

READING

Signing the Armistice

After the United States entered the war in 1917, the tide turned decisively in favor of the Allies. In September 1918, Germany's generals informed Kaiser Wilhelm and his chancellor, Prince Max von Baden, that the war was lost. Two months later, the British and French governments demanded that the Germans sign a ceasefire or face an Allied invasion.

On November 10, Kaiser Wilhelm went into exile, leaving Germany in the hands of the leaders of its most prominent political parties. Germany's new leaders were not sure how to respond to the Allies' demands for a ceasefire. Matthias Erzberger, one of the new leaders from the Catholic Center Party, asked Paul von Hindenburg, the commander-in-chief of the German Armed Forces, for advice. Hindenburg tearfully told Erzberger to do his patriotic duty by signing the document immediately to end the fighting. There would be no negotiation.

So, early on the morning of November 11, Erzberger and two other representatives of the new republic journeyed to France and signed the agreement. Hindenburg and the other generals did not attend the armistice signing; they did not want their names associated with the document.

When the German people finally learned the terms of truce later that day, almost everyone was outraged. The armistice was a shock for many Germans because they had begun the war with a strong sense of national superiority and the expectation that their country would win. Few blamed the generals or the kaiser for the nation's defeat. Instead they placed the blame on the people who signed the armistice—the Social Democrats and the Catholic Center Party. Historian Richard Evans notes:

All of this was greeted with incredulous horror by the majority of Germans...Germany's international strength and prestige had been on an upward course since unification in 1871, so most Germans felt, and now, suddenly, Germany had been brutally expelled from the ranks of the Great Powers and covered in what they considered to be undeserved shame.¹

In the years that followed, many of Germany's generals, including Hindenburg, would claim that the country's new leaders, as well as socialists and Jews, had "stabbed Germany in the back" when they signed the armistice.

¹ Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 66. Reproduced by permission from Penguin Random House UK and Penguin Press.