

Armistice helpsheet for primary schools



War Memorials Trust

This helpsheet outlines key information for primary school teachers about events leading up to, on and after 11th November 2018 when the Armistice which brought an end to World War I was signed. This helpsheet discusses the early part of 1918, the Hundred Day Offensive, other contributing factors to Germany requesting an Armistice, events on 11th November and reaction to them and the Paris Peace Conference which led to the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. This information can be used alongside the series of War Memorials Trust's Armistice resources which include a series of lessons and an assembly. It may also be useful for general studies of World War I.

Early 1918

At the start of 1918 Germany were considered to be in a strong position and were expected to win the war. Russia had withdrawn from the war soon after the October Revolution in 1917. This was followed by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3rd March 1918 which saw the Germans and Russians make peace. This made Germany stronger by allowing them to release a million soldiers from the Eastern front to concentrate its efforts on the Western Front.

On 21st March 1918, under the command of General Ludendorff, Germany launched its Spring Offensive (or Ludendorff Offensive as it is also known) with Operation Michael. The attack on the Western Front took place before American reinforcements arrived and caught the Allies by surprise, pushing them back across the old Somme battlefields. By July the German troops were within 64km (40 miles) of Paris but this was at a cost of 500,000 casualties. The Germans had hoped for a quick victory. However, they were stopped in their tracks by a counter attack from French and American forces led by Marshal Foch which took place on 18th July 1918. The attack stopped the German advance on the River Marne, east of Paris and began to push them back. The tide of the battle had turned and seemed to be favouring the Allies.

The Hundred Days Offensive

On 8th August 1918 British, Australian, Canadian and French forces led by General Rawlinson launched a surprise powerful counter attack against the German troops at Amiens. The Battle of Amiens saw a new combination of tactics employed by the Allies which proved to be very successful. Furthermore the German army was growing short of food so gave little resistance. The Allies advanced by 12km (7.5 miles) on the first day. This marked the start of the Hundred Days Offensive which continued until the 11th November 1918. This offensive is considered to be one of the significant events which led to the end of the war.

Throughout August and September the Allies pushed on, gaining more and more ground. By mid-September they had reached the German's Hindenburg Line. Built in 1916, this was a warren of trenches, barbed wire and concrete fortifications which stretched for 5km (3 miles) in some areas. It was believed impenetrable by many. On 26th September 1918 the British Artillery continuously rained shells down on the Hindenburg Line as the tanks and infantry attacked on the ground. By 5th October the Allied armies had breached the entire Hindenburg Line and were crossing open country. The Germans were retreating along the Western Front.

Weeks leading up to 11th November 1918

By the autumn of 1918 Germany and its allies were exhausted. In addition to ground being lost by the German army, many German soldiers were killed and weakened by the 'Spanish flu'. This was a deadly virus which went on to kill millions worldwide the following year. Germany's army were on the point of defeat and its hungry citizens had begun to rebel. Strikes and even mutinies were common.

By the last week of October the Central Powers including Germany, the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary were in talks with the Allies about ending the fighting. Bulgaria had already agreed a ceasefire which was signed on 29th September 1918 and came into effect at noon on 30th September 1918. On 30th October the Ottoman Empire agreed a ceasefire with representatives from Britain. This marked the end of their participation in World War I. Shortly after on 3rd November Austria-Hungary signed their ceasefire which would begin the following day (4th November).

On 7th November a German delegation headed by Matthias Erzberger crossed the front line to discuss peace terms with the Allies. The German delegation met with representatives for the Allies led by Marshal Foch in a railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne, France. Negotiations began on 8th November and took place over three days. On the second day of these negotiations, 9th November 1918, the German Kaiser abdicated and Germany was declared a Republic.

11th November 1918: the signing of the Armistice

The Armistice was agreed upon and signed at 5.10am on 11th November 1918. It came into effect at eleven am on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918. The Armistice was an agreement for peace and no more fighting. If any of the terms of the Armistice were broken by Germany, fighting would begin again with 48 hours' notice.

News of the Armistice spread around the world very quickly. It was reported in newspapers, shared via telegrams and spread by word of mouth from street to street. People in Britain, France and the other Allied countries celebrated the end of the war. In London, huge crowds gathered in areas including Trafalgar Square and the Mall. The church bells across Britain which had fallen silent for most of World War I rang out in celebration of the news.

Although the Armistice was greeted with great joy, there was also a hint of sadness for those who had lost loved ones during the war. Over 900,000 in the British Army were killed and many more were injured meaning nearly every community was affected in some way. Troops on the front line were also rather more subdued than the celebratory mood at home.

The Paris Peace Conference

Following the end of the war the Allied countries wanted to make sure that there was peace for a long time. In January 1919 delegates from 32 countries met in Paris to discuss a peace treaty. They hoped the peace would end all wars. The conference, which opened on 18th January, was dominated by the leaders of Britain (David Lloyd George), France (Georges Clemenceau) and America (Woodrow Wilson) who were often known as the Big Three. Delegations from the other countries made presentations to Lloyd George, Clemenceau and Wilson who then made their decision.

The Big Three all had different hopes for the outcome of the peace treaty. France wanted to punish Germany and stop them from ever fighting again. America wanted to make sure there was peace for a long time. Britain wanted to keep peace and make Germany pay.

The Treaty of Versailles

This was the treaty between Germany and the Allies which was signed at the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles on 28th June 1919. As part of the treaty:

- Germany had to take full responsibility for starting the war
- a League of Nations was set up where by all countries would work together to keep peace. Germany were not allowed to join
- Germany lost a lot of land including Alsace-Lorraine and all of its overseas colonies
- Germany were banned from uniting with Austria
- Germany were restricted to having an army of no more than 100,000 men. They were not allowed an air force or submarines
- Germany had to pay for the cost of the damage they had done in the war

Germany was shocked at how strict the treaty was and people on both sides considered it to be quite harsh. However, it was felt by many that it was necessary.

Commemorating the Armistice

To celebrate the signing of the Peace Treaty and mark the end of World War I a Bank Holiday was declared for 19th July 1919, Peace Day. Crowds gathered in London to witness the Peace Day Parade which involved nearly 15,000 troops. A temporary structure, named the Cenotaph, made of plaster and wood was erected in Whitehall. The marching procession which formed part of the Peace Day celebrations paused at the Cenotaph (which means empty tomb) to honour the dead. Other elements of the celebrations to entertain the gathered crowds included bands playing and performances hosted by the central parks in London.

The Cenotaph, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, was so popular it was decided to build a permanent version despite the fact it was only originally meant to stand for a week. The original was removed in January 1920 and the permanent monument was unveiled on Armistice Day on 11th November 1920 by King George V. As part of the unveiling the body of an unknown soldier was returned to London and reburied at Westminster Abbey. A procession led by King George V took the body from the Cenotaph to Westminster Abbey.

Prior to the first anniversary of the Armistice an Australian journalist named Edward George Honey published a letter in the London Evening News suggesting that a respectful silence to remember those who had given their lives during the Great War should be observed. On 7th November 1919 King George V proclaimed that a 2 minute silence would take place on 11th November 1919, Armistice Day. Part of the proclamation stated "All work, all sound, and all locomotion should cease so that in perfect stillness the thoughts of everyone may be concentrated on revert remembrance of the glorious dead". Further information about [Remembrance Day](#) and its [history](#) can be found at www.learnaboutwarmemorials.org/youth-groups/general.

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