths attributable to the war. There were no agencies established to keep records of these fatalities, but it is clear that the displacement of peoples through the movement of the war in Europe and in Asia Minor, accompanied as it was in 1918 by the most destructive outbreak of influenza in history, led to the deaths of large numbers. It has been estimated that the number of civilian deaths attributable to the war was higher than the military casualties, or around 13,000,000. These civilian deaths were largely caused by starvation, exposure, disease, military encounters, and massacres.