World War I: Events Leading to the Armistice  
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**Wilson’s Fourteen Point Speech**

As the Germans were planning their big Spring Offensive for 1918, US President Woodrow Wilson made a speech on 8 January 1918 which set out the ‘War Aims and Peace Terms of the United States’. Wilson had tried to get Britain and France to join him in making a joint statement, but they had refused. Known as the ‘Fourteen Points’, Wilson’s speech set out 14 points on which he hoped that a fair and lasting peace could be negotiated.

1. There should be no secret treaties among nations.
2. There should be freedom of the seas outside territorial waters in peacetime and wartime.
3. There should be free trade among nations.
4. There should be international disarmament.
5. Colonies should have a say in their own future.
6. German troops should leave Russia, which has a right to develop independently.
7. There should be withdrawal of troops from Belgium which is an independent country.
8. There should be withdrawal of troops from France, and the return to France of Alsace-Lorraine.
9. The Austrian-Italian borders should be adjusted along nationality lines.
10. There should be self-determination for the peoples of Austria-Hungary (ethnic groups to form their own nations).
11. Foreign troops should be withdrawn from the Balkan states and Serbia given access to the sea.
12. There should be self-determination for ethnic groups under Turkish rule.
13. Creation of an independent Poland with access to the sea.
14. A League of Nations should be established to keep world peace.

Wilson’s Fourteen Points highlight his personal ambition for world order, based upon concepts of self-determination and equality of nations. Although reluctantly drawn into the war, Wilson saw it as an opportunity to create something new from the chaos, changing from the old world order dominated by the European nations to a more global perspective that could incorporate fairness and justice.

Wilson was seen by many as a naive idealist. Britain and France never accepted Wilson’s 14 points and did not feel obliged to follow them during later peace negotiations. Germany also initially rejected the 14 points, although came to see them as important points that might assist them in peace negotiations once their war effort began to falter in September-October 1918.

**Recap on Spring Offensive and Allied counter-offensive**

The military efforts on the Western Front continued, with the Ludendorff (Spring) Offensives commencing in March 1918. Supported with increased numbers of troops from the Eastern Front, the shock troop tactics proved effective in the early offensives and Germany made significant territorial gains. Paris again came under threat. The stalemate was broken and the Western Front again became a war of movement. Yet the British and French troops, while pushed back, were able to hold their lines and not allow a complete German breakthrough.
The Germans suffered high casualty numbers during the early Spring offensives. With exhausted troops and morale falling despite the territorial gains, the later German offensives were not as successful and they seemed to grind to a halt.

With a renewed vigour, and under the leadership of Foch as Allied Commander in Chief, the Allies launched their Counter Offensive on 18 July. The Allies were using new strategies, including better coordination of artillery, tanks, infantry and air, and the close phasing of short targeted offensives at different parts of the line. Low German morale and the loss of the most experienced German troops through casualties left an under strength German defence. The Allies were extremely successful at making territorial gains, as well as capturing large numbers of German prisoners and guns.

The second of the Allied counter offensives involved an attack at Amiens on 8 August. The collapse of the German front line (although reinforced later by reserve troops) was seen by Ludendorff as ‘the black day of the German army’. He started to become concerned about the ability of the Germans to hold against the Allied counter offensives. The continued Allied success continued to take its toll on the German troops and the command, with Ludendorff suffering a seizure on 28 September as the Allies broke through the Hindenburg line. The following day the German command advised the Chancellor that Germany should seek an armistice as soon as possible.

[For detail on the Spring Offensive and the Allied counter offensive, see separate notes named ‘Ludendorff Spring Offensive and Allied Counter Offensive’.

Seeking an armistice

On 3 October 1918, the Germans made a formal application for peace. The Germans did not make this directly to the French and the British, instead making its application to US President Woodrow Wilson. The Germans were seeking to negotiate an armistice and a peace agreement on the basis of Wilson’s Fourteen Points, with its emphasis on fairness and justice. Wilson was effectively asked to act as an intermediary for the Germans, making overtures to the British and French in an attempt to commence negotiations based on his Fourteen Points. Wilson took on the role, but declared he would not consider anything further until the Germans vacated France and Belgium. He also indicated that the cessation of submarine warfare and a change from an autocratic government in Germany would be necessary to finalise armistice negotiations. As fighting continued on the Western Front and the Germans continued to be pushed back, the German government made a series of announcements aimed at securing an armistice:

- 12 October – Germany would agree to withdraw its forces from France and Belgium upon signing of an armistice.
- 21 October – All submarine warfare would cease.

The French and British continued to reject Wilson’s Fourteen Points, considering them too vague. The US threatened to make a separate peace with the Germans. On 25 October the Allied military commanders met and agreed to work towards an armistice, although they were inclined to ensure that the Germans would be unable to engage in any future military action. The British and French leaders also agreed to require that compensation for all damage caused to the civilian population by the aggression of Germany be paid for by Germany.
As the German Home Front became aware of the German government’s peace negotiations, unrest broke out. There were demands for major political and economic reform. This was accompanied by widespread mutiny in the army. On 7 November the government sent a delegation to negotiate an armistice with the Allies. The delegation was taken deep behind the Allied lines and commenced negotiations on Foch’s private train. While the German delegation had the opportunity to see the terms of the armistice, they had little opportunity to truly negotiate the terms.

On 9 November, a revolution in Berlin led to the abdication of the Kaiser himself, and the socialist leader Ebert became Chancellor as a new republican government was declared. The German delegation were shown the Paris newspaper that heralded the news. While an attempt was made by the delegation to seek instructions from Berlin, communication with the new government could not be made due to the chaos.

At 5.10am on 11 November, the German delegation signed the armistice in the railway carriage in France. The ceasefire took effect from 11am that day.

**Conditions of the armistice**

The terms of the armistice were harsh for Germany. They removed any advantage that Germany had gained during the war, and placed them in a difficult situation for the peace negotiations. The terms included:

- Evacuation of all occupied territory (including Alsace-Lorraine).
- Return of all prisoners of war.
- The handing over to the Allies of 5000 heavy guns and 30,000 medium guns and 1700 planes.
- Evacuation of the left bank of the Rhine, and a 10 kilometre zone east of the Rhine to be neutral.
- No removal of population from evacuated territories.
- No destruction of road or rail.
- Restoration of mines and water supplies.
- 5000 locomotive engines, 150,000 railway wagons and 5000 trucks to be handed over immediately.
- Allied rights of requisition in occupied territory to be acknowledged.
- Surrender of its naval fleet to a neutral power or Great Britain.
- Return or replacement of stolen property.
- *Reparations* to follow for all loss and damage to civilian populations caused by German aggression.

In the meantime, the British maintained its blockade of Germany. This was done to keep the pressure on Germany, ensuring the signing of the armistice and compliance with the terms of the armistice. The blockade was maintained until the Treaty of Versailles was signed in June 1919.