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Germany Quit War in 1918 When She Knew Victory Impossible, Heeded Ludendorff

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Twenty-six years ago, a Germany torn by revolution and on the verge of military and national disaster, heeded the advice of one of her greatest military figures and sued for an end to a war she knew she could not win.

The Allies, principally France, Britain and the United States, accepted promptly, thereby renouncing the opportunity for an overwhelming military triumph.

The high drama of the Armistice signature November 11, in a battered old French railway sleeping car that was to become infamous, was applauded hysterically by a world sickened of bloodshed.

Some voices of warning were raised, voices that said the Armistice was premature, yet the Armistice of 1918 was no sudden proposal which required an immediate yes-or-no response. It could be seen coming a long way off.

As early as December, 1916, Germany, with victory still an excellent prospect, made overtures for direct peace negotiations among the belligerents in some neutral country.

Britain and France denounced the German offer as intended to sow discord among them. They demanded expiation for German war crimes and indemnity for war damages.

Wanted Peace Plus Victory

But Imperial Germany then, like Nazi Germany in 1940, wanted a peace which amounted to victory. She scorned the terms the Allies had given to President Wilson: Reduction of German territory, freedom for the subject peoples in the Austria Hungarian empire, expulsion of the Turks from Europe, and payment for destruction to civilian property.

Wilson continued to work for peace until the German command, concluding that they could not gain a negotiated peace to their liking, decided on unrestricted submarine warfare, which the German admiralty promised would bring the Allies to defeat in five months. Instead, in a little over two months, it brought the United States into the war.

But the peace efforts did not end. In 1917 the young Emperor Charles of Austria-Hungary conducted numerous secret negotiations looking for a separate peace, Jan Christiaan Smuts, of South Africa, conferred with the Austrian former ambas-

1918: Victory Impossible

sador to London in December, 1917, on a separate peace, and finally Pope Benedict XV appealed to all belligerents to end the war. Kaiser Wilhelm II later intimated that he had had something to do with the Pope's appeal.

Germany, at least to the eyes of the outside world, still was strong and solid, with her position actually improved during 1917 and the early months of 1918. She had disposed of Russia as an enemy, and in May, 1918, forced peace on Romania, which she had almost entirely occupied.

But, behind the facade, Germany was shaky. The Allied blockade was squeezing the life out of her; mutiny and unrest in the armed Forces were becoming increasing problems. Gen. Erich Ludendorff, her premier military leader, who since has been called the virtual dictator of Germany, decided on one desperate final bid for victory: A supreme offensive on the Western Front. For the task he had 193 excellent divisions. Allied strength has been variously estimated at 167 to 180 divisions. It looked like a good gamble to the German militarist.

Ludendorff Lacked Reserves

He almost succeeded. Until the failure at the second battle of the Marne, in July, 1918, victory was in Ludendorff's sight. But he lacked reserves, and when the Allies in turn launched their great offensive, Ludendorff knew the game was up.

On August 14, conferring with the Kaiser and the High Command at headquarters in Spa, Ludendorff said flatly that all chances of victory were gone; that at best he could hope only to fight defensively while the diplomats quickly negotiated the best peace they could get.

From this point onward the melodrama moved in dizzying sequence to the denouement, in which the villain escaped alive.

Bulgaria, battered and reeling, sued for peace and on September 29 was granted an armistice that amounted to unconditional surrender.

Six days later Ludendorff got permission from the German government to ask for an armistice, and Austria and Turkey appealed to President Wilson for an armistice. Wilson's reply demanded immediate evacuation of all Allied territory, cessation of submarine warfare, and acknowledgment of defeat, with a flat surrender, not a negotiated peace.

Ludendorff then called for a mass levy of men to defend the Fatherland against imminent invasion, but other German commanders insisted further fighting was useless, and the angry Ludendorff resigned from the high command, eventually to flee to Sweden and later to return to assist the upstart Nazi movement and participate in its abortive Munich Putsch of 1923.

Unknown to the Allies at the time, the German navy had mutinied on October 29, an uprising of tremendous significance that led the way to the German revolution.

There had been unrest in the fleet as early as May, 1917, with mutinies in the battleships Westfalen, Kaiserin, Kaiser and Konig Albert. These were sternly suppressed, as were others in the spring and summer of 1918.

1918: Victory Impossible



Ludendorff and Hitler, 1923

Navy Revolt Spreads

The fleet had been in port since an abortive sortie in April, 1918, and the German command decided that the only remedy for disaffection was a last "do and die" challenge of the British fleet.

Officers' stewards heard the plans, relayed them to the crews, and they refused to obey the "put to sea" order on October 29. The crews took the position that they would fight to defend Germany but would not put out on a suicide mission.

The revolt spread; and shortly all the German coast lay virtually defenseless, and the uprising among home troops and civilians reached inland. The belligerent Admiral Tirpitz cut off his flowing whiskers and sneaked into Switzerland for safety.

Turkey at this juncture despaired of a general armistice and made a separate one on October 31, 1918.

Austria-Hungary followed suit on November 3. The Emperor Charles fled. There were military revolts in Vienna, Budapest and elsewhere.

In Germany there were runs on banks, wild demonstrations for peace, flights of the wealthy to what they hoped were safer quarters, distant from the Rhine, and outbreaks of intermittent rioting and bloodshed.

On November 6, 1918, the German Imperial government sent delegates to the front to receive terms from Generalissimo Ferdinand Foch. The Germans reached the French lines by car on November 8, were taken on a 10-hour motor journey, which they complained was circuitous, and then put aboard a shuttered train.

That train pulled up in the 55-square-mile Forest of Compiègne, near Senlis, where Foch had his headquarters in another train.

The stiff German delegates, mostly in uniform and with Iron Crosses dangling from their necks, were presented to Foch.

"Qu'est-ce que vous desirez, messieurs?" ("What do you want, gentlemen?") Foch inquired coolly.

Foch Cool to Delegates

The Germans, taken a bit aback, said they had come to receive Al-

1918: Victory Impossible

lied proposals for an armistice.

Foch replied that the Allies were content to finish the war in the field. The Germans stammered out something about their urgent need for an armistice, and Foch said, "Oh, I understand—you have come to seek an armistice."

The terms were handed to them, calling for evacuation of Belgium, France, Alsace-Lorraine and Luxembourg within two weeks; evacuation of the left bank of the Rhine and creation of a neutral zone on the other bank; surrender of military equipment; repatriation of prisoners held by the Germans; evacuation of Black Sea ports; abandonment of the treaties that had put Russia and Romania out of the war; internment of the German fleet; reparation for all damages done; and continuance of the Allied blockade.

The Germans complained that the terms were "inhuman," but had to take them.

A courier plane took the terms back to Berlin. The waiting German delegation meanwhile was provided with Paris newspaper which headlined the abdication and flight of the Kaiser and Crown Prince. A republic was proclaimed in Germany, where the air was mainly one of public holiday, of relief at having escaped the worst consequences of the war.

When the courier finally returned from Germany, the delegates, who regarded their credentials as still binding under a new government, signed the armistice in Foch's railway car at 5 o'clock in the morning on November 11. Hostilities ceased at 11 a. m., the deadline Foch had set for the courier's return.

The car of signature later became a shrine, set on a permanent base in the forest. It was there that the woebegone French signed their armistice of surrender to Nazi Germany in June, 1940. It was there that Adolf Hitler, dictator of a resurgent Germany, danced a comic little jig of jubilation. Then he had the car taken to Berlin as a museum piece.

The defeated Germany army tramped home. The Kaiser, scribbling his memoirs from safe exile in Doorn, Holland, wrote:

Kaiser Blamed Revolution

"For 30 years the army was my pride. For it I lived upon it I labored. And now, after four and one-half brilliant years of war with unprecedented victories, it was forced to collapse by the stab in the back from the dagger of the revolutionists at the very moment when peace was within reach!"

That same theme was used extensively by a certain former corporal of that army in his building of a new fighting machine that was to bring upon the world a 'greater, more terrible war a little less than 21 years later.

NORFOLK LEDGER-DISPATCH