

Critical moment

CAPTURED ON FILM BY A SLY RAILROAD worker, this image marks the end of World War I. The signing of the Armistice in a dining car in a forest near Paris planted seeds of both peace and war.

The Allies won by technical knockout. Swaggering but dangerously wounded, Germany had been abandoned by its allies, including Austria, which had helped instigate the conflict. German Secretary of State Matthias Erzberger, a peace advocate, proposed an armistice. France's Marshal Ferdinand Foch led the Allied delegation. At the first meeting of the two sides on November 8, Erzberger asked that fighting cease at once. Foch refused, suspecting Germany merely wanted time to regroup. He gave them 72 hours to unconditionally accept the Allies' demands.

Three days later, at 5:10 a.m., they signed. Fighting officially stopped at the 11th hour of the

A MOMENT OF PEACE Marshal Ferdinand Foch, seated, is seen through the rail car window as he signs the Armistice ending World War I. November 11, or Armistice Day, is still observed in many countries. After World War II, the US renamed it Veterans Day to honor soldiers of both wars in a single national holiday.



11th day of the 11th month of 1918. Thousands more lives were lost in the final days and hours. The last was Henry Gunther, an American killed in France at 10:59 a.m., November 11. The date remains a national observance in many countries.

Many still blame the harsh and humiliating demands of the victors for a new wave of German nationalism that rose immediately, culminating in World War II not even 21 years later. But scholars today say part of the problem was a simple failure of communication. No one convinced the Germans that they had, indeed, lost.

"The Armistice of November 1918 was in fact a surrender, but the Allies, without thinking, retained the German term implying only a ceasefire," writes Sally Marks, Professor Emerita at the US's Rhode Island College. "That was the first Allied mistake."

The war's horrific battles hadn't reached inside Germany and its people had been fed overly positive reports. As late as the Treaty of Versailles signing in 1919, they believed Germany to be an equal party in a truce. Reparations and an economic blockade imposed by the Treaty drowned

all hope of peaceful recovery. As one German scholar notes, they saw a "sudden shift from the expectation of certain victory to crushing defeat."

Shock bred denial. A conspiracy theory, "Dolchstoss" ("stab-in-the-back"), swept the nation, fanned by its leaders. Germany, they felt, had been betrayed by Jews, communists, pacifists and others. Erzberger himself was assassinated.

The Allies made other mistakes: no enforcement plan for the Treaty was ever developed, for instance. But the lack of direct involvement with the German people allowed the fatal delusion of Dolchstoss to flourish.

Adolf Hitler sent a clearer message. In June 1940, he signed an armistice with a defeated France – in the same railway car.

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