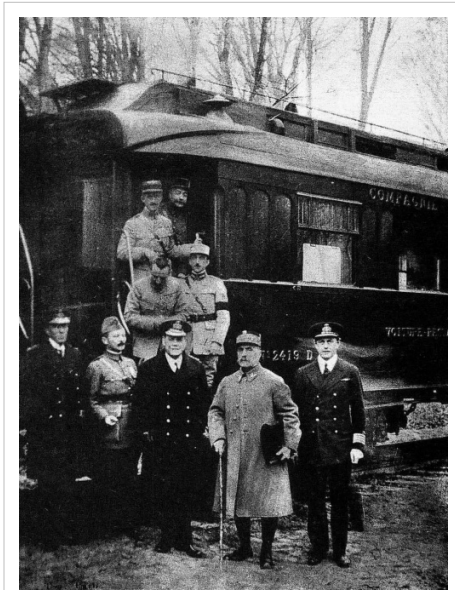


# Armistice with Germany

The **armistice** between the Allies and Germany was an agreement that ended the fighting in the First World War. It was signed in a railway carriage in Compiègne Forest on 11 November 1918 and marked a victory for the Allies and a complete defeat for Germany, although not technically a surrender. The Germans were responding to the policies proposed by American President Woodrow Wilson in his Fourteen Points. The actual terms, largely written by French Marshal Ferdinand Foch, included the cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of German troops to behind their own borders, the preservation of infrastructure, the exchange of prisoners, a promise of reparations, the disposition of German warships and submarines, and conditions for prolonging or terminating the armistice.

The exuberance with which people greeted the armistice quickly succumbed to feelings of exhaustion, relief, sorrow, and a sense of absurdity.<sup>[1]</sup>



This photograph was taken after reaching an agreement for the armistice that ended World War I. This is Ferdinand Foch's own railway carriage and the location is in the forest of Compiègne. Foch is second from the right.

## October 1918 telegrams



First page of the *New York Times* on November 11

On 29 September 1918 the German Supreme Command informed Kaiser Wilhelm II and the Imperial Chancellor Count Georg von Hertling at army headquarters in Spa, Belgium, that the military situation facing Germany was hopeless. Generalquartiermeister Erich Ludendorff, probably fearing a breakthrough, claimed that he could not guarantee that the front would hold for another 24 hours and demanded a request be given to the Entente for an immediate ceasefire. In addition, he recommended the acceptance of the main demands of US President Woodrow Wilson (the Fourteen Points) and put the Imperial Government on a democratic footing, hoping for more favourable peace terms. This enabled him to save the face of the Imperial Army and put the responsibility for the capitulation and its consequences squarely into the hands of the democratic parties and the parliament. As he said to officers of his staff on 1 October: "They now must lie on the bed that they've made us." Thus was born the "Stab-in-the-back" notion that the army had not failed, only the civilians.

On 3 October liberal Prince Maximilian of Baden was appointed Chancellor of Germany instead of Georg von Hertling in order to negotiate an armistice.<sup>[2]</sup>

**On 5 October 1918 Germany asked Wilson to negotiate terms.** In the subsequent two exchanges, Wilson's allusions "failed to convey the idea that the Kaiser's abdication was an essential condition for peace. The leading statesmen of the Reich were not yet ready to contemplate such a monstrous possibility."<sup>[3]</sup> As a precondition for negotiations Wilson demanded the retreat of Germany from all occupied territories, the cessation of submarine activities and the Kaiser's abdication, writing on 23 October: "If the Government of the United States must deal with the military masters and the monarchical autocrats of Germany now, or if it is likely to have to deal with them later in regard to the international obligations of the German Empire, it must demand not peace negotiations but surrender."<sup>[4]</sup> }

Ludendorff, in a sudden change of mind, declared the conditions of the Allies unacceptable. He now demanded to resume the war which he himself had declared lost only one month earlier. However the German soldiers were pressing to get home. It was scarcely possible to arouse their readiness for battle anew, and desertions were on the increase. The Imperial Government stayed on course and replaced Ludendorff with General Wilhelm Groener. On 5 November the Allies agreed to take up negotiations for a truce, now demanding reparation payments.

A much bigger obstacle, which contributed to the five-week delay in the signing of the armistice and to the resulting social deterioration in Europe, was the fact that the Entente Powers had no desire to accept the Fourteen Points and Wilson's subsequent promises. As Czernin points out:<sup>[5]</sup>

The Allied statesmen were faced with a problem: so far they had considered the 'fourteen commandments' as a piece of clever and effective American propaganda, designed primarily to undermine the fighting spirit of the Central Powers, and to bolster the morale of the lesser Allies. Now, suddenly, the whole peace structure was supposed to be built up on that set of 'vague principles,' most of which seemed to them thoroughly unrealistic, and some of which, if they were to be seriously applied, were simply unacceptable.

## German Revolution

The sailors' revolt which took place during the night of 29 to 30 October 1918 in the naval port of Wilhelmshaven spread across the whole country within days and led to the proclamation of a republic on 9 November 1918 and to the announcement of the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II.<sup>[6]</sup> After a renewed demand by the Supreme Command, the new German government headed by Friedrich Ebert accepted the harsh terms of the Entente for a truce.

Ebert was a Social Democrat, whilst Erzberger, who negotiated the armistice, was from the Catholic Centre Party. These parties had enjoyed an uneasy relationship with the Imperial government since Bismarck's era in the 1870s and 1880s. They were well-represented in the Imperial Reichstag, which had little power over the government, and had been calling for a negotiated peace since 1917. Their prominence in the peace negotiations would cause the new Weimar Republic to lack legitimacy in right-wing and militarist eyes.

## Negotiation process

The Armistice was agreed at 5 a.m. on 11 November, to come into effect at 11 a.m. Paris time, for which reason the occasion is sometimes referred to as "the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month". It was the result of a hurried and desperate process. German chief of staff Paul von Hindenburg had requested arrangements for a meeting from Ferdinand Foch by telegram on 7 November. He was under pressure of imminent revolution in Berlin, Munich, and elsewhere across Germany. The German delegation headed by Matthias Erzberger crossed the front line in five cars and was escorted for ten hours across the devastated war zone of Northern France. They were then entrained and taken to the secret destination, aboard Foch's private train parked in a railway siding in the forest of Compiègne.<sup>[7]</sup>

Foch appeared only twice in the three days of negotiations: on the first day, to ask the German delegation what they wanted, and on the last day, to see to the signatures. In between, the German delegation discussed the details of the Allied terms with French and Allied officers. The Armistice amounted to complete German demilitarization, with few promises made by the Allies in return. The naval blockade of Germany would continue until complete peace

terms could be agreed upon.<sup>[8]</sup>

There was no question of negotiation. The Germans were able to correct a few impossible demands (for example, the decommissioning of more submarines than their fleet possessed) and registered their formal protest at the harshness of Allied terms. But they were in no position to refuse to sign. On Sunday 10 November, they were shown newspapers from Paris to inform them that the Kaiser had abdicated. Erzberger was not able to get instructions from Berlin because of the fall of the government. The instructions to sign came from Hindenburg, who felt that an armistice was absolutely necessary.<sup>[9]</sup> Signatures were made between 5:12 a.m. and 5:20 a.m., Paris time.

## Prolongation

The Armistice was prolonged three times before peace was finally ratified.

- First Armistice (11 November 1918 - 13 December 1918)
- First prolongation of the armistice (13 December 1918 - 16 January 1919)
- Second prolongation of the armistice (16 January 1919 - 16 February 1919)
- Third prolongation of the armistice (16 February 1919 - 10 January 1920)<sup>[10]</sup>

Peace was ratified at 4:15 p.m. on 10 January 1920.<sup>[11]</sup>

## The Armistice Carriage

The armistice was signed in a carriage of Foch's private train, CIWL #2419 ("Le Wagon de l'Armistice"). It was later put back into regular service with the Compagnie des Wagons-Lits, but after a short period it was withdrawn to be attached to the French presidential train.

From April 1921 to April 1927, it was on exhibition in the Cour des Invalides in Paris.

In November 1927, it was ceremonially returned to the forest in the exact spot where the Armistice was signed. Marshal Foch, General Weygand and many others watched it being placed in a specially constructed building: the Clairiere de l'Armistice.

There it remained, a monument to the defeat of the Kaiser's Germany, until 22 June 1940, when swastika-bedecked German staff cars bearing Hitler, Goering, Keitel, von Ribbentrop and others swept into the Clairiere and, in that same carriage, demanded and received the surrender armistice from France.

During the Occupation, the Clairiere de l'Armistice was destroyed and the carriage taken to Berlin, where it was exhibited in the Lustgarten.

After the Allied advance into Germany in early 1945, the carriage was removed by the Germans for safe keeping to the town of Ohrdruf, but as an American armoured column entered the town, the detachment of the SS guarding it set it ablaze, and it was totally destroyed.



Painting depicting the signature of the armistice in the railway carriage. Behind the table, from right to left, General Weygand, Marshal Foch (standing) and British Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss and fourth from the left, British Naval Captain, JPR Marriott Jack Marriott. In the foreground, Matthias Erzberger, general major Detlof von Winterfeldt (with helmet), Alfred von Oberndorff and Ernst Vanselow.

After the war, the Compiègne site was restored, but not until Armistice Day 1950 was a replacement carriage, correct in every detail, re-dedicated: an identical Compagnie des Wagon-Lits carriage, no. 2439, built in 1913 in the same batch as the original, was renumbered no. 2419D.

## Key personnel

For the Allies, the personnel involved were entirely military:

- Marshal of France Ferdinand Foch, the Allied supreme commander
- General Weygand, Foch's chief of staff (later French commander-in-chief in 1940)
- First Sea Lord Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss, the British representative
- Rear Admiral George Hope, British Royal Navy Rear Admiral
- Captain John Marriott, British Royal Navy Captain

For Germany:

- Matthias Erzberger, a civilian politician.
- Count Alfred von Oberndorff, from the Foreign Ministry
- Major General Detlof von Winterfeldt, army
- Captain Ernst Vanselow, navy

General Weygand and General von Gruennel [who?] are not mentioned in the (French) document.

## Terms

The terms contained the following major points:<sup>[12]</sup>

- Termination of military hostilities within six hours after signature.
- Immediate removal of all German troops from France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Alsace-Lorraine.
- Subsequent removal of all German troops from territory on the west side of the Rhine plus 30 km radius bridgeheads of the right side of the Rhine at the cities of Mainz, Koblenz, and Cologne with ensuing occupation by Allied and US troops.
- Removal of all German troops at the eastern front to German territory as it was on 1 August 1914.
- Renunciation of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Russia and of the Treaty of Bucharest with Romania.
- Internment of the German fleet.
- Surrender of materiel: 5,000 cannons, 25,000 machine guns, 3,000 minenwerfers, 1,700 airplanes, 5,000 locomotive engines, and 150,000 railcars.

## Aftermath

The British public was notified of the armistice by a subjoined official communiqué issued from the Press Bureau at 10:20 a.m., when David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, announced: "The armistice was signed at five o'clock this morning, and hostilities are to cease on all fronts at 11 a.m. to-day."<sup>[13]</sup> An official comminiqué was published by America at 2:30 p.m.: "In accordance with the terms of the Armistice, hostilities on the fronts of the American armies were suspended at eleven o'clock this morning."<sup>[14]</sup>

News of the armistice being signed was officially announced towards 9 a.m. in Paris. One hour later, Foch, accompanied by a British admiral, presented himself at the Ministry of War, where he was immediately received by Georges Clemenceau, the Prime Minister of France. At 10:50 a.m., Foch issued this general order: "Hostilities will cease on the whole front as from November 11 at 11 o'clock French time The Allied troops will not, until further order, go beyond the line reached on that date and at that hour."<sup>[15]</sup> Five minutes later, Clemenceau, Foch and the British admiral went to the Élysée Palace. At the first shot fired from the Eiffel Tower, the Ministry of War and the Élysée Palace displayed flags, while bells around Paris rang. Five hundred students gathered in front of the Ministry

and called upon Clemenceau, who appeared on the balcony. Clemenceau exclaimed "Vive la France!"—the crowd echoed him. At 11:00 a.m., the first peace-gunshot was fired from Fort Mont-Valérien, which told the population of Paris that the armistice was concluded, but the population were already aware of it from official circles and newspapers.<sup>[16]</sup>

The peace between the Allies and Germany would subsequently be settled in 1919, by the Paris Peace Conference, and the Treaty of Versailles that same year.

## Last casualties

The news was quickly given to the armies during the morning of 11 November, but even after hearing that the armistice was due to start at 11:00 a.m., intense warfare continued right until the last minute. Many artillery units continued to fire on German targets to avoid having to haul away their spare ammunition. The Allies also wished to ensure that, should fighting restart, they would be in the most favourable position. Consequently there were 10,944 casualties of which 2,738 men died on the last day of the war.<sup>[17]</sup>



Gravestone of Henry N. Gunther in Baltimore

Augustin Trébuchon was the last Frenchman to die when he was shot on his way to tell fellow soldiers that hot soup would be served after the ceasefire. He was killed at 10:45 a.m. The last British soldier to die, George Edwin Ellison of the 5th Royal Irish Lancers, was killed earlier that morning at around 9:30 a.m. while scouting on the outskirts of Mons, Belgium. The final Canadian, and Commonwealth, soldier to die, Private George Lawrence Price, was killed just two minutes before the armistice to the north of Mons at 10:58 a.m., to be recognized as one of the last killed with a monument to his name. And finally, American Henry Gunther is generally recognized as the last soldier killed in action in World War I. He was killed 60 seconds before the armistice came into force while charging astonished German troops who were aware the Armistice was nearly upon them.<sup>[18] [19]</sup>

The last reported German casualty occurred after the 11 a.m. armistice. A Lieutenant Tomas, in the Meuse-Argonne sector, went to inform approaching American soldiers that he and his men would be vacating houses that they had been using as billets. However, he was shot by soldiers who had not been told about the ceasefire.

## Legacy

Celebration of the Armistice became the centerpiece of memories of the war, along with salutes to the unknown soldier. Nations built monuments to the dead and the heroic soldiers, but seldom to the generals and admirals.<sup>[20]</sup>

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- [6] The announcement by Prince Maximilian of Baden had great effect, but the abdication document was not formally signed until 28 November.
- [7] Harry Rudin, *Armistice, 1918* (1967) pp 320-49
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- The Armistice Demands, translated into English from German Government statement (<http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1918/armistice.html>) The World War I Document Archive, Brigham Young University Library, accessed 27 July 2006
- Watch six online National Film Board of Canada documentaries about the Armistice (<http://www.nfb.ca/curated-selection/world-war-I-armistice/>)

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