

## Section 4 — The War Comes to a Close



The Meuse-Argonne Offensive was the last major battle of World War I. More than a million American troops helped the Allies capture the railroad that served as Germany's main supply line to France. With defeat all but certain, Germans demanded an end to the fighting. Kaiser Wilhelm abandoned his throne and fled to the Netherlands as the German government agreed to a truce.

As 1918 began, the Allies knew Germany would soon launch a final offensive to end the war in the west. Every day, more troops arrived on the front lines as the Germans raced to defeat the war-weary Allies before the Americans arrived. "We should strike," General Erich Ludendorff told Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German emperor, "before the Americans can throw strong forces into the scale."

### The Meuse-Argonne Offensive Leads to an Armistice

**In early spring 1918, the Germans began their final push.** Their troops advanced rapidly to within 50 miles of Paris. By this time, however, American forces were arriving in Europe at the rate of 300,000 soldiers per month. This was enough to make a difference in the war's outcome.

Between July 15 and August 5, 1918, American forces joined French and British forces in the Second Battle of the Marne. Soon after the Allied forces counterattacked, the German troops fell back. "August 8 was the black day of the German army," General Ludendorff reported to the Kaiser. "It put the decline of our fighting power beyond all doubt . . . The war must be ended."

Estimated World War I Casualties	
Country	Total Casualties
<b>Allied Powers</b>	
Russia	9,150,000
France	6,160,800
British Empire	3,190,235
Italy	2,197,000
United States	323,018
Japan	1,210
Other Allied nations	1,040,164
<b>Central Powers</b>	
Germany	7,142,558
Austria-Hungary	7,020,000
Turkey	975,000
Bulgaria	266,919

Source: U.S. Department of Justice.

**In late September, the Allies launched the Meuse-Argonne Offensive [Meuse-Argonne Offensive: in World War I, the final Allied offensive that brought about the end of the war].** The AEF's goal was to break through the German line to reach the Sedan railroad in northern France. This rail line was the German army's main line of supply and communication with Germany. More than 1 million U.S. troops took part in this final assault. After six weeks of hard fighting through the Argonne Forest, the Americans achieved their objective. **On November 11, 1918, Germany agreed to an armistice—a truce. By then, the other Central powers had also surrendered. The long war was finally over.**

### Counting the Costs and Casualties

**For all involved, the costs of the war in human life and suffering were immense. More than 8 million soldiers had died. Another 21 million were injured, and many would never fully recover or be able to work.** An English veteran and poet named Siegfried Sassoon wrote bitterly of their sacrifice:

Does it matter?—losing your legs? . . .  
 For people will always be kind,  
 And you need not show that you mind  
 When the others come in after hunting  
 To gobble their muffins and eggs.

Does it matter?—losing your sight? . . .  
 There's such splendid work for the blind;  
 And people will always be kind,

As you sit on the terrace remembering  
And turning your face to the light.

—Siegfried Sassoon, "Does It Matter?", 1918

In addition, millions of civilians throughout Europe died from starvation, disease, and other war-related causes. The United States suffered far fewer casualties, with about 116,000 soldiers killed and twice that many wounded or missing.

**The war had also caused horrific damage to farms, forests, factories, towns, and homes throughout Europe.** An Allied soldier described the villages he saw:

They are utterly destroyed, so that there are not even skeletons of buildings left—nothing but a churned mass of debris, with bricks, stones and . . . bodies pounded to nothing. And forests! There are not even tree trunks left—not a leaf or a twig. All is buried and churned up again and buried again.

—John Raws, letter to a friend, August 4, 1916

The war had also destroyed roads, bridges, railroad lines, and other transportation facilities. Countries already severely burdened by the financial cost of war withered under the weight of these additional losses. For Europe, economic recovery would come very slowly in the years ahead.

**Another cost of the war was hard to measure but very real—damage to the human spirit.** Many men and women who had eagerly joined the war effort now felt deeply disillusioned by what they had experienced. They questioned long-held beliefs about the glories of Western civilization and the nobility of war. American poet Ezra Pound spoke for war-weary populations in both the United States and Europe when he wrote of the "myriad," or vast number, who had died "for a botched civilization."