[13]

ONE HUNDRED DAYS TO VICTORY

Amiens to the Meuse-Argonne

> [Captured German] officers in particular inform us of the weakness of their forces, the youth of their recruits, and the influence of the American entry. They are depressed by their heavy losses, by the poor quality of their food, and by the crisis inside Germany. They are worried and begin to doubt German power. . . . The German is beginning to understand that he cannot win, but he is not ready to give up and he can continue to resist.
>
> —French headquarters report on German army morale, September 4, 1918

After the victory at the Second Battle of the Marne, the Allied armies began a general offensive of their own. The Allied soldiers' progress was better than their senior generals had expected. The German army offered little resistance beyond a determined rear guard, preferring instead to move to more defensible positions further east. The most serious impediment to Allied movements was the Germans' scorched-earth policies, in accordance with which they felled bridges, leveled villages, and mined roads. The French army's first sight of French territory so brazenly destroyed by their enemy reenergized its desire to make Germany pay for its crimes. The men of the 77th French Infantry Regiment recalled their feelings as they passed through damaged French towns in August 1918:

> The destroyed and pillaged villages showed the vandalism of the Germans in their rage at having been forced to retreat, down to the last chair, the last broken window, [and] the last torn-up floor.

> There were depots of gas shells [with fuses timed to release the gas after the Germans had cleared out] hidden among woods, cadavers of horses killed by Germans when they retreated over the Marne, fruit trees upturned, [and] unripe wheat cut down. This well-designed spectacle only increased our hatred of the Boche.[1]

In the view of the men of the 77th, these deliberate German actions lay outside the bounds of war. The destruction of livestock and crops in the summer of 1918 threatened a very difficult winter for the farmers and villagers of eastern France. The Germans, the French believed, should be punished for what they had done.

The men of the 77th were assisted in their pursuit of the Germans by a welcome novelty, motorized transportation. Where French engineers could rebuild bridges and secure the safety of roads from mines, the 77th traveled by truck, a positive change for any infantryman. This innovation underscored the importance of the mechanization of the Allied war effort. The use of tanks at the Second Battle of the Marne had proved to be a crucial deciding factor, allowing the Allies to bring mobile firepower forward to open holes for the infantry to exploit. Aviation, too, played an important role.

These successes were in large part a product of the economic reforms overseen by civilians in the war's first years. Britain's Sir Eric Geddes, among others, reformed the administrative capabilities of the British system to allow the right supplies to be produced in Britain, shipped to the various theaters of war, and used by the units that needed them. Geddes brought his expertise in railway management to the problems of temporarily rededicating Britain's essentially civilian railway network to military purposes. He eventually rose to become First Lord of the Admiralty, where he used his skills to solve Royal Navy problems as well. Allied economic and political reforms of 1915 and 1916, combined with the unhindered cooperation of American industry after April 1917, began to change the face of modern warfare in 1918, greatly to the Allies' favor.

The modernization of war did not extend to all parts of the battlefield. Every army continued to rely on animal and human power for moving supplies. (National Archives)

These successes notwithstanding, none of the Allied senior leaders thought that their victory at the Second Battle of the Marne in mid-July or their rapid pursuit of the Germans at the end of the month would lead to the defeat of Germany in 1918. The most optimistic among them envisioned that victory would follow a massive spring 1919 campaign led by fresh American divisions and spearheaded by thousands of tanks, trucks, and airplanes. More pessimistic leaders, including David Lloyd George, began to plan for a continuation of the war into 1920. Lloyd George had heard too many rosy predictions of easy victory in the past. He was unwilling to count on them in the summer of 1918 only to find himself unprepared to lead Britain into a longer war if one developed.

German leaders, by contrast, were much more likely to believe that the war might end, unfavorably for them, by the end of the year. Operationally, they believed they could overcome the setback at the Marne, but the defeat only underscored the bankruptcy of the Germans' strategy. After the Second Battle of the Marne, with their spring offensives a failure, Germany had no obvious strategic alternatives and no fallback plan. Germany's allies, moreover, required massive assistance just to keep them from collapsing. Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire all sat at the extreme end of their operational capacities. Few Germans expected much help from them in the weeks and months to come. As their own allies began to collapse, the Germans knew, the Allied powers would be free to shift even more assets to the western front or to operations designed at attacking Germany from other directions. The latter included plans by Lloyd George and Henry Wilson to commence large-scale operations in the Balkans. Allied success in such theaters could have important consequences. Russia and Romania might even reenter the war if they sensed German weakness, placing at risk the eastern conquests that the Germans expected to hold after the war even if they lost the war on the western front.

Materially, the Germans' position gave them little cause for hope. The appearance of the Americans, combined with the economic strength of Britain and France, tipped the balance sheet on the western front against Germany for the first time in the war. In the summer of 1918 Germany faced a western front manpower deficit of 4,002,104 Allied soldiers to 3,576,900 German soldiers. Those numbers included 786,489 fresh Americans in France on August 1; throughout the summer the Americans augmented that number by almost 30,000 more men per day. The Allied numbers, therefore, would continue to grow as the German numbers fell. American divisions, moreover, were twice the size of German divisions, providing greater punch and endurance on the battlefield.

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

The crisis of 1918 led the Americans to send troops as quickly as possible, often without supplies. Many American units relied on French and British supplies, such as the French 75mm artillery gun shown here. (National Archives)

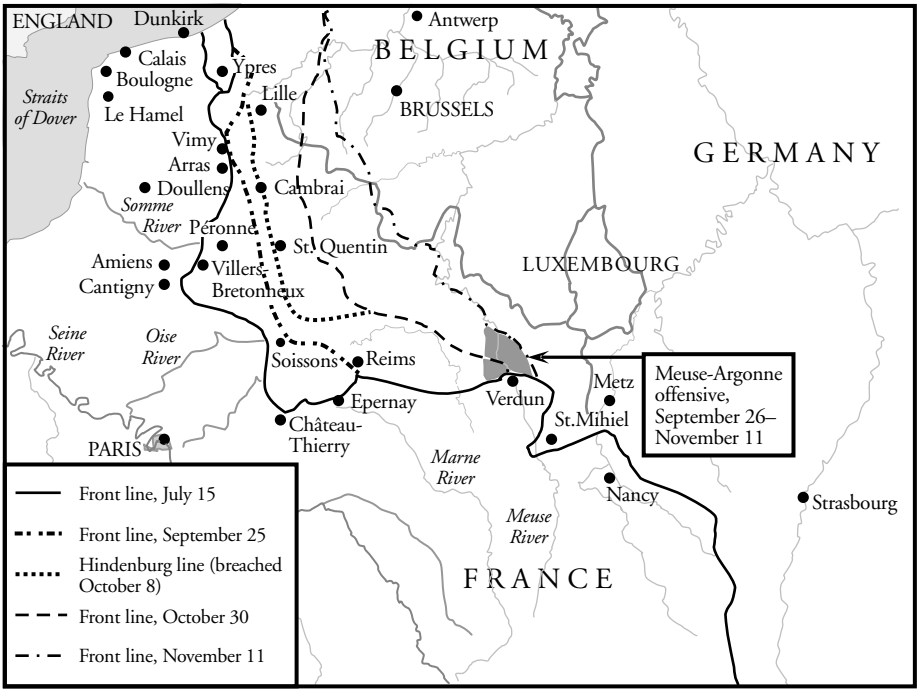
Scores of German units were in no condition to fight. Exhausted by the spring fighting, they needed several weeks or months to rest and refit before they could resume offensive operations. Resupplying these units would not be an easy task, as Germany also faced insurmountable deficits in tanks (1,572 Allied to 10 German), airplanes (5,646 Allied to 2,991 German), machine guns (37,541 Allied to 20,000 German), and gasoline reserves.[2] The Allies had the ability to add large numbers of newer models of all of the weapons of modern warfare throughout 1918 and, if necessary, into 1919. The Germans, by contrast, would need to rely on dwindling stocks of their increasingly outdated weapons, most notably tanks and airplanes.

Despite massive Allied casualties in the first half of 1918, Foch

wanted to press his advantages as rapidly as possible. Consequently, having turned back the last of Germany's spring offensives, he directed the Allies to assume the offensive. The Marne sector offered an enticing opportunity because the German advance there had left them with a salient that jutted sharply into Allied lines, thereby exposing the Germans on three sides. The western tip of the salient, marking the point of Germany's furthest advance, lay at the town of Château-Thierry on the Marne River. The center of the salient lay at the Plateau of Tardenois, about ten miles to the east. Pétain hoped to attack the salient with twin drives at its northern and southern shoulders, with the drives meeting at Tardenois. The ultimate goal, according to Pétain's orders, was not only to "chase [the Germans] from the Château-Thierry pocket, but to cut off their retreat toward the north and to capture the mass of their forces."[3]

Pétain had eighteen French infantry divisions, three American infantry divisions, and two British infantry divisions at his disposal for the operation. Sensing the danger, the Germans abandoned the entire Château-Thierry salient on July 20 and 21. Their need to refit and replace their losses had reduced their available reserves from sixty-two divisions on July 17 to forty-two divisions just a week later. German headquarters also reduced the size of battalions from 980 men to 880 men, a further indication of the serious depletion of German manpower. German headquarters knew it could neither resist an Allied attack on the Château-Thierry salient nor afford the catastrophic losses that would have been suffered if the Allies cut off the salient.

The Allied reoccupation of the Château-Thierry salient had several important ramifications. With the threat to Paris eliminated, the two British divisions were now free to return to British command near Amiens in order to support offensive operations in that sector. They were replaced by three fresh American divisions, bringing the American total in the sector to six double-strength divisions, enough to lead to the landmark creation of the Ameri-



Allied advances, July 15–November 11, 1918

can First Army, approved by the Supreme War Council on July 25 and implemented on August 10. Together with the Americans, the French pursued the retreating Germans in the Marne sector from July 15 to August 5, capturing 29,000 German soldiers, 612 artillery pieces, and 3,330 machine guns. They also recaptured 177 French guns and 393 French machine guns lost during the spring. In all, they captured more than 6 million rounds of small arms ammunition and almost 1 million artillery shells.[4] Germany could not afford these losses.

After the Germans' failure to take Château-Thierry and push on toward Paris, Ludendorff became increasingly distant from both the realities of the war and from his own staff. He refused to

read the signs of an army that had become completely exhausted, most notably the higher desertion rates, the propensity of the Germans to surrender, and increased instances of men refusing the orders of their officers. He denied that the Spanish influenza was having any effect on German soldiers, nor did he accept the reality that his offensives had killed most of Germany's elite soldiers, leaving the army with hundreds of thousands of poorly trained reservists to meet the determined Allied attacks he knew were imminent. Lacking a strategy and a way to turn Germany's fortunes, he yearned for a German victory without being able to effect one.[5] The strain reached across the entire German command structure. Hindenburg's second-in-command suffered a nervous breakdown, and several other officers lost faith in Ludendorff and his grandiose schemes.

On the Allied side, faith in the commanders and a belief in the possibility of victory were rising. Foch, Haig, and Pétain all understood the need to pressure the Germans before they could recover and reorganize. They knew how tired their own forces were, but believed that time lost in July and August could have critical ramifications. Pétain remained the most cautious of the three, arguing that his men needed more rest before driving east. Foch drove him on, telling him on July 23 that "it is important to resume the mastery of operations vigorously and without delay."[6] Haig soon urged a similar effort from his troops, telling them that "risks which a month ago would have been criminal to incur ought now to be incurred as duty."[7] By moving quickly and pressing on all fronts, the Allies could turn the war around and maybe even win it before winter set in.

THE BLACK DAY AND THE DRIVE TO THE HINDENBURG LINE

In early July, the Germans had received a seemingly minor battlefield setback when Australian and American forces captured the

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American soldiers fought at Le Hamel alongside their Australian comrades. Despite Pershing's demand that his units have absolute independence, the Americans relied heavily for leadership on the experienced Australian "diggers." (Australian War Memorial, negative no. E02690)

nondescript village of Le Hamel. The battle for Le Hamel, although hardly noticed by most men on the western front, had two important ramifications for future combat. The first was its originality and improvisation. The genius behind the battle, a Jewish Australian general named John Monash, used his customary careful preparations to design a "textbook" victory.[8] Monash united air, armor, and infantry operations more smoothly than anyone had previously been able to do. At Le Hamel, tanks supported infantry advances more efficiently than they had done at Cambrai or the Second Battle of the Marne, allowing important communications problems that had previously limited the cooperation of armor and infantry to be overcome. Monash and his air commanders even arranged for Royal Air Force pilots to drop ammu-

nition to men involved in the battle, allowing for resupply "on the fly."

The second innovation involved the incorporation of the Americans. Monash integrated two American regiments into the battle under the overall control of the veteran Australian 4th Infantry Division. Pershing had asked that the Americans not be included in the battle because they were not under overall American command, but after considerable debate Haig and Foch overruled him in the interests of ensuring that the Australians had the power to win the battle. The eager Americans fought extremely well (on July 4, no less), impressing their Australian allies. Pershing, however, remained irritated about his lack of control over American units and vowed to ensure that "nothing of the kind could occur again."[9] The angry reaction of the American commander marred an otherwise successful use of American units into the battlefield. Pershing's outrage, however, did not prevent a solid rapport from developing between the Australians and the Americans, which paid great dividends later in the year.

With American help, Monash's masterpiece worked as he had intended. The main portion of the fighting ended in a little over an hour and a half. Allied soldiers seized all of their objectives with astonishingly light losses. They also captured more than 1,500 German soldiers, many of them unwounded, indicating a growing willingness of the Germans to surrender at the first opportunity. The Australians who fought at Le Hamel noted the difference in German fighting strength. They concluded that the German army was "no longer the formidable foe in defence that it had been in 1916 and 1917."[10] Monash therefore argued that the Australian Corps' parent unit, the British Fourth Army, should take advantage of the momentum gained by the victory at Le Hamel. His new scheme of combined operations, he contended, should be tried out on a much larger scale and be aimed at a much more strategically important target.

Monash played a key role in developing the subsequent battle, which was directed at securing the lateral lines of communication running east of Amiens. These lines supplied most of the Germans units in Picardy and Artois. The plan counted on catching the Germans by surprise. There would be no preparation bombardment by a massive artillery park to give away the attack; instead, the British planned to mass tanks to provide local firepower. Foch ordered that all details of the plan be hidden from anyone who did not need to know, including several key members of Allied war ministries. Allied commanders continually shifted the location of conferences and meetings so that they would never be seen together in the same army or corps headquarters twice.

To ensure secrecy on the ground, the British restricted their movements to nighttime and flew airplanes overhead to mask the noise of tank engines. British troops found a slip of paper in their pay books that reminded them to "keep your mouths shut" about the operation when in rest areas. Signposts on the roads to and from forward areas carried the same message. British radio operators also made phony broadcasts to suggest that a British attack in Flanders was imminent. They knew that the decoy had worked when the Germans sent reinforcements to Flanders instead of the Amiens sector.

The careful preparations paid off; the British attack on August 8 took the Germans almost completely by surprise. The attack was led by the British Fourth Army, under its widely respected commander, General Henry Rawlinson. Rawlinson had taken over Gough's broken Fifth Army in late March, renaming it, reorganizing it, and restoring its confidence. Its role as the lead army in the offensive at Amiens showed that it had recovered from the losses it had received in the spring. The solid Canadian and Australian corps came under the Fourth Army as well, adding veteran leadership and some of the best soldiers in the Allied armies. The Canadians, moreover, had not been involved in the bloody fighting of

March and April and were thus fresh. The Australians brought lessons learned from Le Hamel and played a critical role at Amiens, occupying the center of the line.

Rawlinson had a total of 14 infantry divisions, 2,000 artillery pieces, and 450 tanks, the most yet assembled for one battle. The tanks included 342 of the new heavy Mark V models, which were, in the words of the Fourth Army's historian, "handy to maneuver, being able to twist and turn with a rapidity which a year before would have been thought impossible." The new tanks were also less vulnerable to low-trajectory fire, allowing them to be brought further forward. To this arsenal the British added 800 aircraft, some of them dedicated to supporting the advance of the tanks. In the weeks before the battle, aerial photography had spotted and marked all of the German defenses, making the German strongpoints "easily discernable" for the tanks and supporting aircraft. The planning had been done so thoroughly and the secret assembly of forces so efficiently that it was said that "the Battle of Amiens was really won before the attack began."[11]

For the men of the Allied armies who led the attack it was "glorious once again to be in the rush of an advance" after the months of retreating.[12] With near-total surprise and with the Fourth Army's careful preparations leaving little to chance, the advance was Britain's most successful of the war on the western front. By 11:30 on the morning of August 8, the Canadians had seized the first two lines of German defenses. By the end of the day, they had advanced a remarkable eight miles in some places, opening holes that allowed the British to use cavalry to attack the lines of communication of the retreating German units. The French First Army, operating under British control to ensure unity of command, experienced success as well, capturing men from eleven different German divisions.

The final balance sheet of Amiens proved two points. First, the Germans had experienced what their own official monograph on the battle called "the greatest defeat the German Army had suf-

This rare photograph shows a bomber dropping its payload on target sets, numbered on the photograph. Strategic bombardment suffered from problems of accuracy and identification of proper targets, but became a fundamental part of Allied plans by the end of the war. (United States Air Force Academy McDermott Library Special Collections)

fered since the beginning of the war."[13] On day one, the Germans had lost on average six miles of territory along the line of the attack and 28,000 men, the vast majority of whom surrendered rather than fight. Ludendorff famously called August 8 the "black day" of the German army and concluded that Germany could no longer hope to win the war. One week later, the kaiser authorized the German foreign ministry to approach the royal family of Holland in the hopes that the Dutch government might serve as a sympathetic intermediary in armistice negotiations with the Allies.

Second, Amiens proved that the Allies had mastered the art of the large set-piece battle. Air and armor working in tandem

with infantry provided the mass of firepower needed to overcome enemy defenses. Sophisticated artillery techniques, such as flash spotting and sound ranging, allowed British gunners to locate German artillery batteries with considerable accuracy. Using these new tactics, Allied counterartillery batteries could efficiently destroy German artillery batteries, thus eliminating one of the main threats to advancing infantry. At Amiens, the crude tactics of 1916 and 1917 had given way to a mechanical style of war that allowed the Allies to move men faster, support their advances with accurate and overwhelming fire support, and allow operations to continue behind the enemy's lines. The Germans had no answer to this new way of war. Unable to hold on near Amiens, they retreated to the high ground around St. Quentin and Péronne, bringing them once again to the line of the 1916 Somme battles.

This retreat placed the Germans along some of the same ground that they had once defended so well. The terrain may have been similar two years later, but the armies were not. The inexperienced British New Armies that fought in 1916 with insufficient materiel had now been replaced by veteran units well served by stocks of modern weapons and men well schooled in the techniques needed to use them. The Germans, by contrast, were now tired, with some divisions at one-quarter of the manpower strength they had had in the spring. They could not hope to hold the British off the high ground around the Somme River in 1918 as stubbornly as they had in 1916.

The Germans held just one bridgehead west of the Somme River, at the town of Péronne. Ludendorff envisioned holding the town temporarily while his forces established new defensive lines east of the Somme but west of the line of defenses known as the Hindenburg Line, which ran intermittently south-southeast from Lille to Metz. His plan was complicated by two factors. First, of the forty-five divisions in the German reserve, only nineteen were classified as "fresh." Fifteen reserve divisions were in the process of

being reconstituted, meaning that they were being pieced back together from among the survivors of other units; and eleven were "tired," meaning that they were unable to engage in offensive operations and could only engage in emergency defensive operations.[14]

The Germans' second problem was that the Allies had no intention of giving the Germans any time to rest and refit. Foch had already told Allied commanders to "give the enemy no respite" from a general Allied offensive and to "respond to the situation of the moment" in directing local attacks.[15] To accomplish these goals he moved the French Sixth Army out of the general reserve to add to the mass of Allied units available to attack. He also moved six other French infantry divisions out of the reserve and assigned them to the Army Group Center. French units were told not to expect reinforcements before "a delay impossible to determine," but Foch's actions gave the French maximum ability to pressure the Germans all along the western front.[16] To add weight to the British attack, Foch also moved six heavy artillery brigades from the French First Army to British efforts in Flanders.

Once again, the Australians led the way in putting Foch's orders into action. On the night of August 30, before the Germans could secure their defenses around Péronne, the Australians severed the rail lines south of the town. Without a rail link, the Germans could not resupply a sufficient garrison inside Péronne. The next night, British troops approached the heights of St. Quentin—"a veritable bastion," as the Fourth Army's historian wrote, "the capture of which would enable us to enfilade the enemy's positions . . . and threaten the safety of his whole line."[17] Australian troops once again led the attack, seizing the heights despite a variety of obstacles, both natural and man-made. Rather than fight another battle he knew he could not win, Ludendorff ordered German forces to abandon the Somme positions, retreat to the Hindenburg Line, and prepare to make a stand there. Ger-

The town of St. Quentin formed a main center of resistance on the Hindenburg Line in 1918. These ruins testify to the intensity of the fighting there. (National Archives)

man reserves then sat at just nine divisions capable of offensive operations.

Farther to the south, the Allies undertook the task of eliminating another salient, this one just south of Verdun and based around the town of St. Mihiel. Since the start of the war, this salient had protected the approaches to the economically vital Briey iron basin and the critical rail center at Metz. The responsibility for the St. Mihiel attack fell to the Americans, to whom Pétain had loaned four French infantry divisions, showing "the vast faith he had in the military abilities of the AEF and in the leadership capabilities of Pershing and his corps commanders." Pétain's decision, a function of the close friendship he had developed with

Pershing, was an example of amalgamation in reverse: French units now sat under an overall American command. The American First Army that attacked at St. Mihiel thus included 110,000 French soldiers, 3,010 French artillery pieces, and 113 French tank crews.[18] The Americans also had command of the entire Allied air fleet, the war's largest, which included 1,400 planes from four different air forces.

With this arsenal, the Americans simultaneously struck the southern and western faces of the St. Mihiel salient on September 12, 1918. The Germans had seen the danger to the salient and, as they had done at Château-Thierry, decided to evacuate it rather than fight. The American attack caught the Germans in the first stages of this withdrawal; nevertheless, the Germans lost 16,000 prisoners and more than 460 heavy guns. By nightfall on September 13, the American First Army had cleared the salient; by September 16 the Americans had recovered more than 200 square miles of French territory. The roads to Sedan and Metz were opened, the southern threat to Verdun had ended, and the Americans had gained immensely in confidence. They soon began the difficult process of planning a follow-up operation north of St. Mihiel in the Meuse-Argonne sector. Few generals on either side dared any longer to question the value of the Americans to the overall Allied war effort.

The attack on the St. Mihiel salient was the last in the series of limited offensives envisioned by Foch in his memorandum of July 24. After the victory at St. Mihiel, he directed an all-out attack aimed at pressuring the Germans on every front with maximum force. Foch was now certain that the Allies could win the war in 1918. To do so, he believed that they had to cut the lateral Antwerp-to-Metz railway that supplied German forces in France, place Allied forces across the Rhine River, and attrite German units to the point that they could not offer significant resistance. The most important obstacle to all of these goals was the

Hindenburg Line. Unless the Allies breached that line before the onset of winter, Foch knew, his hope of winning the war in 1918 would be dashed.

"MAKE IMMEDIATE PEACE OVERTURES"

By September 11, 1918, Allied forces had cleared most of the obstacles that guarded the approaches to the Hindenburg Line, including the Somme, Oise, Aisne, and Vesle River valleys. French and British units had established contact in the heights just west of the line itself. Excellent weather permitted the rapid movement of men and supplies as well as frequent reconnaissance overflights. These flights, combined with captured German documents, gave the Allies solid intelligence on the strong and weak points of the line's defenses. On September 18, the Australians seized important high ground opposite the Hindenburg Line east of St. Quentin. They moved the line forward 5,000 yards along four miles of front and captured 4,243 German soldiers, 87 artillery pieces, and 300 machine guns.

The line itself, however, remained unbreached. It was designed, according to the Germans who built it with labor from Russian prisoners of war, to afford "the most favorable conditions for a stubborn defense by a minimum garrison."[19] It contained thick belts of barbed wire, solidly constructed concrete machine-gun outposts, and a sophisticated trench network as deep as 2,000 yards in places. In the Australian-American sector, this set of defenses was augmented by the presence of the four-mile-long St. Quentin canal tunnel, which ran behind the main Hindenburg Line defenses. Once drained of its water, it formed a spacious underground bunker that offered protection from even the most powerful artillery bombardment. The tunnel was an ideal place for the Germans to locate storehouses. Once enhanced with ventilation, heat, electricity, and underground passageways to the trenches, the tunnel also provided an ideal location for barracks.

The steep slopes of the canal and German antitank ditches made the ground difficult terrain for Allied tanks, leaving many units without the armor support to which they had grown accustomed. Tanks therefore were used only to crush barbed wire on the near side of the canal.

The task of breaking the line at St. Quentin fell again to Monash and his Australians. The American II Corps, composed of the 27th Division from New York and the 30th from Tennessee and the Carolinas, came under Australian command for the duration of the operation. Due to the inexperience of so many American officers, Monash assigned an Australian officer or senior NCO to each American company. Because British artillery could not penetrate the tunnel, Monash planed to target tunnel entrances with gas and high-explosive shells in order to keep German soldiers pinned down inside. The Americans would then advance and capture initial objectives. Once the Americans had their goals in hand, the Australians would follow them to the second line in "leapfrog" style.

Powerful British artillery began its work on September 26. The British had concentrated one artillery piece for every three yards of front, double the ratio they had had at the Somme on July 1, 1916. From September 26 to October 4, the British fired 1.3 million high-explosive and gas shells. The raw power of the British shelling forced many Germans to seek deeper and deeper hiding places, neutralizing their effectiveness to resist the coming assault. On the night of September 28, the men of the two American divisions assumed their positions, received rations, and wrote letters home, some of them for the last time.

As they had in their previous campaigns, the Americans fought with an enthusiasm that compensated for their inexperience. On the first day of the ground phase, September 29, the 27th Division opened a hole 6,000 yards deep by 10,000 yards long in the German defenses and crossed to the far side of the canal. In parts of the attack sector, American inexperience proved to be costly. Some

units failed to account for all German machine-gun positions before passing them by. This failure to "mop up" caused one unit, the 107th Regiment of the 27th Division, to sustain the highest casualty rates of any American regiment in the war. Still, by the morning of day two the southern entrance to the St. Quentin tunnel and the northern strongpoint known as the Knoll were in Allied hands. The Australian 5th Division then leapfrogged the Americans and continued the attack.

Ground combat in this sector continued for several more days until, on October 4, the Germans ordered a general retirement. The Hindenburg Line, which Ludendorff had expected would delay the Allies through the winter, had fallen in just days. The decision to retire from the Hindenburg Line sector left the Allies, noted one historian, in an area with "no prepared lines of defense" in front of them. The terrain, "well suited to the employment of cavalry and tanks," presented the kind of possibilities for pursuit that generals on the western front had been seeking for four years.[20]

Farther to the south, the Americans had launched a concurrent offensive in the Meuse-Argonne sector northwest of Verdun. A successful offensive in this region would cut the remaining railroads that serviced the German forces on the western front and might divide the German forces in two. Because of the importance of this sector, the Germans had no intention of voluntarily surrendering it as they had the Château-Thierry and St. Mihiel sectors. Their defenses, moreover, were anchored by the heavy woods of the Argonne forest on the west, the heights of Montfaucon in the center, and the Meuse River to the east. To reinforce these natural defenses, the Germans had built three solid belts of trenches defended with mutually supporting machine-gun nests and artillery positions. It represented one of the most formidable defensive arrangements on the western front.

The American First Army attacked the Meuse-Argonne sector on September 26 with 2,700 artillery pieces and nineteen divi-

[To view this image, refer to the print version of this title.]

This aerial view of trenches on the Meuse-Argonne front in 1918 shows the characteristic zigzag pattern of trench networks. The Americans hoped to move quickly through this sector to prevent the Germans from entrenching too deeply, but were frustrated by supply problems. (United States Air Force Academy McDermott Library Special Collections)

sions, six of which were French. The unenviable task of the First Army in the Meuse-Argonne was compounded by a poor road network, which greatly complicated supply and movement. The battle for the Meuse-Argonne turned into a massive campaign of attrition that the Americans could afford to fight, but the Germans could not. The fighting continued until the signing of the armistice, eventually engaging Americans from twenty-two divisions, 4 million artillery shells, 324 tanks, and 840 airplanes. In the offensive's first week, the Americans advanced to a maximum depth of eight miles and captured the commanding heights of Montfaucon. They approached the German third defensive line,

which was actually an extension of the Hindenburg Line. There they temporarily stalled on October 4, but despite its logistical and tactical shortcomings the Meuse-Argonne offensive had already served its purpose. The American advance had proven that the Germans could not even hold the ideal defensive country of the Meuse-Argonne in the face of the materiel and human superiority of the Allies.

Sensing the hopelessness of their military situation, the Germans began to look for a diplomatic solution. On October 1, Ludendorff had directed the German foreign ministry to "make immediate peace overtures." He told them that "the troops are still holding on, but no one can predict what will happen tomorrow. . . . The front could be pierced at any moment."[21] Like most senior German officials, Ludendorff hoped to negotiate with the less vengeful Americans. Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points seemed to hold out the hope of a peace with some honor. Although Ludendorff had not bothered to read the actual text of the Fourteen Points for himself, he hoped that the president's call for national self-determination might allow Germany to keep the German-speaking parts of Alsace-Lorraine and the portions of eastern Europe then under German military control.

The Fourteen Points, which Wilson had first publicized in a presidential address of January 8, 1918, in fact held out no such hope. Point 8 specified that "the wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine . . . should be righted," and Point 6 called for German evacuation of all Russian territory. The real diplomatic value of the Fourteen Points to Germany lay in the disagreement that it caused between the Americans and their European allies. The British were uncomfortable with the anticolonial tone of Point 5, the removal of economic barriers called for in Point 3, and the demand for "freedom of the seas" in Point 2. The latter two points in particular threatened the very cornerstones of the British Empire. Clemenceau, who distrusted Wilson's idealism and disliked his arrogance, was more blunt.

Upon first seeing the Fourteen Points he declared, "God Himself was content with ten."[22]

On October 6, the new German chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, asked Wilson to arrange an armistice and organize peace negotiations based on the principles of the Fourteen Points. Wilson replied that he needed assurances that the Germans were truly willing to accept the Fourteen Points as the basis for discussion. The American response infuriated Clemenceau and Lloyd George, who were astonished that Wilson would engage in bipartisan talks with the Germans. They were also fearful that Wilson might conclude an armistice that was against their interests. Given British and French reliance on the United States for credit, manpower, and resources, they might be left with no choice but to accept an armistice Wilson negotiated without their input. The polite tone of Wilson's reply, however, was warmly received in Berlin, where the German government grasped at it "like a drowning person reaches for a lifeline."[23]

On October 12, Prince Max sent Wilson a carefully worded message that made no commitments, but left German desires for a peace based on the Fourteen Points quite clear. It indicated German willingness to abandon unspecified occupied territory and underscored that the chancellor, not the kaiser (with whom Wilson had refused to deal) was the head of the German government. German military headquarters had approved the text of the message, indicating how serious they believed the situation to be. At approximately the same time that Wilson received the second German note, he also received word that a German U-boat had sunk the civilian liner *Leinster,* killing 200 people.

The sinking, plus the pressure placed on him by Lloyd George and Clemenceau, put Wilson in a less conciliatory mood. His reply to the second note demanded an immediate end to submarine warfare and an immediate evacuation of all territory seized by Germany since 1914. The president also implied that unless the kaiser abdicated, Germany could not hope to open negotiations.

For most of the war, northeastern France remained under harsh German military government. These French peasants welcome their liberators after four years of occupation. (National Archives)

The contrast in tone between Wilson's first and second notes caused a panic in Berlin, where German officials now knew that they could not use the moderation of Wilson to avoid the harshness of the French and British.

The long-anticipated collapse of Germany's allies had begun as well. On October 24, a reenergized Italian army struck the Austro-Hungarians at Vittorio Veneto. By November 3, they had captured 80,000 Austro-Hungarian soldiers and taken 1,600 of Austria-Hungary's 2,000 remaining artillery pieces. On October 26, Count Mihály Károlyi declared Hungary independent. Czechoslovakia, Slovenia, Bosnia, and Croatia all followed suit. Bulgaria surrendered to the Allies on October 29. The Ottoman Empire surrendered the next day.

The German state itself began to unravel as conditions on the home front approached desperation and the army could no longer hide the seriousness of the military position. On October 29, a mutiny by 600 sailors broke out in Kiel, followed by a massive mutiny on November 4 by 100,000 sailors in ten ports. The mutineers seized control of ships, took over town governments, and demanded an end to the war. The mutinies had distinctly pro-Bolshevik overtones, as did the creation of a "Free State of Bavaria" under socialist Kurt Eisner on November 7. Several members of Germany's nobility had already fled the country, fearing an outbreak of Soviet-style Bolshevism that the army was in no position to quell.

Nor could the army stop the Allied steamroller. The only factor slowing the Allied armies was their inability to provide food and ammunition to units moving so quickly that they had advanced far ahead of the rail centers designated for their resupply. The German units, by contrast, were increasingly beset by disease, malnutrition, lack of ammunition, and a crisis of demoralization that left no doubt about the war's outcome. A letter found on the body of a German officer in the war's final week described his unit:

> The men have been in the same clothes, dirty, lousy, and torn, for four weeks, are suffering from bodily filth and a state of depression due to living continuously within range of the enemy's guns, and in daily expectation of an attack. The troops are hardly in a fit state to fulfill the task allotted to them in the case of an attack.[24]

The Germans faced a stark choice. They could agree to whatever armistice terms the Allies offered, thereby fending off the invasion of Germany itself that Pershing and others were urging, or they could fight on. The absolute futility of sustaining an armed struggle combined with the nightmarish prospect of an Allied victory march through Berlin led the Germans to send a radio signal

to Paris on November 7, indicating their willingness to discuss armistice terms.

Foch had argued forcefully that the Allies should conclude an armistice as soon as the Germans agreed to his conditions. Fighting on to make the symbolic gesture of invading Germany struck him as unnecessary. "I am not waging war for the sake of waging war," he told Edward House. "If I obtain through the armistice the conditions that we wish to impose on Germany, I am satisfied. Once this object is attained, nobody has the right to shed one more drop of blood."[25] Upon receiving the German signal, he reiterated his belief to Clemenceau that an armistice was a purely military affair and therefore fell under his purview, not Clemenceau's. The French prime minister reluctantly agreed and left the arrangements for the armistice to Foch. The Allied commander-in-chief assembled his staff, gave them precise instructions for delivering the Germans through Allied lines, and warned his army commanders to look out for a German trick. With victory so close at hand, Foch left nothing to chance.