

# Chapter Six

## THE WAR GRINDS TO A GRUESOME END



The Armistice came, the day we had dreamed of. The guns stopped, the fighting stopped. Four years of noise and bangs ended in silence. The killings had stopped. We were stunned. I had been out since 1914. I should have been happy. I was sad. I thought of the slaughter, the hardships, the waste, and the friends I had lost.<sup>1</sup>

—British sergeant-major Richard Tobin of the  
Army's Royal Naval Division

Russia's withdrawal from the Great War in late 1917 was a major benefit to Germany and the other Central Powers. True, the Germans would have to leave some manpower in place in the East in order to keep an eye on Ukraine, Poland, Finland, and Baltic states that it had received according to the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. But with Russia no longer a concern, German military commanders could still shift huge numbers of troops, guns, and other military resources to the Western Front, where the enemy remained formidable. The only question that remained, according to German strategists, was whether this additional muscle would enable them to defeat reeling French and British armies before Americans troops began pouring into Europe.

### A Race Against Time for Germany

In early 1918 Kaiser Wilhelm II remained Germany's emperor and the official commander-in-chief of its military. In reality, however, the war had elevated the country's generals to positions of influence that eclipsed the Kaiser. From 1916 to 1918, in fact, Germany operated under an unofficial military dictator-

ship—a “silent dictatorship” in the words of some historians—led by two men, Chief of the General Staff Paul von Hindenburg and his deputy, First Quartermaster-General Erich Ludendorff (see biography, p. 137).

Von Hindenburg was technically the country’s highest-ranking general, and he was greatly admired among his countrymen as a model of Germanic honor and toughness. But it was his deputy, the forbidding and ruthless Ludendorff, who in many ways ran the war for Germany from 1916 to 1918. It was also Ludendorff who devised a spring 1918 offensive designed to crush the Allies and win the war before the United States could come to the rescue.

Ludendorff’s plan revolved around using a combination of brute force and superior troop strength in a series of ramming offensives. In early 1918 he stealthily transported huge numbers of additional troops to the Western Front—750,000 men by some counts. He also brought most of Germany’s artillery up to the so-called Hindenburg Line. This extensive network of German trenches and other defenses cutting through northeastern France had cemented Germany’s grip on the Belgian and French territories it had conquered during the war’s first two years. On March 21, 1918, the Ludendorff Offensive (also sometimes known as the Second Battle of the Marne) began. The German army leaped forward from the Hindenburg Line and carried out a heavy assault on British lines located along the Somme River, where some of the entire war’s bloodiest fighting had taken place back in 1916. German forces prevailed not only here, but in other places up and down the lines over the next few weeks (see “Ludendorff Praises Germany’s 1918 Spring Offensive,” p. 196).

Some German troops, backed by punishing rains of shelling, pushed more than forty miles to the west. Many of these units were composed of veteran infantry *sturmtruppen* (“storm troopers”) armed with automatic rifles, light machine guns, and flamethrowers. As the fighting continued, though, German infantry began to advance too far ahead of their artillery units and supply trucks, which were slowed by northern France’s pulverized terrain. After four years of war the region’s roads had been ruined by shelling and its fields had become honeycombed with vast networks of trenches. British units that had absorbed the brunt of this first wave of attacks slowly dug in their heels, and the German advance ground to a halt (see “Haig Issues His ‘Backs to the Wall’ Order,” p. 200).

In late May Ludendorff turned his attention further south, where French troops manned the Allied lines. German divisions pushed through the strategically important Chemin des Dames ridge and advanced as far south as

Château-Thierry, a town about fifty miles from Paris. This swift advance brought German troops to the same land that they had occupied four years earlier, during their first major offensive of the war. At this point the Germans began pounding the French capital with long-range artillery. But just as it had been stymied to the north, the German charge toward Paris stalled out. It was turned aside by the arrival not only of thirty divisions of well-armed French reserves, but also the first major deployments of U.S. troops. American soldiers helped push back the German assault at Château-Thierry. U.S. Marines also fought with great distinction at Belleau Wood, a strategically important forest along the Marne River, where the invading Germans had concentrated a good deal of their forces.



German generals Paul von Hindenburg (left) and Erich Ludendorff (right) devised a spring 1918 offensive to crush the Allies before American troops arrived.

The Battle of Belleau Wood, in fact, became one of the most legendary events in the annals of the U.S. Marine Corps. In early June, when Marines were first taking up positions against enemy forces entrenched in Belleau Wood, retreating French soldiers urged the Americans to retreat as well. Marine captain Lloyd Williams famously responded, “Retreat? Hell, we just got here.”<sup>2</sup> Over the next few weeks American and German forces engaged in desperate and near-constant combat for possession of Belleau Wood. At times the combatants were reduced to using bayonets or their fists against one another. Possession of the forest switched back and forth several times, but on June 26 the American forces pushed the Germans out for good. General John Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force, later called the Battle of Belleau Wood the most momentous battle fought by American troops since the Civil War.

The cost of the victory at Belleau Wood was very high, however. The Americans suffered nearly 10,000 casualties, including more than 1,800 deaths. The

French fully recognized the scale of this sacrifice. They later changed, *Bois de Belleau*, the French name for Belleau Wood, to the *Bois de la Brigade de Marine* (“Wood of the Marine Brigade”) to honor the American Marines who gave their lives there in defense of the French capital.

### **The Allies Launch a Counterattack**

By June it was clear that the German wave of offensives up and down the Western Front had failed to produce a decisive breakthrough. The Allies had bent—but not broken—in the face of Ludendorff’s massive attacks. Moreover, although the offensive had taken a horrible toll on both armies, the Allies were better able to absorb these losses than their enemy. The Germans, explained historian John Keegan, had “lost another hundred thousand men and more, and, while French, British, and American losses equaled theirs, the Allies retained the ability to replace casualties while they did not. The French, after a year of effective inactivity, were able to draw on a new annual class of conscripts.... The Americans were now receiving 250,000 men a month and had twenty-five organized divisions in or behind the battle zone. Fifty-five more [divisions] were under organization in the United States.”<sup>3</sup>

Even worse for the Germans, U-boats had come to pose only a remote risk to American troopships by this time. By 1918, in fact, the Allies had mostly neutralized the German subs that had caused so much fear and loss of life earlier in the war. Scientists had developed hydrophones that could detect underwater noises emanating from U-boats and explosive depth charges capable of ripping open their metal shells and sending them to the ocean floor. These depth charges were carried by British and American destroyers that began escorting cargo ships in large convoy formations. As a result of these advances, U-boat sinkings steadily declined, the Americans kept coming, and the Allies kept getting the supplies they needed.

On June 9 and then again on July 15, Ludendorff renewed his offensive. Neither effort yielded the necessary breakthrough triumph, though. The latter offensive, in fact, was smashed by a devastating French-led counterattack on July 18. Allied commanders subsequently agreed on a plan for a much broader counteroffensive against the German invaders, who by this time were exhausted and depressed by their inability to reach Paris. From March to July the Germans had lost almost one million of their comrades, with little to show for it. The Allies’ political and military leadership sensed that the enemy was tottering, and they were determined to strike hard.



An American machine gun crew taking aim during an advance against German trenches in 1918.

The Allies launched their counterattack, which came to be known as the Hundred Days' Offensive, on August 8. French forces under Marshal Ferdinand Foch (see biography, p. 125), troops of the British Empire led by General Douglas Haig, and American soldiers moving under the independent command of General Pershing all sprang forward at selected targets. All along the line, fresh soldiers pushed forward, supported by newly built tanks and squadrons of bomb-dropping aircraft. And at enemy position after enemy position, they succeeded in prying the Germans loose and forcing them to fall back.

As the Allied armies pressed steadily eastward, their actions showed that they had learned some lessons from the German offensive. Rather than race far ahead of their supply lines and supporting artillery, Allied forces—and especially the French—proceeded at a strong but measured pace that kept relentless pres-



sure on the retreating storm troopers. At times the Germans put up fierce resistance, and many units poisoned drinking wells and torched homes, businesses, and fields as they retreated through the Belgian countryside. Other than these cruel acts of vandalism, however, the bulk of the German infantry forces put up little resistance. “There is a mysterious process in the defeat of any army—the point at which the men give up hope,” wrote historian Norman Stone. “The German army’s morale began to break on 18 July.... The Kaiser, at the headquarters town of Spa, in Belgium, politely asked Ludendorff what had gone wrong, and Ludendorff said that the men were just not fighting any more—thousands were surrendering.”<sup>4</sup>

### Crossing the Hindenburg Line

By early September Ludendorff’s armies had been driven all the way back to the Hindenburg Line, where they had launched their spring offensive. Foch then orchestrated a wave of attacks against German positions all up and down the line. He and the other Allied commanders knew that if they could break through the Hindenburg Line, they could strike deep in the heart of enemy territory and even take the German capital of Berlin. Such a blow would not only devastate Germany’s military, it would also shatter the morale of its citizenry. If such things came to pass, victory would belong to the Allies.

The Allies depended on troops from all corners of the globe in this grim march against the Hindenburg Line. French and Belgian soldiers seeking to reclaim their homelands were joined by British troops from Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and Britain itself. Pershing and the soldiers of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) played an important role as well. They joined with French units to attack German defenses in the Argonne Forest, a region of mountainous woodlands in northern France, just south of Belgium. The main goal of this joint American-French campaign was to capture the city of Sedan, a railroad hub that the Germans were using to supply their armies throughout France and Belgium.

The so-called Meuse-Argonne Offensive (also named for the nearby Meuse River) was a bloody and desperate campaign that reflected Sedan’s high strategic importance. The Germans held one important advantage in that the Argonne Forest had been their home for the last four years. During that time, wrote a *New York Times* journalist accompanying the American forces, German forces had built fearsome defenses that included “stone walls, reinforced with bars of



A U.S. medical officer treats an Allied soldier stricken from a chemical gas attack.

steel,” “machine-gun nests in all possible places of protection,” and a truly awe-inspiring trench highway system: “there are big trenches, little trenches, communicating trenches, simple ditches, and trenches fitted with palatial dugouts and electric lights.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite the formidable German defensive lines in the Argonne Forest, however, the American and French troops outnumbered the enemy. By the time the Meuse-Argonne campaign concluded in early November, in fact, about 1.2 million U.S. soldiers took part. These doughboys were armed not only with rifles and grenades, but with a growing conviction that victory was near. This confidence helped sustain the U.S. troops through weeks of desperate combat and heavy casu-

alties—some of which stemmed from wasteful frontal assaults on strong German positions. All told, the Americans suffered about 120,000 casualties in the campaign, including more than 26,000 deaths. The offensive also killed or wounded about 70,000 French and resulted in 120,000 German casualties.

By the end of October French and American troops, including several segregated African-American regiments that fought with great distinction and bravery, had pushed the enemy out of the Argonne Forest and into a stumbling retreat to the east. Similar progress was being made all across the European map, which showed the front shifting steadily eastward toward the German border. The Allies had breached the Hindenburg Line, and it was now only a matter of time until they claimed victory.

### **Collapse of the Central Powers**

As the Allies poured over the Hindenburg Line, reclaiming most of France and portions of northern Belgium, Germany's partners in the war laid down their arms one by one. "They had all been following events in the west," wrote Stone, "and with the failure of Ludendorff's great offensive, were looking to save what they could from the overall wreckage."<sup>6</sup>

Bulgaria was the first to give up. In September 1918 a joint Allied force of French, British, and Serbian troops poured out of Salonika, in northern Greece, against Bulgarian troops in occupied Serbia. This punishing campaign, dubbed the Vardar Offensive, pushed the Bulgarians out of large sections of Serbia that they had seized earlier in the war. The Allies then moved into Bulgaria itself, which by this time was being wracked by antiwar riots in some of its largest cities. With both its civilian population and its army in complete disarray, it was clear that Bulgaria could not stand. The Bulgarian government surrendered to the Allies on September 29, signing an armistice agreement that took effect the following day.

Turkey was the next to fall. Ever since mid-1917, its military prospects in the Middle East had undergone a slow decline due to rising rates of desertion, epidemics that swept through the ranks of its armies, and its relatively small male population (which made it hard to replenish the losses suffered by its military). In September 1918 Turkish dreams that the Great War might revitalize the Ottoman Empire were shattered once and for all. That month, British ground and air forces commanded by General Sir Edmund Allenby and supported by Arab guerrillas pushed deep into Turkish territory. Allenby's force



seized Damascus, Aleppo, and other cities in Ottoman-controlled Palestine (now parts of present-day Israel, Jordan, and Syria), capturing an estimated 75,000 prisoners of war (POWs) in the process. With its military in a total state of collapse, Turkey formally surrendered on October 30, 1918.

Four days later, Austria-Hungary followed suit. At the war's outset, the Hapsburg Empire had been Germany's most enthusiastic and reliable partner. By 1918, though, the people of Austria and Hungary had turned against the war. Economic misery and the growing threat of outright famine sparked riots in some of the nation's cities. Its army was going hungry as well, and desertions became a severe problem in many divisions.

In June Austria-Hungary launched a final desperate offensive against Italy, but it was turned aside. This defeat, coupled with news of Bulgaria's surrender and widespread stories of heartless profiteering and starving families in the cities and countryside, transformed the empire into a helpless giant. Italy launched its own offensive and drove northward. The Italians encountered little resistance, and they reclaimed large tracts of land that had been occupied earlier in the war by Austrian forces. By the time Austria-Hungary formally signed an armistice on November 3 (to take effect the following day), its government was falling apart. Like the Ottoman Empire, the Hapsburg Empire was dissolving before the eyes of the world.

The Great War had been a disaster for all of these nations, and defeat was a bitter pill to swallow. Nonetheless, the mourning in Bulgaria, Turkey, and Austria-Hungary was leavened with a sense of weary relief. As World War I had progressed, Bulgarians, Turks, Austrians, and Hungarians had come to realize that the only real authority among the Central Powers lay with Germany, which had adopted an often-bullying attitude toward them. The subsequent downturn in military and public morale in each of these countries has been cited by many



A mother and her starving child in Austria at the end of World War I.

historians as a significant factor in their poor showing in the war. As historian H. P. Willmott wrote, the other Central Powers shared “a growing fear of, and resentment toward, Germany on accounts of its economic, industrial, and financial strength, and its crass insensitivity to its partners. By 1918, many people in Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria, in particular, wished for an end to the war as the means of escaping German domination.”<sup>7</sup>

### **A Cornered Germany Agrees to an Armistice**

As the Allied armies closed in on Germany and the beaten remnants of its army, panic and resignation spread across Berlin. On September 30 Kaiser Wilhelm II appointed Prince Maximilian von Baden as the government’s new chancellor, replacing George Hertling. Maximilian had an international reputation as a reasonable and moderate man, and he had vocally opposed Germany’s resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. The appointment reflected the desperate hope of the Kaiser and his generals that “Prince Max” might be able to soften the eventual terms of surrender in negotiations with the Allied powers. They were particularly hopeful that Maximilian would be able to curry favor with U.S. president Woodrow Wilson, whose “Fourteen Points” speech earlier in the



German sailors march in the streets of Keil, the first in a series of mutinies that rocked the German navy in November 1918.

year had emphasized the importance of ending the war in a way that would bring peace and prosperity to all of Europe (see “Wilson’s Fourteen Points,” p. 192).

Meanwhile, the German military went through its own convulsions. Ludendorff resigned under pressure in late October and fled to neutral Sweden. Around this same time, mutinies spread through the ranks of Germany’s navy when the High Seas Fleet was ordered to make a last-ditch charge against the ironclad Allied naval blockade. “The 80,000 sailors and stokers [of the German navy] were not enthusiastic about the bottom of the ocean,” commented Stone. “They mutinied at Kiel, then at Lübeck and Wilhelmshaven, and insurrection spread to Cologne, then Munich.”<sup>8</sup> As this wave of rebellion rose higher, Maximilian and many other German officials began to notice similarities to the Bolshevik revolution that had swept through Russia one year earlier.

On November 9 Wilhelm II was forced to abdicate the throne of the German Empire. “Your abdication has become necessary to save Germany from civil war,” Maximilian told him. “The great majority of the people believe you to be responsible for the present situation.”<sup>9</sup> As the Kaiser sought exile in neutral Holland, Germany frantically declared its intention to convert from a monarchy to a civilian-led republic.

Far from the chaos in Berlin, meanwhile, grim negotiations to end the Great War were finally drawing to a close. These negotiations, which had been requested by General von Hindenburg, commenced on November 7 in the woodlands of Compiègne, north of Paris. The armistice talks were hosted by Foch, supreme commander of the Allied armies, and held in a railroad carriage in a remote corner of the forest.

The German peace delegation was stunned by the severe cease-fire terms demanded by the Allies. Foch and his deputies insisted that the Allies would



Marshal Foch (second from right) and other Allied delegates of the armistice negotiations, standing in front of a railroad car in the forest of Compiègne.

only agree to an armistice, which had to be in place before a formal peace treaty could be hammered out, if the Germans completely disarmed and agreed to other strict demands (see “British Forces Occupy the German Rhineland,” p. 202). The German representatives protested vehemently, but they knew that they had no choice but to accept the Allies’ terms. “All the hostility and the fullness of hate for our country that seems now to be cherished in France came to expression in ... the terrible nature of the conditions,” recalled one German delegate.

During our two days’ proceedings there was really no negotiation, and we could only try to obtain concessions on various conditions. For when the enemy demanded delivery of 160 U-boats we could only point out the technical impossibility, as we had not 160 to give. This demand had to be changed into the formula, “all U-boats.” ... Immediately before the close of the second and last plenary [armistice conference] we placed before the enemy in the German language our protest against the treaty, but in the end we had to sign.<sup>10</sup>

In accordance with the terms of the armistice agreement, the guns of World War I finally fell silent at 11:00 a.m. on November 11, 1918. As news of the armistice spread to the exhausted armies, the war-shattered cities, towns, and farms of Europe, and anxious families on the American home front, reactions took many forms. Many soldiers and civilians engaged in jubilant celebrations. But others spent the night in tears, thinking of the friends, family members, and innocence they had lost in the muddy trenches, shell-blasted woods, and ruined cities of the Great War.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in Arthur, Max. *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*. Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2002, p. 313.
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted in Harries, Meirion, and Susie Harries. *The Last Days of Innocence: America at War, 1917-1918*. New York: Random House, 1997, p. 251.
- <sup>3</sup> Keegan, John. *The First World War*. New York: Random House, 2003, p. 408.
- <sup>4</sup> Stone, Norman. *World War One: A Short History*. New York: Basic Books, 2009, p. 172.
- <sup>5</sup> James, Edwin L. “The Battle for Argonne Forest: Sept. 27, 1918.” *New York Times Current History: The European War*. Vol. 17, Oct.-Dec. 1918. New York: New York Times Co., 1919, p. 226.
- <sup>6</sup> Stone, p. 176.
- <sup>7</sup> Willmott, H. P. *World War I*. New York: Dorling Kindersley, p. 278.
- <sup>8</sup> Stone, p. 180.
- <sup>9</sup> Quoted in Rose, Gideon. *How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle: A History of American Intervention from World War I to Afghanistan*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010, p. 13.
- <sup>10</sup> “German Armistice Delegate’s Account of Negotiations, 5-11 November 1918.” *Firstworldwar.com*, August 22, 2009. Retrieved from [http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/armistice\\_germandelegate.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/armistice_germandelegate.htm).