

War's End

In the end, the Central Powers could not win the war of attrition. They did not have the men to reinforce their armies. They did not have the resources to manufacture the weapons and munitions they needed because they could not call on their empires. To do so would have required access to the seas, and the British navy choked off that access.

The Allied powers, on the other hand, could not be defeated because they had access to the resources and manpower of their empires. They were not strangled by **blockades** as Germany was. Nonetheless, after several years of slaughter on the Western Front, they did not have the strength to win either.

Knowing the Americans were going to enter the war, the German High Command launched one last offensive against the French and British lines on the Western Front. Despite initial advances, it failed, and the Germans were pushed back a considerable distance. More land changed hands along the Western Front at this time than had since 1914.

The reluctant entry of America into the war ensured the defeat of the Central Powers. The United States had not become a world power yet. It had no tradition of involvement in world affairs, and Americans did not want to be involved in a European war. Nonetheless, President Woodrow Wilson led the USA to war in 1917. America's fresh troops and, more importantly, new resources to make arms and munitions tipped the balance in favor of the Allies.

Historians generally feel that even if the Americans had not entered the war, the Central Powers would likely have collapsed soon after.

Post-War Concerns

On January 8, 1918, idealistic US President Wilson made a speech before Congress to outline his **14 Points** for making long-lasting peace in Europe. The Germans saw this as an offer of peace terms although the other Allies had not approved and did not feel bound by them. Knowing that the end was near, Germany sought peace on the basis of the 14 Points in the belief that they would be treated fairly.

The horrors of the first industrialized war finally came to an end at 11:00 a.m. on November 11, 1918. One could say the Central Powers lost and the Allies won, but the war left millions dead and maimed on all sides, including a large number of civilians. A generation of young men was nearly wiped out. Whole regions of France and Belgium were leveled by artillery. Towns and villages lay in ruins. On the Eastern Front, Russia had collapsed in revolution under the pressures of the slaughter. The Austro-Hungarian Empire—the oldest monarchy in Europe—vanished from the map as nationalist forces created new nations from its territories.

The relief that the death and destruction was at an end was so great, and the war had such a deep impact on society, that we still mark the end of fighting in World War I by observing Remembrance Day. Each year, **at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month**, at the precise time when the guns fell silent on the Western Front in 1918, we bow our heads to silently remember the sacrifices made by those who go to war.

The Lost Generation

The Literal Lost Generation

A careful examination of statistics can often tell us much about an event. At the very least, a review of the numbers of killed, wounded, captured and missing can give us an idea of the scale of the devastation of World War I.

Remember as you do so, that these numbers represent the lives of mostly young men. So many men in their teens and twenties died in the war that they are sometimes referred to as "The Lost Generation." As you review the statistics, think of the works of art never painted, the doctors who never saved another life, the inventions not imagined, the work not done, and the sons and daughters who never saw their fathers.

The Weimar Republic

When the fighting ended at 11 a.m. on November 11, 1918, the German people were stunned to find they had lost the war. Government-controlled propaganda had made them think they were winning right up until the very end. The generals, however, had known they were losing the war of attrition.

When America entered the war in 1917 on the Allied side, it brought fresh troops and equipment to the struggle. This was too much for Germany to counter. After a last, desperate attempt to win on the Western Front before the Americans arrived, Germany sought an end to the war. Germany believed that President Wilson's 14 Points offered peace on acceptable—even generous—terms.

When their government announced the **armistice** (an end to the fighting), many Germans thought they must have been betrayed. After all, no fighting had taken place on German soil. The press had announced victory after victory. How could they have lost?

With the armistice, Kaiser Wilhelm II left the throne and went into exile. A new German republic called the **Weimar Republic** was established under the leadership of socialist President Ebert. The new leaders of Germany were left to rebuild the German economy. They signed what would turn out to be the harsh terms of the **Treaty of Versailles**. Their opponents within Germany fed the myth that republican leaders had "stabbed Germany in the back" and that Germany had not lost the war on the battlefield but rather in the political back rooms.

In this atmosphere of discontent, political unrest grew. Agitators tried to start a Russian-style revolution to bring in a communist government. Conservatives and militarists resisted this. Many out-of-work and disillusioned war veterans supported one side or the other by providing **paramilitary forces** to break up the other's meetings and to inflict violence. Fighting occurred in the streets, and there were political assassinations. In the early post-war years, the very survival of the republic was in doubt.

Eventually the Weimar Republic asserted control over Germany, but it was never a popular regime. Hitler used its system of free elections to gain power in 1933. His dictatorship was authoritarian like the old monarchy. His attacks on the terms of the peace settlement—and his determination to ignore them to rebuild Germany's military might—were received enthusiastically by many Germans.

Aims of the Victors

Although the November 11 armistice stopped the fighting, a permanent peace settlement still had to be made. To do this, the leaders of the Allied Powers gathered in Paris in 1919 to draft the **terms of surrender** for the Central Powers.

The main treaty was the one with Germany. It was called the **Treaty of Versailles** after Louis XIV's palace where the meetings took place. Its name has come to signify the entire peace settlement with all the nations on the losing side.

The key players in the creation of the peace settlement were Britain's Prime Minister Lloyd George, Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau of France, and American President Woodrow Wilson. These were the **Big Three**.

The Big Three arrived in Paris with a set of goals. Each wanted to see certain things incorporated in the final peace treaties.

President Woodrow Wilson: idealistic and wishful goals

Prime Minister Clemenceau: practical, firm demands

Prime Minister Lloyd George: moderate, generous goals

The Treaty of Versailles

When it was finalized, the Treaty of Versailles included terms that addressed reparations, territory, arms limitations, national self-determination and a League of Nations. **Note:** "Reparations" means paying for repairs after damages, and "self-determination" means the right of a people to have their own country and government.

Articles 1–26 of the treaty set up the **League of Nations**. It was intended to be a place where differences between nations could be resolved peacefully to avoid war.

Articles 27–30 dealt with the **German boundaries** by restoring Belgium and returning Alsace-Lorraine to France. Czechoslovakia was created from the remnants of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Poland was recreated out of lands that had belonged to the Russian Empire and East Prussia (Germany) before the war.

In the clauses on German Rights and Interests Outside Germany, Germany was forced to give up her **colonies**.

In the military sections of the treaty, Germany was required to reduce its **armed forces** to a size considered suitable for its defence only. The army could be no more than 100,000 men led by no more than 4000 officers. Weapons and equipment were likewise limited in type and number. The Imperial navy was reduced to a few dozen, mostly small, surface ships. Germany was not permitted to have submarines or an air force.

The political sections relating to **national boundaries** reinforced the military ones. Germany had to demilitarize its border with France along the Rhine. In addition, France got control of the coal rich Saar basin as compensation for its mines that were destroyed in the war. Germany also had to surrender territory in the east to the new states created out of the old Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires.

The terms on **reparations** placed a staggering burden on Germany. They required Germany to pay for all damage done to the civilian population and to their property. Germany was also required to pay Belgium's war debt and the cost of the Allied armies that were occupying German territory.

Perhaps the hardest thing for Germany to accept was the inclusion of the treaty's Article 231, the **war guilt clause**:

Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage...of the war....

Germany was not given a chance to negotiate these terms. They were presented to the representatives of the new German Republic to sign. The only other option was to start fighting again and, with its armies disbanded and the country in turmoil, Germany could not do that.

New Nations

By 1919, the map of Europe had fundamentally changed from what it was only five years earlier, before the outbreak of war. These events contributed to the redrawing of the European map:

Europe (1914)



Europe (1919)

