

1918-The Fifth War Year

by Alfred F. Kugel

The Strategic Situation

By the beginning of 1918, although the fighting on the Western front had gone on for nearly 3½ years, neither side had been able to deliver a knockout blow. The French army seemed at risk of collapse following its significant efforts during 1917, and the British were shocked at losing nearly a generation of their young men in the mud of Belgium and Northern France. The leaders of both armies realized that they had very few reserves left. On the German side, when they were able to transfer nearly 50 divisions from the Eastern to the Western front after the Russians withdrew from the war, there was an expectation on the home front that the Kaiser's announcement of a "Peace Offensive" would force the Allies to accept an armistice so that Germany would be able to obtain a negotiated peace of some sort, even if not an actual victory. However, the public remained wary after so many disappointments.

In the meantime, of course, the men of the American Expeditionary Forces continued with their training and by spring began to move to the front in sufficient numbers to slow the German advance and eventually bring it to a halt at places like Château-Thierry, as the drive simply ran out of momentum before any breakthrough could be achieved. The tide then turned and the Allies, aided by the continual infusion of large numbers of fresh and well-trained Americans, were able to push the Germans out of positions that they had occupied since 1914, back toward their own borders. As a result, it became obvious that the Germans were losing the war and they were forced



Figure 1. German delegates arriving in the railway car at Compiègne to sign the Armistice agreement on November 11, 1918.

to consider asking for an Armistice to bring the fighting to an end. This event then took place on November 11, 1918, to the relief of people around the world (Figure 1).

As to the situation on the other fronts, the positions in Italy had been stabilized following the Austro-German advance into Venetia in 1917, but the tide was about to turn there as well. As it turned out, a successful Italian advance would lead to a strategic victory at Vittorio Veneto, the defeat of Austria-Hungary and the disintegration of the Dual Monarchy itself, which were confirmed by an Armistice agreement signed on November 3.

In the East, the Central Powers took advantage of the Treaty of Brest Litovsk with Russia to send troops to various territories inhabited by non-ethnic Russians, including Finland, Estonia, Ukraine, Bessarabia and Transcaucasia. However, these moves proved to be of very little long-range benefit as the respective armistice agreements that their homelands were forced to sign in late 1918 required that their troops evacuate all of the occupied territories in the former Russian empire as well as elsewhere.

In the Balkans, Allied forces were built up in preparation for a new thrust that would use the base at Salonica to begin the liberation of Serbia, which would in due course successfully drive Bulgaria out of the war.

In the Near East, the Allies were preparing to follow up on their 1917 victories in Palestine and Mesopotamia with new offensives that would take them into Syria, Lebanon and Kurdistan up to the borders of Turkey proper, which would bring about the end of the war on the part of the Ottomans.

In Siberia, Allied intervention forces managed to delay the takeover of the area by the Bolsheviks but could not alter anything else as the effort was too little to affect the Russian Civil War and too late to have any impact on the other battlefronts.

The Final German Offensives

The spring and early summer of 1918 saw the final German offensives of the war. Bolstered by the transfer of more than 40 divisions from the eastern front when the



Figure 2. Picture card of the American victory at Château-Thierry on July 18, 1918.

Russians left the war, the Germans unleashed a major advance toward Paris on March 21, followed up by a second thrust in June. These efforts gained as much as 40 miles, but with an increasing number of Americans reaching the front during the same period, the Allies were much better prepared to meet the assault this time. As a result, the final thrust simply ran out of energy without achieving any breakthrough, following much the same pattern as had been seen in 1914 and culminating in the Second Marne victory by the French. In this case they were aided by the Americans in what was known as the Battle of Château-Thierry on July 18, 1918 (Figure 2). At this point, the momentum on the Western front came to a final and decisive shift in favor of the Allies (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Patriotic postcard celebrating the Second Battle of the Marne and depicting General Pershing and French Marshals Foch and Pétain.

The Americans Weigh In

The U.S. Army at the beginning of the war in 1914 was extremely weak, with fewer than 130,000 men, mostly assigned to forts located throughout the western states and overseas in the newly acquired Philippine Islands. It was a major task for the War Department to create a force of sufficient size and training to compete on a European scale.

To build an effective U.S. fighting force, men were drafted and volunteers enlisted in unprecedented numbers, and numerous training camps were opened, at home, in Britain and France. Even so, by the time of the German "Peace Offensive" in the spring of 1918, nearly a year since we entered the war, only 287,000 of our combat troops had arrived in France. However, the number was growing rapidly and, by August, the 500,000-man First Army had been created and General Pershing was ready to unleash it.

The 100 Day Campaign

The final act in the West was initiated on August 8 by the British-French offensive in the Amiens area. This was then capped by the two great American offensives



8—American Advance in the Argonne, Yankee Tank Leading.

Figure 4. American advance in the Argonne area led by a Renault FT light tank.

that got started at the end of the summer; at Saint Michel on September 12 and in the Meuse-Argonne sector just two weeks later (Figure 4).

These thrusts finally broke through the German "Hindenburg Line" defenses and forced a retreat from territory that had been occupied by them throughout the previous four years. The Germans were unable to halt the Allied forward momentum, and before long it became obvious that they would not be able to continue the struggle (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Map of the Western Front showing area gained by the Allies during the Hundred Days Advance up to November 11, 1918.



Figure 6. Cover mailed by American officer and postmarked at APO 727 in St. Algnan, France, on Armistice Day.

Germany Seeks an Armistice

Once the full-scale retreat of the German Army got underway and was seemingly irreversible, the newly appointed Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, telegraphed President Wilson to ask for an Armistice and peace talks based on the President's famous Fourteen Points. This, of course, was not what really happened, but it did open the way for negotiations to an end of the fighting. Recognizing that the defeat would mean the end of the monarchy, the Kaiser and Crown Prince departed Germany and sought exile in The Netherlands on November 9 and a republic was declared back in Berlin. The actual Armistice then took place, with the signing being set for the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, on November 11, 1918. Figure 6 is a cover from a member of the AEF at APO 727 in St. Algnan, France, postmarked on that date. Such mail is particularly scarce, presumably because the postal clerks were busy on that day celebrating that they had survived the war rather than processing mail.

Based on the terms imposed on the Germans, they were to evacuate the occupied portions of France and Belgium as quickly as possible. Figure 7 shows the French troops arriving in Strasbourg on November 22 during the liberation of Alsace. Allied troops would cross over into Germany starting on December 1 and take over designated occupation zones for Belgium, Britain, America and France west of the Rhine River (plus three designated bridgeheads). A postcard showing U.S. Engineers crossing the border into Germany is provided as Figure 8. Belgium was the only one of the occupying powers to issue special stamps for use in its zone, being overprints of "Germany" in French and Flemish on Belgian definitives. A registered letter franked with one of these stamps is shown as Figure 9.

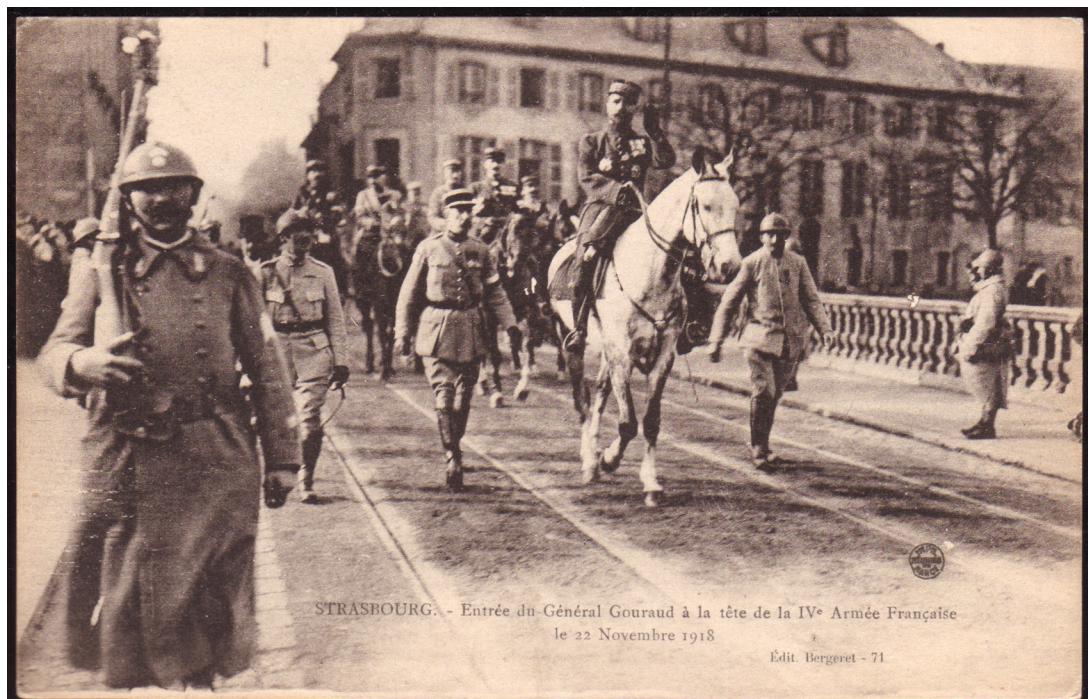


Figure 7. French troops led by General Gouraud arriving in liberated Strasbourg on November 22.



Figure 8. American troops crossing the border into Germany on December 1 in accordance with the terms of the Armistice agreement.



Figure 9. Cover franked with overprinted stamp for Germany mailed from Belgian APO 1 in Aachen.

Disintegration in Russia

The final advances of the Central Powers were based on the Treaty of Brest Litovsk signed by Russia in March 1918. Under its provisions, Russian forces withdrew from designated territories inhabited by non-Russians, into which German, Turkish and

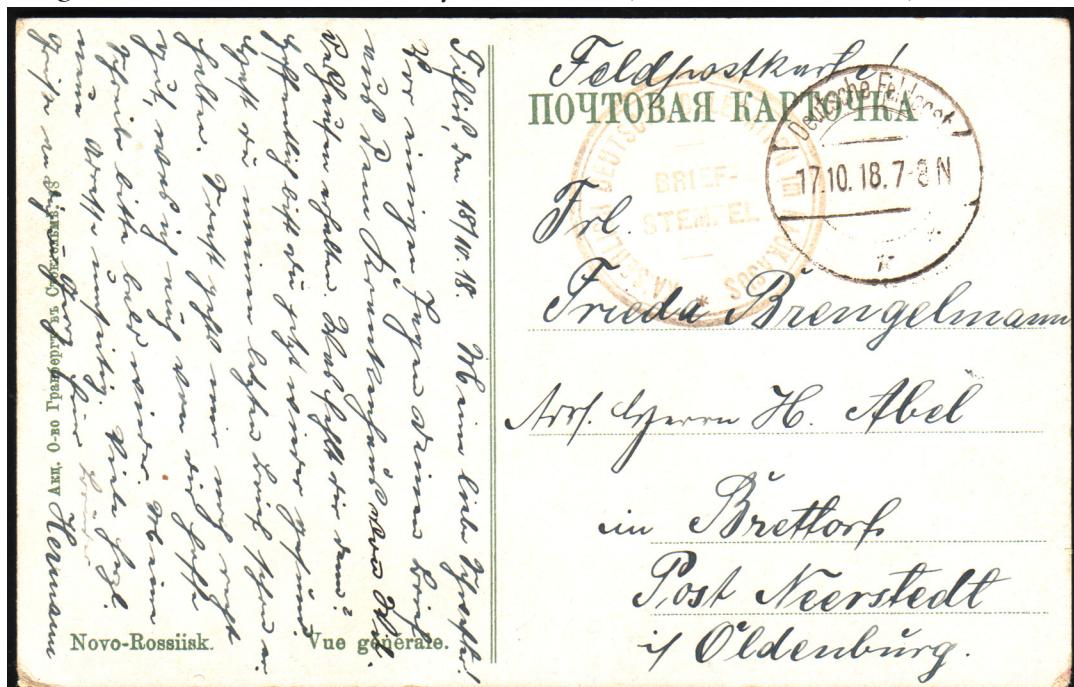


Figure 10. Cover sent by a German soldier from Tiflis, Georgia, in October 1918 with unit cachet of the “Imperial German Delegation in the Caucasus.”



Figure 11. Cover sent by a member of the Turkish occupation forces in Baku, Azerbaijan, in October 1918. The postmark is inscribed “Kafkas Ordusu Postasi (Caucasian Army Post).”

Austro-Hungarian forces were sent. Such activity included not only the Baltic area but Ukraine and Transcaucasia, where an effort was made to aid those attempting to establish new governments in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. As it turned out, of course, this activity was quite limited in effect since the occupying forces themselves were required to evacuate the occupied areas soon thereafter based on armistice agreements signed by their own governments back home. Philatelic material from this period is especially difficult to find, but Figure 10 shows a cover from a German soldier in Tiflis in Georgia, and Figure 11 is a cover from the Turkish occupation of Baku in Azerbaijan.

At the same time, in the aftermath of the fall of the Czar, the Allies had a number of concerns about what was going on in Russia proper, including that the peace agreement with the Central Powers would allow large numbers of German troops to be shifted from the Eastern Front to the West. This, of course, actually happened and provided the Germans with the resources for their last major thrust toward Paris. In addition, there were worries that large quantities of weapons and ammunition that had been shipped to Russia when it was an ally would fall into German hands and that Archangel might provide a base for German submarines patrolling the North Atlantic, which didn't happen.

On this basis, a joint intervention plan was drawn up involving the landing of expeditionary forces from a number of Allied countries (primarily America, Britain, France and Japan) in North Russia and Siberia. See Figure 12 for a picture postcard of the American troops landing at Vladivostok in August 1918. However, by the time this program was implemented, the Bolsheviks had come to power and had taken Russia out of the war. Thus, as it turned out, the intervention was too little to have any effect on the Civil War between the Reds and the Whites within Russia and too late to have any impact on the fighting elsewhere.



American Army landing at Vladivostok.

(一美) 景光ノ陸上德斯越浦軍陸國米

Figure 12. American intervention troops arriving in Vladivostok, Siberia, on August 15, 1918.

Austria-Hungary Leaves the War

As happened on the Western front with the Second Marne battle, the tide of battle turned decisively in the Southwest with a significant Italian victory at Vittorio Veneto on October 29. This defeat broke the back of the Austro-Hungarian defenses and, from that point forward, the troops simply pulled back without stopping. The authorities were forced to seek an armistice, which was signed on November 3, 1918. In connection with this event, Emperor/King Karl was required to abdicate; new countries free of Hapsburg rule were established in Czechoslovakia, Jugoslavia and Poland; and republics were declared in Austria on November 12 and in Hungary on November 16. As a result, the Dual Monarchy, which dated back for centuries, simply ceased to exist.

Turkey Leaves the War

Although the Brest Litovsk Treaty with Russia cleared the way for Turkish forces to occupy parts of Transcaucasia, including Batum (Georgia) and Baku (Azerbaijan), this advance would be short lived as the British were about to unleash a final assault on the Ottoman Empire involving twin prongs. First, the Egyptian Expeditionary Force would be following up on its 1917 advance in Palestine by moving into Transjordan, Syria and Lebanon. Simultaneously, the Indian Expeditionary Force would be moving north from Baghdad to take over Upper Mesopotamia and Kurdistan. Thus, both units would be approaching the southern border of that part of the Empire populated by ethnic Turks. At this point, the latter did not have any additional resources available to halt the incursion. Thus, the Ottomans were forced to sign an Armistice on October 30, 1918, which provided the Allies with the right to occupy European Turkey and take over the administration of Constantinople and the entire area around the Bosphorus. See Figure 13 for a cover sent by a sailor on the Italian warship *Sardinia* from the naval base in Constantinople.



Figure 13. Cover from the Italian warship *Sardinia* at the naval base in Constantinople.

Bulgaria Leaves the War

Following an unsuccessful attack out of the base at Salonica by Allied troops led by French General Sarrail in mid-1917, the situation on the Southeast front had remained relatively dormant. However, a new leader, General d'Esperey, was put in charge in mid-1918 and he began to prepare the forces for a new push through Macedonia, with the objective of liberating Serbia and advancing 400 miles north to the Danube. The offensive started on September 15 and came as a surprise to the Bulgarians, who were pushed back without much resistance. Figure 14 is a postcard depicting the French troops entering Monastir, Serbia. In fact, much of Bulgaria was occupied by the time an armistice was reached on September 29, and the French with their allies from the Serbian army in exile reached Belgrade on November 1.

The Final Act

The Great War (but not the international animosities) officially came to an end on June 28, 1919, when representatives of the countries involved signed the Treaty of Versailles in the great Hall of Mirrors in the palace of Louis XIV. See Figure 15 for a picture of the signing ceremony. In retrospect, the terms imposed on Germany were unduly harsh territorially, financially and with regard to placing of the blame for starting the war. The boundary problems included the loss of historically German lands to neighboring countries, the stripping away of her colonies, and a 20-year occupation of the Rhineland by Allied troops. There were also severe restrictions on future Ger-



Figure 14. French troops from Salonica liberating Monastir, Serbia.



Figure 15. Delegates gathering in the Great Hall of Mirrors at Versailles on June 28, 1919, to sign the Peace Treaty.

man military activity and heavy reparation payments that were beyond the ability of the crippled economy to meet.

The occupation of the Rhineland was scheduled to last until June 30, 1930, with specific zones assigned to the four principal Western Allies (Figure 16).

Summary

As has been described in this series of five articles, the first declaration of war took place on July 28, 1914, and the final shot was fired on the morning of November 11, 1918. Unfortunately, the peace agreement did not really settle many of the fundamental issues, and it was necessary for the participants to fight in another even greater war that got underway just twenty years later. In fact, it can be argued that the severity of the terms of the Treaties of Brest Litovsk and Versailles set the stage for World War II as the major losers of World War I – Germany and Russia – attempted to redress the situation.

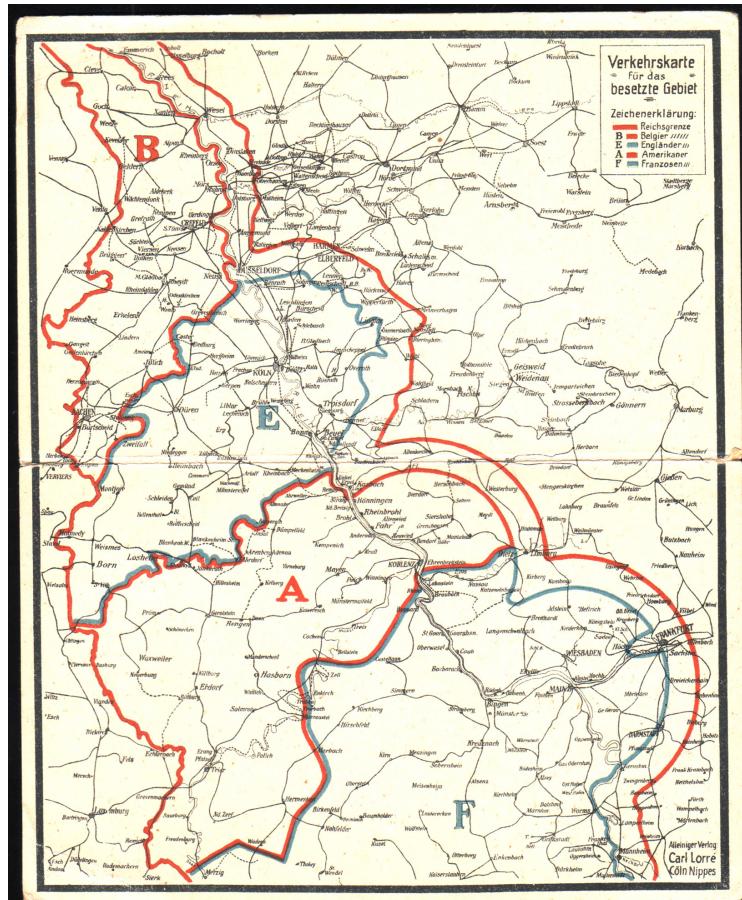


Figure 16. Map of zones of occupation of the Rhineland by Belgian, British, American and French forces, including bridgeheads at Cologne, Koblenz and Mainz.

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