

THE ELEVENTH HOUR

If you think the First World War began senselessly, consider how it ended.

BY ADAM HOCHSCHILD



A hundred years after the Armistice, we have yet to reckon with its true legacy.

For millions of soldiers, the First World War meant unimaginable horror: artillery shells that could pulverize a human body into a thousand fragments; immense underground mine explosions that could do the same to hundreds of bodies; attacks by poison gas, tanks, flamethrowers. Shortly after 8 P.M. on November 7, 1918, however, French troops near the town of La Capelle saw something different. From the north, three large automobiles, with the black eagle of Imperial Germany on their sides, approached the front lines with their headlights on. Two German soldiers were perched on the running boards of the lead car, one waving a white flag, the other, with an unusually long silver bugle, blowing the

call for ceasefire—a single high tone repeated in rapid succession four times, then four times again, with the last note lingering.

By prior agreement, the three German cars slowly made their way across the scarred and cratered no man's land between the opposing armies. When they reached the French lines, they halted, the German bugler was replaced by a French one (his bugle is in a Paris museum today), and the German peace envoys continued their journey. At La Capelle, flashes lit up the night as the envoys were photographed by waiting press and newsreel cameramen, then transferred to French cars. Their route took them past houses, factories, barns, and churches reduced to charred rub-

ble, fruit trees cut down and wells poisoned by retreating German troops. "It appeared to me that the drive was intentionally prolonged in order to carry us across devastated provinces and to prepare us for the hardest conditions which the feelings of hatred and revenge might demand," one of the German passengers later wrote. The envoys next boarded a railway carriage that had once belonged to Napoleon III, who was forced to surrender most of Alsace and part of Lorraine to Germany in the Franco-Prussian War.

Finally, the train pulled into a clearing in the forest of Compiègne, near another train occupied by an Allied delegation headed by Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the Allied commander-in-chief, a diminutive Frenchman with an immense, shaggy mustache. The two groups met in Foch's train, in what was formerly the dining car of a luxury sleeper service. The German delegation was headed by a civilian cabinet minister, but the high command was desperate to avoid blame for a humiliating end to the war, and the military representatives were relatively junior: a major general and a Navy captain.

The German Army had asked for peace talks because it knew that it was fast losing the war. Germany had already seen the surrender of its two major allies, Ottoman Turkey and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was rapidly fragmenting as one ethnic group after another declared its independence. The most powerful German commander, General Erich Ludendorff, had had a nervous breakdown, raging at his staff, drinking heavily, and suffering panic attacks; a hastily summoned psychologist advised flowers in his office and the singing of folk songs when he woke in the morning. He had resigned in late October, and fled the country wearing a false beard and blue spectacles. In rear areas, tens of thousands of German troops were deserting. On the Western Front, the Allies had been gaining ground since midsummer. And mutinous crews in the German Navy, ordered to sea for a suicidal last-ditch foray against the British, seized control of their ships, ran up the red flag, arrested their officers, and made common cause with rebellious workers and soldiers ashore.

The Allied powers yielded to the

French—on whose soil so much of the bloodiest fighting had taken place—the role of dictating peace terms to the Germans. The demands that Marshal Foch laid down were even harsher than the pessimistic German delegates had feared. German troops were to swiftly evacuate territory they occupied in France and Belgium. Alsace and Lorraine were to be returned to France, and the left bank of the Rhine—Germany’s industrial heartland—would be occupied by Allied troops at German expense. Foch further demanded that the Germans turn over to the Allies not merely large numbers of artillery pieces, machine guns, aircraft, submarines, and surface warships but also five thousand trucks, five thousand railway locomotives, and a hundred and fifty thousand freight cars. Reparations would be determined and imposed later. The German representatives pleaded for an immediate ceasefire while the two sides discussed these terms. Foch refused. Instead, he ordered all Allied commanders to step up attacks: “It is urgent to hasten and intensify our efforts.”

In the five weeks since the Germans first requested peace negotiations, half a million casualties had been added to the war’s toll. As the delegates talked, Germany continued to collapse from within: inspired by the Russian Revolution, workers and soldiers were forming soviets, or councils. Bavaria proclaimed itself a socialist republic; a soviet took over in Cologne. With Berlin in ferment, Kaiser Wilhelm II had gone to Western Front military headquarters in the Belgian resort town of Spa (which is where the word “spa” comes from). But even there he found a soldiers’ soviet, and troops who refused to salute their officers. As news came that the red flag had been raised over his own palace, in Berlin, he fled across the border to neutral Holland.

It was no longer clear what sort of government the German delegates in the railway carriage were representing, but the Allies’ chief concern was that the German Army accept Foch’s terms for peace. Ferocious combat continued as a courier was sent back through the

front lines to carry the text of Allied demands to Spa, again with a white flag and bugle calls. (Years later, the French bugler who accompanied him described the thrill to a veterans’ magazine: “For the first time in my life, I am riding in a luxury car.”) At last, the high command in Spa radioed its approval, and, early on the morning of November 11, 1918, the delegates signed the agreement known as the Armistice. There were no handshakes. The Armistice took effect at 11 A.M. At that moment, the *Times* correspondent Edwin L. James wrote from the front, “four years’ killing and massacre stopped, as if God had swept His omnipotent finger across the scene of world carnage and cried, ‘Enough!’”

A flurry of new books marks the hundredth anniversary of that moment. Paul Kendall’s “Voices from the Past: Armistice 1918” is a useful and capacious collection of material about the war’s last weeks. It consists, in large part, of excerpts, generally a paragraph or more, from memoirs and other documents, including a few quoted above. The voices we hear are German, British, French, and American, and they encompass the famous, the unknown, and those who became famous later. Here, for instance, is the young Captain Harry Truman writing to his fiancée, Bess Wallace, after he saw a downed and wounded German aviator robbed of his boots by an American officer: “I heard a Frenchman remark that Germany was fighting for territory, England for the sea, France for patriotism, and Americans for souvenirs.”

Guy Cuthbertson’s “Peace at Last: A Portrait of Armistice Day, 11 November 1918,” is exactly what its title says, and focusses almost entirely on Britain. After a while,

though, it becomes wearisome to learn who was standing where when they heard the great news and what was playing in London theatres and cinemas that evening, or to hear how the day was later represented in fiction, film, poetry, paintings—or in accounts that may be suspect. “Total strangers copulated in doorways and on the pave-

ments,” the historian A. J. P. Taylor declared. “They were asserting the triumph of life over death.” But, Cuthbertson points out, Taylor was in no position to know: at the time, he was a boy at home in bed with the flu. Did such things happen? “It is difficult to say,” Cuthbertson allows. Did Big Ben really ring out at last at 11 A.M., after more than four years of silence, or did its keepers only manage to get the chimes working several hours later? Recollections differ. The book is a collage of such tidbits. There are, however, hints that the ecstatic celebrations were eventually followed by something far more sombre. A British baby who was born at exactly 11 A.M. on the great day was christened Pax. At the age of twenty-one, he would be killed in the next war.

Most of the other new books are similarly unsatisfying, because they don’t address the consequences of the Armistice. “1918: Winning the War, Losing the War” is a compendium of traditional military-history articles edited by Matthias Strohn, who worked at the British Army’s military academy and, later, at its research center. “The Last Battle: Endgame on the Western Front, 1918,” by Peter Hart, covers the same ground as narrative, following the current orthodoxy of too many British military historians in unreservedly praising the “many strengths and ultimate triumph” of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Britain’s Western Front commander. Haig, it should be remembered, was the man who had sent tens of thousands of men to their death in the fruitless battles of the Somme and Passchendaele; and who, lacking good intelligence about German battle casualties, assumed that they must be roughly equal to his own, and therefore berated British generals whose divisions did not suffer high numbers of killed and wounded. Several additional books celebrate the role of American troops in 1918, notably Alan Axelrod’s “How America Won World War I: The U.S. Military Victory in the Great War—The Causes, the Course, and the Consequences.”

But can we really say that the war was won? If ever there was a conflict that both sides lost, this was it. For one thing, it didn’t have to happen. There were rivalries among Europe’s major



powers, but in June, 1914, they were getting along amicably. None openly claimed part of another's territory. Germany was Britain's largest trading partner. The royal families of Britain, Germany, and Russia were closely related, and King George V and his cousins Kaiser Wilhelm II and Tsar Nicholas II had all recently been together for the wedding of Wilhelm's daughter in Berlin. And yet by early August of that year, after the epic chain of blunders, accusations, and ultimatums that followed the assassination of the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand, at Sarajevo, the entire continent was in flames.

The war took a staggering toll: more than nine million men killed in combat, and another twenty-one million wounded, many of them left without arms, legs, noses, genitals. Millions of civilians also died. And the long-range consequences were worse still: in Germany, the conflict left a simmering bitterness that Hitler brilliantly manipulated. It is impossible to imagine the Second World War happening without the toxic legacy of the First.

Traditionally, the Treaty of Versailles, signed in June of 1919, has been blamed for the war's disastrous aftereffects. Schoolbooks tell us that Germany was humiliated: forced to give up territory, pay huge reparations, and admit guilt for starting the war. Hitler did indeed thunder a great deal about Versailles. But, two years after the treaty was signed, the amount of reparations was significantly but quietly reduced. The territory that Germany lost contained only about ten per cent of its people, many of whom were not ethnic Germans. Despite its flaws, the treaty was far less harsh than many imposed on other nations that had been defeated in war. The problem was something else: when the war came to an end, at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, few Germans considered themselves defeated. The resentment that led to a new cataclysm two decades later was really forged by the Armistice.

To begin with, the Armistice was not an armistice; the Allies, in effect, demanded—and received—a surrender. Yet German civilians had no idea their vaunted military was start-



ing to crumble. Their ignorance was a fateful result of unrelenting propaganda. This was the first war in which both sides invested huge resources in whipping up patriotic fervor with posters, films, pamphlets, postcards, plays, children's books, and more. The German military controlled press censorship, keeping all word of mass desertions, for instance, out of the papers. As the tide turned against Germany, in the second half of 1918, the country's propaganda for home consumption fully parted ways with reality, remaining relentlessly triumphal to the last. The apparent German retreat? A mere temporary setback. Even a few weeks before the Armistice, the country's newspapers were still running stories about an imminent final victory.

The illusion was aided by the fact that almost all the combat had been, to the very end, on foreign soil. The only major fighting inside Germany, in the war's opening weeks, had ended in a spectacular rout of Tsar Nicholas II's inept invading troops. What's more, in the Peace of Brest-Litovsk, in early 1918, Russia had yielded to victorious Ger-

man and Austro-Hungarian troops more than a million square miles of fertile land, largely in what today is Ukraine, Poland, Belarus, and the Baltic states. Who ever heard of a country surrendering under such conditions?

And then, in the spring of 1918, a vast German offensive had been dazzlingly successful; troops broke the long deadlock of trench warfare and advanced far into France. Some hundred thousand Allied soldiers were captured. Church bells rang in Berlin, German schoolchildren received a national holiday. An exuberant Kaiser presented his top commander, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, with the Grand Cross of the Iron Cross with Golden Rays, a medal last awarded to a general who had defeated Napoleon. On May 27th, the Germans moved forward thirteen miles—the largest gain ever in a single day on the Western Front. Paris seemed within reach. True, the advance eventually stalled, but on August 1st, the ever-optimistic Kaiser had reassured his people that the "worst is behind us."

Finally, as soon as the Armistice took



effect, most German troops marched home in good order, regimental flags flying proudly. (What looting they did on the way was in occupied France and Belgium, not in Germany itself.) As they paraded through German cities, they were welcomed by crowds throwing flowers. Friedrich Ebert, the socialist chancellor who took office two days before the Armistice, greeted soldiers at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate as having returned "unconquered from the field of battle." As far as most Germans could see, this was true.

Small wonder that Germans were outraged to learn the Armistice terms, and to see British, French, and American occupation troops march into the Rhineland. If the Army was "unconquered," who was responsible for these humiliations? Who had betrayed the 1.8 million German soldiers killed in the war? Powerful right-wingers had prepared the ground for the legend of the *Dolchstoß*, or stab in the back, even as the war was still raging. "We shall win the war when the home front stops attacking us from behind," Colonel Max Bauer, an influential military strategist, declared in 1918. Others made spurious charges that Germany's Jews were shirking military service and secured a special census of Jews in the armed forces. The Pan-German League called for a "ruthless struggle against Jews." Aiding right-wing efforts was the fact that it was the new socialist chancellor, Ebert, who would now be blamed for the harsh terms of the Armistice. And so Hitler had an easy time claiming that the Army had been robbed of victory by the sinister mach-

inations of socialists, pacifists, and Jews. The hapless German delegates who had had no choice but to sign the Armistice in Foch's railway carriage were branded the "November Traitors." The delegation's chief, Matthias Erzberger, was assassinated, in 1921, by two members of a right-wing death squad.

Another provision of the Armistice Astoked German bitterness. Although the country's civilians had been spared heavy aerial bombardment, they weren't spared hunger. After the Royal Navy threw a tight blockade around the Central Powers, in 1914, German civilians waited in line all night in the hope of buying scarce meat, butter, or bread. Prices soared, food riots erupted, and, when bad weather damaged the potato crop, in late 1916, Germany and Austria-Hungary suffered through what became known as "the turnip winter." A foreign visitor happened to be in Berlin one day when a horse fell dead on the street, and was startled to see dozens of women rush at the corpse, cutting and tearing off pieces of bloody meat to take home. By 1918, daily consumption of calories in Germany was less than half of what it had been in peacetime. Starvation and malnutrition claimed an estimated four hundred and twenty-four thousand German lives. An Oxford scholar, Mary E. Cox, recently came upon dramatic evidence of the toll of the food shortages: records, from before, during, and after the war, of the height and weight of more than half a million German schoolchildren and adolescents. The average German boy or girl in 1918 was

more than an inch shorter than the average one in 1914.

Germans expected the Armistice to relieve this suffering, but its terms specified that the Allied blockade was to remain in place until Germany signed a final peace treaty, many months away. "I have seen infants in Berlin and Dresden hospitals with the shrunken limbs and swollen stomachs characteristic of famine sufferers," the American journalist Oswald Garrison Villard wrote from Germany in March, 1919, "and I have seen that the midday meal for all patients in one hospital is simply a carrot soup—nothing else—for all ages and all conditions. . . . The week I was in Dresden not one pound of meat was distributed." He found that "a bitter hatred" was rising in Germany, that "there is now talk of revenge which was not heard before."

The German delegates in the railway carriage had protested frantically that their country was starving, and, in one of the few small concessions they won, the Allies agreed to "contemplate the provisioning" of Germany, in lieu of lifting the blockade. Herbert Hoover, the American aid-relief czar, finally managed to make that happen. "The United States is not at war with German infants," he declared. Overcoming resistance from the British and the French, and deftly cutting bureaucratic corners, he steered some 1.3 million tons of food to Germany. But the first shipments did not start until mid-March, 1919, four months after the Armistice. And only then were Germans allowed to resume fishing in the North Sea. The blockade itself was

not lifted until Germany reluctantly signed the Treaty of Versailles, at the end of June.

If the new books scant the malign consequences of the Armistice, they also show little concern about the final spasm of madness that unfolded on the day it was signed. For the full story, one must turn to the late Joseph E. Persico's well-crafted and quietly angry "Eleventh Month, Eleventh Day, Eleventh Hour: Armistice Day, 1918—World War I and Its Violent Climax," from 2004. Because Foch rejected German requests for a ceasefire while the Armistice was being negotiated, Persico makes clear, sixty-seven hundred and fifty lives were lost and nearly fifteen thousand men were wounded. Worse yet, British, French, and American commanders made certain that the bloodshed continued at full pitch for six hours after the Armistice had been signed. The delegates in Foch's railway carriage put their signatures to the document just after 5 A.M. on November 11th, and the key terms were immediately radioed and telephoned to Army commands up and down the front on both sides. Nonetheless, Allied soldiers scheduled to attack that morning did so until the very last minute.

Since the armies tabulated their casualty statistics by the day and not by the hour, we know only the total toll for November 11th: twenty-seven hundred and thirty-eight men from both sides were killed, and eighty-two hundred and six were left wounded or missing. But since it was still dark at 5 A.M., and attacks almost always took place in daylight, the vast majority of these casualties clearly happened after the Armistice had been signed, when commanders knew that the firing was to stop for good at 11 A.M. The day's toll was greater than both sides would suffer in Normandy on D Day, 1944. And it was incurred to gain ground that Allied generals knew the Germans would be vacating days, or even hours, later.

In some cases, men wanted to fight, especially Americans, who hadn't been worn down by four years of combat. Private Henry Gunther, of Baltimore, became the last American to be killed in the war, at 10:59 A.M., when he charged a German machine-gun crew with his bayonet fixed. In broken English, the

Germans shouted at him to go back, the war was about to stop. When he didn't, they shot him. Lieutenant General Robert Bullard, the commander of the U.S. Second Army, was openly disappointed to see the fighting end. On November 11th, he wrote about how he went "near the front line, to see the last of it, to hear the crack of the last guns in the greatest war of all ages. . . . I stayed until 11 A.M., when all being over, I returned to my headquarters, thoughtful and feeling lost."

Some commanders were eager for glory and promotion, others for revenge: before the fighting stopped, British and Canadian officers were determined to capture the Belgian city of Mons and its surroundings, which British troops had been forced to abandon in 1914. In other cases, Allied officers and men feared severe punishment if they disobeyed orders to attack. Artillerymen on both sides were eager to shoot off all their ammunition to avoid having to load and take away the heavy shells; some, at least, had the decency to aim their guns at an angle where they were unlikely to kill anyone. A few Allied generals held their troops back when they heard that the Armistice had been signed, but they were in the minority.

And so thousands of men were killed or maimed during the last six hours of the war for no political or military reason whatever. Among the many victims were troops of the American 92nd Division, part of Bullard's Second Army. The U.S. military was rigidly segregated, and the men of the 92nd were black. All their higher-ranking officers, however, were white, often Southerners resentful of being given such commands. "Poor Negroes!" Bullard, an Alabaman, wrote. "They are hopelessly inferior." After already enduring discrimination and fear at home—sixty black Americans were lynched in 1918 alone—and being treated as second-class citizens in the Army, these troops found themselves, after the Armistice had been signed, advancing into German machine-gun fire and mustard gas. They were ordered to make their last attack at 10:30 A.M. The 92nd Division officially recorded seventeen deaths and three hundred and two wounded or missing on November 11th; one general declared that the real toll was even higher. The war ended as senselessly as it had begun. ♦