

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 170

### *“Très Bien”*

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

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Now it is September of 1918. The German offensives of last spring have ended, and the Germans pushed back to the Hindenburg Line in many places. The German Army is clearly shaken. But the end of the campaign season is just weeks away. Prudence might dictate that the Allies wait until spring of 1919 for the next big push. But Field Marshal Haig has learned from bitter experience how dangerous it is to allow the Germans breathing room to rest and rebuild.

Marshal Foch and General Pershing agree. The Germans have never been more vulnerable than they are right now.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 170. *Très Bien*.

The Allied commanders had originally agreed to wait until 1919 for the next big Allied offensive. Now that they’d decided to pursue an autumn 1918 offensive, the next step was to choose the objective. It would be a big one. The rail line that ran behind and parallel to the Hindenburg Line, from Metz in Lorraine through Sedan and on to Lille, just across the old border from Belgian Flanders. This was a four-track line and the main artery that fed the German front line its supplies, ammunition and replacement soldiers. It was also the main route the

Germans used to move reinforcements back and forth along the line to wherever they were needed to counter an Allied offensive, a strategy that has served the Germans well for years now.

After the American Expeditionary Force had taken the St. Mihiel salient, that railroad was a mere 25 miles away from the American front lines. Close enough that Pershing could smell it. A disruption of rail traffic on that line might well force the Germans to withdraw from France altogether.

Foch developed a shrewd attack plan. On the first day, September 26, the US First Army and French Fourth Army would attack north, toward Sedan. The next day, the British First and Third Armies would attack the Hindenburg Line at Cambrai. On the third day, the British Second Army and the Belgian Army would begin another offensive, this one in Flanders. And on the fourth day, British and French forces would make a joint attack at the Somme.

The Allies had by this time built up stockpiles of munitions so huge it was entirely possible for them to begin and sustain these simultaneous multiple offensives. This would keep the German Army off balance, shifting their reserves back and forth along the line, forcing the German command to keep reacting to the last attack, rather than anticipating the next one.

The first stage was the Franco-American offensive north, toward Sedan. The Americans were advancing roughly along the Meuse river valley, the French farther west. Pershing ordered the Americans to make an aggressive advance “without regard to losses.” Yeah, that wasn’t a good idea, and he should have known better. This offensive was not going to be a cakewalk like the St. Mihiel salient. Here the Germans were going to fight hard, and the Americans were going to suffer the heaviest casualties of any US military campaign in history, before or since.

Like many Great War offensives, it began promisingly, with a six-mile advance on the first day. But these German defenders were not the tired, depleted units of St. Mihiel. They fought tenaciously, drawing on years of German experience at weathering Allied offensives, and aided by the rough, forested terrain of the Argonne. Autumn rains interfered with movement and supply, as did the shortage of motor vehicles and horses in the American army, a result of that emphasis on getting the largest possible numbers of soldiers across the Atlantic. And then there was the latest round of the seemingly endless influenza epidemic that had plagued both sides since last spring. Tens of thousands of soldiers on both sides of the front became critically ill, and thousands of them would never recover.

Yet this was only the first action in a multi-pronged offensive. On September 27, the British First and Third Armies, including Canadian and New Zealander units, attacked the Hindenburg Line in a drive toward the town of Cambrai. This attack, aided by tanks, advanced far more rapidly, until Canadian units entered Cambrai on October 10, sooner than had been expected.

On September 28 began the Flanders offensive, sometimes called the Fifth Battle of Ypres. On the first day, British forces advanced to Passchendaele Ridge. Remember that a year ago, it had

taken three months and 200,000 casualties to achieve this same goal. On the 29<sup>th</sup>, the British Fourth Army, including the Australian Corps and the American II Corps, attacked another section of the Hindenburg Line. The German defenses here made use of the Saint-Quentin Canal and was thought by the Germans to be among their strongest defenses. The assault crossed this deep canal cut on the very first day, owing to the fortunate capture of the Riqueval Bridge by the British North Staffordshire Regiment. German engineers had not had time to destroy the bridge, which spanned the otherwise formidable obstacle. The capture of this bridge intact allowed the British to push ahead immediately.

This one-two-three-four punch strained the German defenses to their limit. And let me take this opportunity to remind you that less than two weeks earlier, the Allied offensive in the Balkans had begun. That had ripped a hole in the Bulgarian line, prompting a Bulgarian plea to Germany for reinforcements. With all this pressure in the West, the Germans have no reinforcements to spare. On September 29<sup>th</sup>, the same day that punch number four landed on the Western Front, Bulgaria quit the war.

When Erich Ludendorff received news of the Bulgarian armistice, he reportedly collapsed to the floor in a fit, foaming at the mouth. Once he'd recovered, he recommended to Hindenburg that Germany also seek an armistice. Hindenburg agreed. On the same day that the Bulgarian armistice took effect and the North Staffordshire Regiment captured the Riqueval Bridge, the duo met with Kaiser Wilhelm to tell him that a ceasefire was Germany's only hope. Hindenburg tried to sugarcoat the proposal by suggesting that the German Army could use the breathing space to rest and regroup. If the peace negotiations with the Allies fell through, the Army could resume the war stronger than it was right now. Ludendorff told the Kaiser that Germany was still a nation 70 million strong, and those 70 million would rise up as one should a single Allied soldier set foot on German soil.

Wilhelm was stunned. Just months ago, Russia had been defeated and Hindenburg and Ludendorff were assuring him that victory was at hand. Since then, they had been keeping the truth from him about Germany's reversals. It must also be said that Wilhelm was not trying very hard to keep abreast of military developments. He was largely a figurehead by now, and seemed content with that status, his occasional grumbling notwithstanding.

Also present at this meeting was the new German foreign minister, Paul von Hintze. Hintze shared his own opinion with Kaiser Wilhelm, which was this: There was no way 70 million Germans were going to rise up as one in the name of defending the sacred soil of Imperial Germany. Far more likely, if 70 million Germans did rise up as one, their first act would be to lynch the Kaiser and overthrow his government. After that, who knows, but whatever it was, it was going to be ugly. Germany would collapse into strikes, rioting, anarchy, maybe even the dark depths of Bolshevism.

There was but one recourse. Chancellor von Hertling and his government must resign. The government that replaced it would need to be a democratic one, composed of the major parties in the Reichstag, particularly the parties that had passed that 1917 peace resolution. Domestically, this would demonstrate to the German people compliance with their will, while internationally, it would satisfy Woodrow Wilson's demand that peace negotiations be with representatives not of the Kaiser but of the German people.

The new chancellor would be Maximilian of Baden, the heir presumptive to the Grand Duchy of Baden, and as blue a blue-blood as the ranks of German aristocracy had to offer. He was also known to be liberal politically and dovish on the war. He had criticized unrestricted submarine warfare and worked with the German Red Cross as an advocate for POWs. He would preside over a cabinet drawn from the Social Democratic Party, the Center Party, and the Progressive Party, the three parties that had spearheaded the Reichstag peace resolution and which collectively held a majority in that chamber, making this government much more in line with parliamentary democracy than any previous German government. Here was a government that matched those of Britain or France or America as a democratic peer. More or less.

The Kaiser summoned Prince Max to Berlin on October 1 to accept the appointment as chancellor. The prince was as stunned as the Kaiser had been when it was explained to him that his primary responsibility as chancellor would be to oversee the negotiation of an armistice with the Allies. Prince Max would say later that "I believed I had been summoned at five minutes to twelve, and find out that it is already five minutes past twelve."

The military seemed to think a ceasefire could be arranged quickly, but Prince Max understood that an armistice acceptable both to the Allies and to Hindenburg and Ludendorff couldn't be drawn up overnight. Prince Max also understood clearly that Germany was far more likely to get generous peace terms from the United States than from Britain or France.

Also on October 1, Erich Ludendorff called a meeting of the staff officers of the German high command. He told them that Austria and Turkey were finished, and that the war could no longer be won. He ordered a withdrawal to the planned secondary defensive line, which you'll recall never got past the planning, and no one in the room expected the Army would be able to hold that largely imaginary position.

Ludendorff blamed the government for opening negotiations with the enemy. He blamed the socialists, the anarchists, and the Bolsheviks for undermining the German Army with their vile propaganda. He blamed the Reichstag for their peace resolution. He blamed the strikers and the protestors and the new, more liberal government in Berlin. In short, he blamed everyone but himself. I've mentioned before that after the war, there's going to be a cottage industry of military and political leaders from all the Great War nations writing their memoirs. Most of these memoirs would be packed cover to cover with excuses and the shifting of blame to someone

else. But Erich Ludendorff will write the quintessential Great War blame-shifting memoir. What you're seeing here is him just getting warmed up.

Ludendorff's words reportedly left some in the room in tears. Hindenburg spoke next. He was more sanguine. He told the assembled officers that he had faith that God would protect Germany. The following day, as it happened, was Hindenburg's 71<sup>st</sup> birthday. Kaiser Wilhelm sent Hindenburg a nice birthday present, a bronze statuette...of Kaiser Wilhelm.

Ludendorff began sending urgent telegrams to the Kaiser and the new chancellor, dire warnings that the army might not last another 48 hours. It might not last another 24 hours. A disastrous enemy breakthrough could happen at any moment. Germany needed an armistice, and it needed one right now. Kaiser Wilhelm replied that in that case, Ludendorff should have told him this two weeks ago.

[music: Wagner, *Das Liebesmahl der Apostel*]

On October 4, Germany sent a diplomatic note to Washington, requesting an armistice to be followed by a peace agreement based on the Fourteen Points. Austria-Hungary sent a similar note on the same day.

The German note began a back-and-forth of diplomatic communications between Berlin and Washington that stretched over the rest of October and into early November, reminiscent of the diplomatic exchanges that followed the sinking of *Lusitania* back in 1915. Once word leaked out that peace discussions were underway, both the German and Austrian governments experienced domestic political collapse. What will to fight remained evaporated upon the news that the two Kaisers' governments were talking peace. In America, Wilson's most hawkish Republican critics like Henry Cabot Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt, condemned these discussions. They also remembered the *Lusitania* negotiations, and in particular, they remembered that Wilson had let the Kaiser off the hook in exchange for some vague promises that the German government dispensed with as soon as they became inconvenient. They called for the US and the Allies to fight on until Germany surrendered unconditionally. They argued this would be the only way to ensure that German militarism was crushed and that Germany would no longer threaten world peace. Anything less would be a betrayal of the soldiers fighting and dying at the front.

The official American response to Germany requested clarification that the officials representing Germany in the talks were speaking not for the Kaiser and the Empire, but for the German people. If so, the American reply insisted that they accept the Fourteen Points without conditions, and as a show of good faith, that they withdraw German forces from all occupied territories. This laid to rest Hindenburg's naïve hopes that the Allies might agree to an armistice in place, one that would allow the German Army to rest and rebuild. The US response to Austria was similar. Austria must withdraw its forces from all Allied territory in Italy, Serbia, and Romania.

Meanwhile, at the front, the Allied offensives were still in high gear. On October 1, the American assault into the Argonne Forest had been forced to pause to untangle its organizational and logistical problems. It began again on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, and soon German forces had been cleared from the forest, although the fighting in that sector remained fierce and bloody. But the Americans had the advantage of numbers, and their numbers were growing every day. They could afford to rotate units in and out of combat. The Germans had no such luxury. German soldiers fought on grimly, day after day after bitter day.

On October 7, the Regency Council of the Kingdom of Poland, which was a temporary authority set up by the German government to create a German-dominated Polish kingdom, declared Polish independence. They based this declaration on the German government's acceptance of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, one of which called for Polish independence. The Regency Council soon took over administration of Russian Poland from the German military, and took control of Polish military units.

On October 10, just as the German government was delivering vague assurances to Washington that yes, it did indeed speak for the German people, a German submarine, *UB-123*, torpedoed and sank an Irish passenger steamer, *Leinster*, in the Irish Sea. *Leinster* had been carrying hundreds of military personnel and civilians from Britain, Ireland, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Over five hundred of her passengers died. The next American diplomatic note to Germany repeated the demand for a withdrawal from occupied territory, plus additional demands for a cessation of submarine warfare, and guarantees of democratic reforms. The US government also declared that the details of the armistice would have to be negotiated not with the Wilson Administration in Washington, but with the French, British and American military commanders on the Western Front.

It was wise of Wilson not to attempt to negotiate an armistice without French or British input. It was also politically shrewd to punt the armistice terms over to the soldiers, thus shielding Wilson from Republican criticism that he was going too easy on the Germans.

But what about Austria? Vienna sent another diplomatic note to Washington on October 14, again agreeing to peace under the Fourteen Points. Now, remember that one of those fourteen points demanded something like autonomy for minorities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Another demanded an independent Poland. Perhaps as a show of good faith, or to appease the Allies, two days later the Austrian Kaiser Karl issued a proclamation restructuring the Austrian state into a form he must have hoped would be more acceptable to the Allies. The Polish regions of Galicia were to be granted independence and the freedom to join with Polish regions of Germany and Russia into a new, independent Polish state. The remainder of Austria would be reorganized into German, Czech, Ukrainian, and South Slav regions, and governed as a federation.

Four days later, the Austrians would receive a reply to their note from the US Secretary of State, Robert Lansing. In it, Lansing would explain to the Austrians that circumstances had changed since Wilson announced his Fourteen Points speech back in January. That was before the United States and the Allies had recognized the Czechoslovak National Council, for one thing. Therefore, Lansing wrote, the US government was no longer the arbiter of what constituted a sufficient degree of autonomy on behalf of the peoples of Austria-Hungary. Rather, those peoples themselves must decide their own futures.

In fact, the Czechoslovak National Council had already issued a declaration of independence two days earlier, on October 18. In Zagreb, representatives of the South Slavic peoples had set up a National Council that was something close to a provisional government. Independence-minded leaders in both Prague and Zagreb immediately seized on the American diplomatic note, taking it to mean that independence for Czecho-Slovaks and for South Slavs was now part of the American peace terms.

Now, Kaiser Karl's proposed reforms might have been too weak to satisfy the US government, or to placate the dissident Slavs in the Empire, but they did succeed in going way too far for the German-speaking conservative elements in Austria, who rejected them. On October 21 in Vienna, the ethnic German deputies in the Reichsrat met and proclaimed themselves the "Provisional National Assembly for German-Austria." These deputies represented not only Germans in Austria proper, as we know it today, but also German-speaking regions of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia, who rejected rule under Czech or Polish governments.

On the other side of the Dual Monarchy, the Hungarian government in Budapest was equally vehement. If you think back to the days before the war when we talked about Hungary, I told you then that it was likely that ethnic Magyars are less than half the total population of their own country. Hungary has its own minority issues, and Budapest has been far less accommodating than the Austrians have been. No regional diets, no language rights. *Everyone* in our country is a Hungarian, whether they want to be or not.

Now, bear in mind that Kaiser Karl's proclamation didn't apply to Hungary, but that didn't change the fact that the Czechs in Prague were scheming for an independent state that would include the Slovak regions of Hungary, nor the fact that the South Slav National Council that was organizing in Zagreb includes Croat representatives, even though Croatia is part of Hungary. Indeed, the city of Zagreb itself is in Croatia, and therefore within the borders of the Kingdom of Hungary. So Budapest wasn't happy about any of this. The Hungarian government declared that Kaiser Karl's proclamation violated the *Ausgleich*, the Compromise of 1867 that had formed the Dual Monarchy.

It remains a question, though, how much say the government in Budapest still has. Since the Great War began, the Hungarian half of the Dual Monarchy has always had it a little easier than the Austrian side. Hungary is more rural and agrarian than Austria, so food shortages have been

less of a problem. Hungary has not experienced the same degree of opposition from its ethnic minorities that the Austrians have, from the Czechs in particular.

On the other hand, the war is becoming more unpopular every month in Hungary, just as it had in Russia and Germany and, well, everywhere, really. And that brings me back to our old friend, former Hungarian prime minister István Tisza. Hey, there's a blast from the past. You may remember István Tisza from episode 76, and such classic hits as "Let's not go to war with Serbia/Okay, let's totally go to war with Serbia." What I'm saying is, he was the Hungarian prime minister during the July Crisis. In the bifurcated Dual Monarchy, Tisza could have prevented Austria-Hungary from going to war with Serbia and all the calamities that ensued therefrom, but, after some initial resistance, he did sign on for the war.

I haven't mentioned him since all the way back in episode 76, so let's get caught up. Tisza remained prime minister for three more years, and became an ardent war supporter. I suppose once you've made a difficult and consequential decision, there's a natural tendency to go all in and insist to yourself and everyone else that it was the right choice. As the war dragged on, Tisza was seen within Hungarian politics as one of its architects. After the death of the Kaiser Franz Josef, the now 56-year old Tisza found himself at odds with the new, more liberal Kaiser Karl, and when Karl began his housekeeping project of clearing out the old pro-war guard, Tisza was among those asked to resign. He was succeeded as prime minister by Móric Esterházy of the old aristocratic family of that name. Tisza remained an influential figure in Hungarian politics though, a conservative one who led the opposition against the more liberal Esterházy, who only lasted five months before resigning in frustration. He was in turn replaced by 68-year-old Sándor Wekerle, for whom it would be his third go-round as prime minister. Wekerle was another of these elder statesman-caretaker PMs who were popping up in several capitals during this period. They get appointed in a time of crisis because everyone respects them for their age and wisdom and experience, and no one sees any danger they might actually try to do anything.

There was a small but committed anti-war faction in the Hungarian parliament, led by a 43-year-old aristocrat named Mihály Károlyi, who was quietly putting out peace feelers to the Allies, floating the suggestion that Hungary might agree to leave the Dual Monarchy and make a separate peace, provided the Allies agreed to preserve Hungary's pre-war borders. By 1918, Károlyi was publicly endorsing Wilson's Fourteen Points as a framework for peace. Whether he understood them the same way the Americans did, which would mean independence for the Slovaks and the Croats, and maybe the Hungarian Romanians as well, I'm not clear on that. Leaders in Germany and Austria generally were reading the Fourteen Points in a very different way than the Allies were.

On October 16, 1918, the same day that Kaiser Karl issued his proclamation reorganizing the Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy, an anti-war radical attempted to assassinate István Tisza in Budapest. Tisza escaped. This was in fact the second attempt on his life since the war began.



[music: Wagner, *Das Liebesmahl der Apostel*]

When the latest American diplomatic note, the one demanding democratic reforms, was received in Berlin, Kaiser Wilhelm denounced it as “a piece of unmitigated frivolous nonsense.” The Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Scheer, the hero of the Battle of Jutland, balked at ending the U-boat campaign. He argued that the U-boats were Germany’s most valuable weapon. The Navy had enough diesel fuel stockpiled to continue submarine warfare for at least eight more months. This came as quite a bit of news to the Army and to the civilian government, both of which were struggling with crippling fuel shortages.

Ludendorff told the Imperial Council that Germany should tell the Allies that if they sought such harsh conditions, they would have to fight for them. Prince Max asked him, and after the Allies have fought for them, will they not then demand even worse? “There can be no worse,” Ludendorff snapped. Of course there can, the chancellor retorted. How about the occupation and destruction of Germany?

As Hindenburg and Ludendorff continued to resist the armistice they had urged upon the government two weeks ago, the Western Front was collapsing. German units retained only a fraction of their theoretical strength. Desertions and surrenders were commonplace, further depleting the Army. Trainloads of reinforcements arrived at the front with many of their soldiers already missing. Allied artillery bombardments were now overwhelming, so terrible that German soldiers were afraid to leave their bunkers long enough to use the latrines. German artillery lacked shells and there were no horses to move the guns. And there was the influenza epidemic, which had been weakening the Army all year and had still not yet let up.

On October 23, the German government received its third diplomatic note from the Wilson Administration. This one said that the Allies would not agree to an armistice unless it was permanent, and repeated the objection that the Allied governments could not trust the word of the German military leadership or of the Kaiser. If that is whom they must deal with, then the Allies would accept nothing less than unconditional surrender.

Hindenburg telegraphed the chancellor to condemn Wilson’s demands. The next day, and without consulting the civilian government, the German military issued an order to all troops in the field, declaring that Wilson’s peace overtures were a sham, and that the Allies’ goal had not changed since 1914: they wanted to destroy Germany. Period. There was no possible response other than to continue to resist.

Some of you may be wondering by now, what about the Italian front? Good question. You’ll recall the disastrous Battle of Caporetto last fall. In June, an Austrian attempt to begin a new offensive in Italy failed. Ever since then, as multiple Allied offensives in the West ground down the Germans, Allied leaders were imploring Italy to also go on the offensive at their own front.

The Italian chief of staff, Armando Diaz, resisted these urgings. The Italian Army had spent a year rebuilding from its losses at Caporetto, and Diaz was not interested in attacking until he felt confident of victory. But by October, with Austria plainly collapsing, he was beginning to feel that confidence. More than that, with armistice negotiations underway, Diaz and the Italians wanted to claim as much territory as possible before peace broke out.

The Italian offensive began on October 24, the anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of Caporetto. The Italians struck toward the Austrian-occupied town of Vittorio Veneto, piercing the middle of the Austrian line and dividing the Austrian armies. Italy fielded 52 divisions, augmented by three British and two French divisions, as well as an American regiment and a Czechoslovak division created from Austrian POWs.

That same evening, anti-war demonstrators marched through the streets of Budapest, calling for an end to the war and a Károlyi government. Some chanted republican slogans. In Zagreb, they were flying the Serbian flag, along with the Croatian flag and the Slovene flag and the red flag of socialist revolution.

In Berlin, the new German chancellor fell ill, yet another victim of the influenza pandemic. This left the problem of balancing the government's response to Wilson's demands and the military's intransigence in a muddle. In his incapacity, the vice-chancellor, Friedrich von Payer was on the receiving end of Ludendorff's demands. The Army could fight on, Ludendorff insisted, if only the nation would support it. "A fortress that surrenders without having defended itself to the last is dishonored."

Von Payer told him, "I know nothing of soldier's honor. I am an ordinary, plain citizen and civilian. I see only hungry people."

Ludendorff broke off the meeting, saying "There is no point in speaking further with you, Herr von Payer...[W]e shall never agree. We live in different worlds."

The following day, October 27, Hindenburg and Ludendorff were summoned to a meeting with the Kaiser. Wilhelm chewed Ludendorff out for his insubordination and rebuked him for that unauthorized communication to the Army about the Wilson peace proposal. Hindenburg did not defend Ludendorff, who angrily responded by telling the Kaiser that the government was attacking the military, that the Emperor himself was indebted to the high command, and he offered his resignation. This was a tactic Ludendorff and Hindenburg had employed to good effect many times before, but not this time. The Kaiser accepted Ludendorff's resignation, though he refused Hindenburg's.

By this time, in German cinemas, it had become a common sight to see the audiences booing when newsreels were run featuring Hindenburg and the Kaiser. But when the news of Ludendorff's resignation was announced, the cinema audiences cheered.

The German government replied to the latest American note with a message that said, we look forward to your armistice proposal. In other words, we're willing to do whatever you say. But as the Army and the government were reconciling themselves to the end of the war, the Navy was still resisting. An internal Navy memo declared that the Navy did not need an armistice. Admiral Sheer resented the order to cease U-boat attacks, but he also saw a bright side. With no more U-boats going to sea, the Navy could divert its fuel and other resources to its surface ships, activate the High Seas Fleet, and engage the British Grand Fleet in a last-ditch battle.

It's hard to understand what the point of this would have been, except as a matter of honor. Ludendorff would have understood; indeed, Ludendorff was the only Army leader informed of the pending naval attack and he was told to keep that information strictly secret. You'll recall that Germany invested heavily in building its Navy before the war. This was supposed to deter the British, as well as force them to acknowledge Germany as an equal. You see how well that turned out. Once the war began, despite a few modest early successes, the German surface fleet proved of little strategic value, and since the Battle of Jutland, it has been rusting in port.

Scheer and the German admiralty were not willing to let the fleet stand idly by while Germany was defeated. The plan here was to lure the Grand Fleet into a final battle in the North Sea, counting on the element of surprise since, yeah, Germany is in armistice talks with the Allies, so the British aren't going to expect a sneak attack by the fleet that's been studiously avoiding battle ever since 1916. With a little luck, the High Seas Fleet might be able to score that decisive blow against the Royal Navy that the Germans have been dreaming of for years. And if not, if the battle turns out the way most sensible people would expect, with a crushing British victory, well, at least the High Seas Fleet went down fighting. Honor and all that, just as Ludendorff was talking about.

This is an excellent plan. I can see no flaws in this plan.

Ha, ha. I am joking. There is an obvious flaw in this plan. If you've been listening along for the duration of the war, you may have spotted it, too. This war has seen several instances of belligerent navies that have been spending all their time cooped up in port. The Russian Baltic Fleet. The Austrian fleet at Pola, in the Adriatic. The German High Seas Fleet at Kiel. And for that matter, you could add the Russian Black Sea Fleet. And what do all these fleets have in common, besides years of sitting idly in port? That's right! Mutinies and revolution. The Russian Baltic Fleet turned into a Bolshevik stronghold. To some extent, so did the Black Sea Fleet. There have been mutinies both at Pola and at Kiel as recently as last year. In Kiel, the Admiralty cracked down hard on what were pretty mild protests over the sailors' poor living conditions, so you shouldn't be surprised to learn that resentments linger a year later.

Admiral Scheer shouldn't be surprised, either. But he's gonna be.

While the German Admiralty was putting this plan for a desperate last stand against the Royal Navy into motion, Austria-Hungary was disintegrating. So-called national councils, national

committees, even provisional governments were springing up across the empire like dandelions, even among the German and Magyar communities, who are supposed to be the ruling class. When even the people who *run* your empire don't want it anymore, you know its days are numbered.

These movements took power in their respective regions almost bloodlessly. This was because the imperial state was barely functioning, coupled with Kaiser Karl's proclamation on creating a federalized empire, which seemed to endorse the creation of these new regional governments and leaving the old guard confused as to whether they were supposed to oppose them. Rather than suppress these new national movements, the Kaiser seemed to have adopted a strategy of trying to co-opt them into becoming the instruments of his new federalization plan.

Unfortunately for Karl, no one is going to buy into his plan. No one. This became abundantly clear on October 28. That's the day Czechs in Prague affiliated with the Czechoslovak National Council endorsed the declaration of an independent Czech state. In Budapest, military and civilian sympathizers of the Hungarian National Council took to the streets to call for Hungarian independence. They adopted asters as the symbol of their movement and wore them in their caps, which is why this uprising is sometimes referred to as the "Aster Revolution."

On October 29, the Croatian parliament in Zagreb declared independence from Hungary and further declared Croatia to be a part of the new State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. That was the name. The State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs.

On the afternoon of the 29<sup>th</sup>, the ships of the German High Seas Fleet began assembling to attack the Thames Estuary, as part of the Navy's plan to force an eleventh-hour battle with the Royal Navy. The sailors were told this was to be a training exercise, but word got out that they were actually going into battle. To sabotage the armistice talks, some said. It turned out German sailors had no enthusiasm whatsoever for sacrificing their lives in a futile gesture meant to salvage the honor of a bunch of guys with "von" in front of their names, who you'll notice aren't offering to come along themselves on this great face-saving expedition. Sailors refused to report to their ships. Others were insubordinate, a few outright mutinous. In Britain, naval intelligence picked up on the activity and correctly deduced that the fleet was about to put to sea. Though the Germans didn't know it, the element of surprise had already been lost.

Not that it mattered. The unrest among the sailors got bad enough that the plan had to be cancelled and the assembled fleet ordered to disperse.

On October 30, Slovak leaders ratified the decision to form a joint state with the Czechs. Recall from episode 167, this was also the day the Armistice of Mudros took effect, taking the Ottoman Empire out of the war.

The next day, October 31, after three days of unrest, the Hungarian National Council, supported by military and civilian fighters, seized control of government buildings in Budapest. Prime

Minister Wekerle resigned, while former prime minister István Tisza was gunned down in his home by a group of men believed to have been disgruntled soldiers who blamed him for the war. This means that both of the prime ministers who led Austria-Hungary to war in July 1914 paid for it with their lives. Karl von Stürgkh was killed in 1916.

Late in the day, Kaiser Karl, in his capacity as King of Hungary, named Mihály Károlyi his new prime minister, apparently on the theory that if you can't beat them, join them, or maybe, if you can't beat them, you can fool them into thinking they were carrying out your instructions all along. The new Károlyi government promptly announced Hungary's withdrawal from the Dual Monarchy.

On November 3, with Austrian forces in retreat across the Italian front, the Italian destroyer *Audace* entered Trieste harbor, and Italian marines took control of the city. In the German port of Kiel, ships of the High Seas Fleet had returned from the aborted attack on Britain. Some of the sailors deemed ringleaders of the mutiny were imprisoned. Their fellow sailors began agitating for their release and reached out to labor unions and members of the local Social Democratic Party in Kiel for their support. In response, thousands of protestors marched in Kiel on November 3, calling not only for the release of the sailors, but for an end to the war. Anti-war demonstrators carried this message to other cities, and within days, large scale protests were breaking out across western Germany, from Hannover to Frankfurt to Munich. Across Germany, soldiers, sailors, and workers began forming councils, modeled on the Russian soviets.

That same day, Austrian commanders ordered their soldiers to cease combat. Allied and Austrian commanders signed the Armistice of Villa Giusti. The Austrian side agreed to withdraw from all Austrian-occupied territory in Italy, as well as from all Austro-Hungarian territory claimed by Italy: the South Tyrol, Istria, and Dalmatia. The Austrians also agreed to allow Allied troops free passage through Austro-Hungarian territory, meaning southern Germany was now potentially open to an Allied attack.

On November 6, French and American forces captured the French town of Sedan, seizing that crucial rail line the Germans used to supply their forces on the Western Front. Sedan also had symbolic meaning. It was the site of the French surrender in 1870, and *Sedantag* was still celebrated as a holiday in Germany.

The following day, November 7, the King of Bavaria, Ludwig III, fled the city of Munich. Revolutionaries declared the end of the 700-year-old Wittelsbach dynasty and the creation of the *Volksstaat Bayern*, the People's State of Bavaria. That same day in Berlin, the Chancellor, Prince Max, met with Friedrich Ebert, the leader of the Social Democratic Party. Ebert told him, "If the Kaiser does not abdicate, then social revolution is unavoidable. Though I do not want it, indeed I hate it like sin."

Ebert didn't want to see a revolution any more than Prince Max or the Kaiser did, but events were moving beyond his ability to control. The more radical breakaway factions of the SPD, like

the Independent Social Democratic Party and the Spartacist League, were organizing to declare a Bolshevik-style socialist revolution. The mainstream SPD risked being left behind, so Ebert himself publicly demanded the Kaiser's abdication. Prince Max, the chancellor, telephoned Wilhelm and advised him to comply. Wilhelm refused. He spoke darkly, if not very realistically, of returning to Berlin at the head of the army and restoring order by force of arms.

But Wilhelm's army was disintegrating, plagued by the kind of mass surrenders and desertions that had previously struck the Russian and Austrian armies. Ludendorff's successor, General Karl Groener, polled 39 military commanders at the Western Front. He asked them whether they believed their soldiers would be willing to follow the Kaiser to Berlin and put down the impending revolution. Only one of the 39 answered in the affirmative. When told of this, Kaiser Wilhelm proposed that he give up the Imperial crown but retain the title of King of Prussia. This proposal made no sense whatsoever, because it violated the German constitution, which stated that the King of Prussia was the Emperor, period.

But by this time, nothing Wilhelm said or did mattered anymore. In Berlin, on Saturday, November 9, the Independent SPD called for mass demonstrations, while Prince Max, the chancellor, worried that the Kaiser's dithering would destroy the nation, stepped out onto the Reichstag balcony at noon to announce that Kaiser Wilhelm had abdicated and his heir, the Crown Prince, had declined the throne. Neither of these claims was true. Max was merely trying to placate the mobs in the streets. Friedrich Ebert appeared and demanded that Max hand over the chancellorship to him. There was no constitutional way to do this without the approval of the Kaiser, but Max agreed anyway. Two hours later, and without any authority to do so, SPD deputy leader Philipp Scheidemann stepped onto the same balcony and announced that Germany was now a republic and would be governed by a coalition of socialist parties.

The following day, Sunday November 10, Kaiser Wilhelm fled to the Netherlands.

By this time, arrangements had already been made with Allied commanders for a German delegation to cross the front line and meet to conclude an armistice. The military commanders refused to participate, and so the unhappy responsibility of leading this delegation fell to Matthias Erzberger, the leader of the Center Party, the second largest party in the Reichstag. You'll recall that Erzberger had turned against the war in 1917 and had made common cause with the SPD to pass that peace resolution. This made him a far better representative than a German military commander or a Prussian aristocrat.

Woodrow Wilson had delegated to the Allied military commanders the responsibility of setting the armistice terms. The British and French commanders, war weary and satisfied that Germany was now prepared to give up at the peace table everything that could be won on the battlefield, favored concluding the armistice as soon as possible. The French Army had by now all but ejected the Germans from French soil; the British had done them one better and were advancing into Belgium. Ironically, in the final days of the war, the BEF would reach the Belgian town of

Mons, site of the first battle between British and German forces all the way back in August 1914, episode 86.

The dissenting voice was the American commander, John Pershing, who advocated keeping up the fight and pushing the Germans all the way to the Rhine and demanding terms that amounted to unconditional surrender. Why Pershing was so eager to keep it going is hard to understand. The most charitable explanation was that he had not been so worn down by the endless fighting as had the British and the French.

But the British and the French had no interest in continuing the war, whatever Pershing might have to say about it. Besides the question of what exactly would be gained by prolonging the combat, there was also the simple fact that US soldiers were pouring into France by the hundreds of thousands. By next summer, the US Army might well outnumber the British and French forces combined, which would give the Americans that much more leverage at the peace talks. Foch and Haig saw no reason why their own soldiers should keep fighting and dying for the sake of enhancing the influence of the USA.

One last-minute sticking point was whether the British and French governments themselves were willing to accept Wilson's Fourteen Points. In particular, the British objected to the demand for freedom of the seas. Remember that the Americans still had a grievance over the British blockade. And yet the naval blockade had been a huge asset to the Allies. Arguably, the Royal Navy had won the war. The British government were in no mind to give up their most potent weapon. After some discussion, a face-saving compromise was negotiated, under which the British agreed to the Fourteen Points, with a reservation over the precise interpretation of "freedom of the seas." In other words, the British gave up nothing.

Erzberger and the other three members of his delegation crossed the front line by automobile on November 8 over roads barely worthy of the name. From there they traveled under French military escort to a train parked on a siding in a forest outside the town of Compiègne, where they were handed a list of terms and given 72 hours to reply.

The armistice terms were far harsher than the Germans had been expecting. The German military was to withdraw not only from occupied France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Alsace-Lorraine, but to positions behind the River Rhine. Not only behind the Rhine, but the major Rhine crossing points at Mainz, Koblenz, and Cologne were to be occupied by French, American, and British forces respectively, as well as all territory on the east bank of the Rhine within 30 kilometers of each crossing. This was to insure the Germans could not use the armistice merely to rebuild a defensive line along the river.

But that was just the beginning. The Germans would also have to surrender 5,000 artillery guns, 3,000 mortars, 25,000 machine guns, 1,700 airplanes, 5,000 trucks, 5,000 locomotives, and 150,000 railroad cars. In the east, Germany was to renounce the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the Treaty of Bucharest and withdraw German forces to positions behind the 1914 border. All U-

boats would be surrendered, and the surface fleet interned. And the bitterest pill of all: the British blockade would be maintained until Germany signed a final peace agreement.

Given the uncertain political situation in Berlin and the difficulties in communication, Erzberger wasn't sure 72 hours would be enough time to get an answer. He asked for an additional 24 hours. The request was refused. In fact, the new government in Berlin did receive the armistice terms and did agree to them within the deadline.

At 2:00 AM on Monday, November 11, Foch and Erzberger met in the dining car of the train to discuss the terms. Erzberger raised the subject of the blockade; Foch would say only that he would raise the matter with the French government. Erzberger told Foch, "The German people, which held off a world of enemies for fifty months will preserve their liberty and unity despite every kind of violence. A nation of seventy million people suffers, but it does not die." Foch replied simply, "*Très bien.*" "Okay, then."

The agreement was signed at 5:20 AM, the armistice to take effect at 11:00, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. The time between were necessary to communicate news of the armistice to the soldiers on the front lines.

Combat continued until the appointed time, and soldiers fought and died right up to the end. At 11:00 AM, the armistice went into effect. It was not technically peace, and fighting would go on for some time, many years in some places, but the modern nightmare of industrial-scale warfare was ended after an interminable four years. The war to end war had ended. What would come next...well, that is a story for another episode.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Artur for his donation, and thank you, Chris, for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons helped get us all the way through the Great War, and on to the next chapter in the history of the twentieth century. If you'd like to become a donor or patron, visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com), for more information.

And yes, this is it, the end of the Great War. In truth, as I said a moment ago, fighting will go on for years to come in many places, especially Russia and the Near East, but the war is no longer a world war, no longer demanding half or more of the output of the world's leading economies, and it is customary to draw the line at November 11, 1918, so here we are. It took a lot longer to cover the war than I thought—it always takes longer to cover anything than I think it will when I begin. I guess that just goes with the territory. Also, there have been many episodes since 1914 that covered topics other than the war, especially the Russian revolution, so there's that.

Some of you may have noticed that Apple is now labeling podcast episodes by season. I have retroactively decided that season one of *The History of the Twentieth Century* was the Belle Époque era, ending when the war began. Season two spanned the war itself, which concludes



with today's episode. So next week we will begin season three, which I am tentatively labeling "The Jazz Age." We'll see.

I'm already projecting over twenty-five episodes' worth of material covering the political and diplomatic consequences of the war. Which new nations appeared, how their borders were drawn, and so on. But before we take on that project, I have a few episodes involving the immediate postwar period. The very first topic we will tackle in season three will be the influenza pandemic, which has already come up a few times in the podcast. It began during the war and continued for some time after the armistice, so about now is a good time to focus on what was surely the greatest natural disaster of the twentieth century, although its impact was largely overshadowed by, or lumped together with, the war itself.

So I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we begin the first of two episodes on the pandemic. Pale Horse, Pale Rider, beginning next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Erich Ludendorff, after his resignation and the collapse of the Imperial government in Germany, feared for his life. He donned a disguise and, bearing a forged passport purportedly issued by the new nation of Finland, he escaped to Sweden, where he lived in exile for the next three months, until the Swedish government forced him to return to Germany. Once back in Germany, he got to work on those memoirs I mentioned. In them, he blamed Germany's defeat on...everyone else.

But Ludendorff's memoirs, unlike most, would be widely read and his take on the causes of the German defeat would become influential in German politics. Unfortunately. Prepare yourself; this is going to get ugly.

[music: Closing War Theme]