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THE ENDING OF WORLD WAR I: THE ROAD TO 11 NOVEMBER

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To understand how and why the Great War ended when it did, we should remember why it failed to do so sooner. In its middle years the conflict grew into a triple stalemate. This stalemate was simultaneously military (neither side could achieve a decisive breakthrough); diplomatic (the two sides' objectives diverged too widely to allow for 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 Western Europe, at the end of 1917, this stalemate seemed stubbornly to remain in place. In the terrible Third Battle of Ypres between July and November, each side suffered over 200,000 casualties but the Allies advanced barely six miles. In September the German Government extended to the British perhaps its most important peace feeler of the war, but the Cabinet in London (if only after lengthy debate) refused to negotiate separately from its allies and thereby killed the initiative. In contrast, on the Eastern Front the crucial development that enabled Soviet Russia's withdrawal from the war (formalized by the signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty in March 1918) was that a majority of the Soviet leaders was willing to concede all their enemies' demands rather than risk being overthrown from within. In any case, much of the Russian army deserted after the Bolshevik takeover, rendering organized resistance impossible. Even so, the Brest-Litovsk Treaty did not halt operations. In summer 1918 the Central Powers (Germany and its allies) overran the Baltic coast, the 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.

By contrast, in Western Europe the key variable that altered was the military one: 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' programme of January 1918, which previously the German leaders had rejected. Only after the Berlin Government had publicly admitted that the war could not be won did revolution follow, and soon that revolution ruled out further resistance to the victors' terms.

Germany's Decision to Seek an Armistice

Germany in 1918 was not a military dictatorship, but Generals 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. They were credited with having repelled a Russian invasion of East Prussia at the Battle of Tannenberg in 1914. In summer 1916, at another moment of military emergency, Hindenburg and Ludendorff took over the army high command. Wooden effigies of Hindenburg appeared in market squares, and citizens hammered nails into them when purchasing war bonds. Emperor Wilhelm II feared to confront the duo, and by threatening to resign they could remove civilian officials whom they thought too moderate. As late as June 1918 they forced out the Foreign Minister, Richard von Kühlmann, when he suggested in the Reichstag that the war could not be ended by military means alone. The key development on the road to the armistice therefore came on Saturday 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 (he had taken to drink and had quarrelled with his superior) but developments in the Balkans, in France, and within 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. French and Serbian troops had spearheaded an assault in what is now the Kosovo area, after hauling artillery up to heights of eight thousand feet. If Bulgaria dropped out, the Central Powers would split in two, Ottoman Turkey separating from Austria-Hungary and Germany. In addition, Allied forces could threaten the Ploesti oilfield in Romania, which as in the First as in the Second World War was Germany's principal supplier of petroleum. Without Ploesti, Ludendorff was advised, German lorries, submarines, and aircraft might run out of fuel within weeks. Bulgaria therefore mattered in its own right. But it surrendered partly because of wider developments in the war. German and Austro-Hungarian units 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 fifty miles towards the Amiens railway junction, the Channel ports, and Paris, but they had compelled neither Britain nor France to make peace before the American army arrived in strength. Between July and November the Allies then drove Germany back, expelling it from most of France and much of Belgium. After the Battle of Amiens on 8 August, Hindenburg and Ludendorff gave up hope of returning to the offensive, though not yet of winning the war. But on 26 September Allied forces opened a co-ordinated sequence of attacks along a huge arc 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. Since the stalemate of 1915-17 the situation on the Western Front had altered fundamentally.

The Allies' Sources of Advantage

Technology was one factor. The Allies possessed hundreds of tanks against Germany's dozens (many of the latter captured from the British). The German high command cited tanks as one reason why a ceasefire was essential: they were deployed in massed attacks on the river Marne on 18 July and east of Amiens on 8 August. Yet British Mark IV and Mark V tanks advanced only at walking pace, and were highly vulnerable to mechanical breakdown and to enemy artillery fire. They were a supplementary advantage rather than a war-winning weapon. More important was Allied artillery. This meant particularly heavy guns (six inches or more in calibre), which could destroy trenches and dugouts, and if guided by aerial reconnaissance and photographs could silence Germany's field artillery (field-gun calibres were approximately three inches) by surprise bombardments. Their projectiles contained high explosive, but they also fired gas shells, which filled and smothered the German gun pits. Allied field-gun batteries then laid down a 'creeping barrage' ahead of their infantry that suppressed the German machine guns until the British and French assault troops were upon them. Before the storming of the Hindenburg Line on 29 September, the British fired no fewer than 750,000 shells.

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 railway line was paralysed by the demands placed on it. Behind the fighting line lay the home fronts, where British and French factories delivered machine guns, artillery, gas, tanks, and aircraft in extraordinary quantities, backed by American supplies of oil, steel, machine tools, and finance. Equally crucial was command of the Atlantic, across which American and Canadian troops and commodities were funnelled. In 1917 German U-Boats had threatened to starve Britain into surrender; by 1918 they were contained. Most ocean crossings were now escorted in convoys, which dramatically cut losses; and the shipping that remained available was concentrated on the North Atlantic run.

A further Allied advantage lay in 'manpower' (the term was a wartime coinage). Labour power would be a better description, and Britain and France had greater success than Germany in recruiting women to make munitions; whereas the German army released hundreds of thousands of its troops into arms production. During 1918 it suffered a million casualties in the offensives from March to July; and nearly as many again as it retreated 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. During the summer they crossed the Atlantic at the rate of quarter of a million each month, and not a single outward-bound troopship was sunk. French commentators likened the arrival of the 'Doughboys' to a blood transfusion. Yet the French army remained the largest on the Western Front, and made essential contributions in the 1918 fighting: to understand the armistice we should remember that America, France, and the British Empire had all played vital roles in Germany's defeat. Conversely, the German army was not only outnumbered but also demoralized: tens of



thousands of its troops surrendered every month from August onwards, and comparable numbers deserted. Some historians have compared this phenomenon to 'a secret military strike'; others have argued that the rank and file followed leads from their junior officers. Either way, many of the men now felt that the war was lost and further effort was pointless.

The Ceasefire Process

Ludendorff feared that the German army was becoming a 'militia'. 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 Kühlmann's successor as Foreign Minister, Paul von Hintze, he envisaged appealing not to Germany's enemies collectively but to the American President, whom the German leaders judged the weak link in the opposing chain. On 5 October they communicated via Switzerland, asking Wilson for a ceasefire prior to a peace based on the Fourteen Points (his moderate and idealistic programme announced in January) and on his other speeches. They also stage-managed a 'revolution from above', forming a government under Prince Max of Baden (who had a reputation as a liberal), which included the Social Democrat, Catholic, and Progressive parties who between them 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 too on paper did Britain, France, and Italy, at the Paris conference of 29 October-4 November 1918. Admittedly they did so with reservations and qualifications, and the British and French Prime Ministers, David Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau, considered the Points to be extremely vaguely drafted. Just as it had taken two sides to start the war, now so too must all parties be persuaded that stopping the conflict was in their interest. Even so, it is less surprising that the Germans requested a ceasefire than that the Americans and the European Allies conceded one, at a moment when at last the military operations were moving in their favour.

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 the spring. In Washington the issue was partly financial: Treasury Secretary William G. McAdoo warned that even for America the war was becoming prohibitively expensive, and the huge American Expeditionary Force was a drain on the balance of payments. Moreover, Wilson faced mid-term elections in which his Democratic party was likely to lose ground to his Republican critics. He had not realized how 'war mad our people have become', and feared that xenophobia at home would hamper him in brokering a moderate peace. This danger would loom still larger if Germany were so completely beaten that Britain and France no longer depended on American assistance. In Europe, in contrast, the Italian Government would follow a Franco-British lead, and both Paris and London feared that a victory won in 1919 would seem a triumph for America, which would gain a corresponding dominance at the peace conference.

The British Expeditionary Force was set to dwindle from 59 to some 35 divisions; France was also running out of soldiers, while its railways were dangerously overstretched. And although Wilson insisted on the Fourteen Points becoming the political framework of the armistice, he left the technical ceasefire conditions to the European Allies. Hence 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 principally by the Allied General-in-Chief, Ferdinand Foch, in liaison with the French Government. He 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 and the west bank of the Rhine (which were central French ones), and bridgeheads on the river's east bank. Further, Germany had to withdraw from all its conquests in Russia, while the Italians under a separate ceasefire with Austria could occupy the lands they wanted in the Trentino, the Tyrol, and Dalmatia. Germany also had to evacuate German East Africa, the one overseas colony where its forces still resisted. The European Allies therefore used the ceasefire agreement to over-run the territories to which they had pretensions; and so to weaken Germany that it could not renew hostilities.

The question remains of why Germany accepted terms that were much less favourable than Hindenburg and Ludendorff had initially envisaged. Part of the answer is that Wilhelm dismissed Ludendorff on 17 October, while ordering Hindenburg to stay in post and thereby splitting the two generals, who never spoke to each other again. As Ludendorff was replaced by the more conciliatory and realistic Wilhelm Groener, a logistics expert from Württemberg, the military veto over foreign policy was effectively lifted. Ludendorff had lost credibility with the German politicians by urging them to reject an armistice once he realized its conditions would be severe, and



Wilson's pressure for democratization within Germany may also have weakened military influence. In the meantime, while leaders deliberated the fighting went on, and the Allies' Western Front advance accelerated. Moreover, two further developments completed the destruction of Berlin's bargaining position. The first was a series of nationalist revolutions in Austria-Hungary (Germany's main ally) at the end of October and in early November. Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia emerged at the former Dual Monarchy's expense, while the remainders of its Austrian and Hungarian halves separated. The Austro-Hungarian armed forces disintegrated, and the Austrian and Hungarian Governments signed ceasefires. On 31 October Ottoman Turkey did likewise, partly because Bulgaria's surrender had opened the road for Allied armies to advance on Istanbul. If Germany fought on now, therefore, it would do so alone.

But the final blow was revolution in Germany itself. It began when the navy prepared in secrecy 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, where the sailors joined hands with munitions workers to raise the red flag and form a soviet. A largely bloodless 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 in Holland. The Emperor's commanders warned him that their troops would not support the use of force, and with the interior railways and food supplies falling under rebel control, the army at the front faced catastrophe. Groener advised the new authorities to conclude a ceasefire on any terms available, which they did. A German delegation under Matthias Erzberger met an Allied delegation led by Foch in a railway carriage in the Forest of Compiègne. The Germans received the Allied terms on 8 November and on Monday 11 November they signed them, obtaining little modification in Foch's conditions. Concluded at 5am the armistice took effect at 11am, although even during the last six hours operations continued and hundreds more soldiers died.

Conclusion

The armistice offered Germany apparently lenient political terms, based on the Fourteen Points, combined with stringent naval and military conditions. Yet almost immediately some Allied leaders feared the war was being halted prematurely - as the American commander, John J. Pershing, had warned before the ceasefire was signed. Pershing was over-ridden by Wilson and by Wilson's envoy, Colonel Edward House, but Germany's forces still stood everywhere on foreign territory, and only four months previously its territorial conquests had reached their maximum. Soon after the surrender German nationalists launched the myth that the defeat was bogus, and that 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 paraded through Berlin they might have hammered home that Germany really had been beaten, undercutting the far Right's appeal. Yet at the time none of the Allied political chiefs wished to occupy the German interior, Lloyd George fearing that the Bolshevik contagion would infect the British troops. In the pre-ceasefire discussions Pershing was countered by Foch, who warned that fighting on would cost tens of thousands of French lives for political advantages that were uncertain. 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. On 11 November 1918 leaders in Washington, Paris, and London judged that now the campaigning no longer served a political purpose, no further loss of life was justified. The bloodshed that their peoples had so long endured could finally come to an end. On 11 November 1919 the British Government marked the first anniversary of the armistice by a nationwide two-minute silence; on 11 November 1920 the Unknown Warrior was interred in Westminster Abbey; and on 11 November 1921 the British Legion began the tradition of wearing poppies. A complex of commemoration and of ritual emerged, to which the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month was central, and Armistice Day became more solemn, an emblem of wider attitudes towards war in Western societies. None the less, the immediate reaction of the crowds in Whitehall and through Britain on that November morning was one of relief and joy, even if these were emotions that all too many households could not share.