CHAPTER XVII

Defeat in 1918

Ludendorff's urgent request to Chancellor Hertling for an armistice on September 29, 1918, was not the first intimation to those in high places that Germany's chance for victory was becoming alarmingly dim. The great offensive of the spring had accomplished too little in proportion to its enormous cost, and the numbers of new recruits for the army were not up to the High Command's expectation. Various methods of achieving a negotiated peace were discussed at high-level conferences by both the military leaders and the government, but such thought was kept extremely secret and the public was lulled into maintaining its rosy anticipation of a conqueror's peace. The first trickle of bad news came on June 24, when von Kuhlmann, secretary of state for foreign affairs, gave a speech in the Reichstag about the possibility of diplomatic negotiations leading to peace. Kuhlmann was justified in these disclosures in the light of what he had been hearing, but the High Command burst into fury at the report of what he had done and demanded that the emperor dismiss the offender. William did so on July 8 and named Admiral von Hintze to succeed him.

The dismissal of Kuhlmann caused a storm of attack in the Reichstag led by both branches of the socialists. They felt rightly that Kuhlmann had been sacrificed to the militarists and that this act showed nakedly what a farce the fiction of civilian government had become. The debates became more and more heated and focused attention on the deplorable state of the home front. By 1918 living conditions in Germany, particularly in the large cities, had become almost unbearable; the prospect of living through another winter of wartime stringency seemed beyond human endurance. During the summer the world-wide epidemic of influenza reached Germany, and before long thousands, especially children, were stricken. The supply of food and clothing was daily becoming more meager. A potato famine had cut that staple to a fraction of the usual supply. Animals were being slaughtered for lack of fodder.
The flour ration was cut, and the prospect of meatless weeks was in sight. To make things worse the Austrian ally, equally deprived, was pleading for shipments of food from Germany. The occupation of the Ukraine, which the Germans had hoped would be their granary, was an almost complete disappointment.

One result of these sorry conditions was grumbling about high prices and profiteers. The radicals made full use of these grievances to accelerate their attacks and to call for strikes. Strikes and riots broke out as a sullen people approached another winter.

It is against this background that the Allied offensive of July must be viewed. The British success of August 8 unnerved Ludendorff. The continuing Allied advance of August and September almost robbed him of his control. It was a panicky man who, on September 29 and the days immediately following, insisted that the request for peace be made not in a matter of days but in a matter of hours.

By the last days of September a number of almost unrelated issues combined to create a major crisis. In the south, Bulgaria collapsed and asked for an armistice; in Vienna the hopes of Emperor Charles and his government were limited to preserving what could be salvaged of Austria-Hungary, even at the expense of a separate peace; in Berlin a group representing several parties in the Reichstag drew up a demand for the dismissal of the conservative Hertling, whom they considered to be simply a mouthpiece for Ludendorff; at Headquarters in Spa on the evening of the twenty-eighth Hindenburg and Ludendorff had a melancholy conversation in which they agreed on the immediate necessity of negotiations leading to an armistice. With the arrival of both the emperor and Hertling at Spa on the twenty-ninth the stage was set.

On that afternoon Emperor William accepted the resignation of Hertling, who refused to support the liberalization of the government which the others insisted upon to placate the Allies, especially the United States. No successor was named immediately, but the generals insisted that October 1 should be the deadline for the commencement of armistice negotiations. The emperor also signed and published a decree stating among other things, “It is, therefore, my will that men who have the confidence of the people should have a broad share in the rights and duties of government.” There was now no road back. The new government, as yet unnamed, was pledged in advance both to ask for peace and also to reform the structure of internal government. The demand for peace came unquestionably from the army, but the acceptance of it without demur by the civilians gave a basis for the later legend that the civilians were the defeatists.

It was not until October 1, the army’s deadline for the armistice re-
quest, that the emperor summoned his new chancellor. He had picked Prince Max of Baden, in many ways a good choice. Max was a cousin of the emperor and was heir to the grand-ducal throne of Baden; thus he could be expected to be loyal both to William II and to the monarchical principle. He had had considerable parliamentary experience in the Badenese legislature and had achieved some reputation as a liberal. His unexpected quality was that he was able and willing to stand up to strong opposition, even from so redoubtable a figure as General Ludendorff.

Prince Max refused to be hurried into the decisive step that the generals demanded and resolved first to form his government, which for the first time in the history of the empire was to be responsible to the Reichstag and thus include members of the controlling parties, in particular the Social Democrats. Before he completed this task, however, the High Command succeeded in conveying to the leading parliamentarians its very black view of Germany's position in the war. On the morning of October 2 Vice-Chancellor von Payer called a meeting of the leaders of all parties to hear a speech by Major von dem Bussche, a representative of the High Command. The operative statement in the speech was "... the Army Command has had to reach the immensely difficult decision of acknowledging that, according to human calculation, there is no longer any prospect of forcing the enemy to seek peace." Bussche's speech fell like a bombshell on those who had been kept at a distance from affairs by the dictatorship. Even to those who were close to the inner circle it was a very sobering event. Men left the meeting pale and drawn. Within a few hours leaks had occurred and all sorts of dismal rumors were making their way around Berlin.

Under the shadow of Bussche's remarks the Social Democratic delegates met to decide whether they would take part in Max's cabinet. This was a major concern of Marxist doctrine. Ebert, the leader of the party, motivated by patriotism and fear of the future if the party did not try to help at this desperate moment, carried his policy of co-operating with Max against the opposition of Philipp Scheidemann, the party's second-in-command.

The new government was announced on October 4. Several members of the Hertling cabinet remained, including Payer and Dr. Solf, who received the post of foreign affairs. Appointed also were three Centrists (including Matthias Erzberger, who became a minister without portfolio), one Progressive, and two Social Democrats. Ebert preferred to remain outside the government, but Scheidemann received a seat also as minister without portfolio.

The preceding evening Prince Max sent by way of neutral Switzer-
land the first German peace note to President Woodrow Wilson, from whom the Germans expected the best treatment, both because the United States seemed the nation least emotionally involved in the war and also because Wilson in his “Fourteen Points” speech and in later statements seemed to offer the most reasonable and objective program for peace. The note requested Wilson “to take steps for the restoration of peace” and to organize a conference for this purpose. It declared that Germany accepted “as a basis for peace negotiations” the Fourteen Points and Wilson’s speech of September 27. It further asked for an immediate armistice.

Max’s next step was to implement the promises he had made in his introductory statement to the Reichstag to liberalize the German government. For this, several constitutional amendments were necessary. The most important were the requirement of the assent of both houses for war and peace and the ending of the rule whereby a Reichstag deputy had to give up his seat in the house if he entered the government. These amendments were passed toward the end of October. In the Prussian parliament a bill was introduced calling for universal male suffrage. The Prussian upper house, even after the eleventh hour, made difficulties. However, this conservative bastion fell too, and the bill became law shortly before the armistice.

This is not the place to discuss the reactions of either President Wilson or the Allied governments to the German request for peace. That is a complicated story which has been told well and often. Wilson’s reply to Max was dated October 8. The president raised three issues. He asked if the German government would accept his peace program and if it were interested only in the “practical details of its application.” He pointed out that further discussion was dependent on German withdrawal from all invaded territory. Finally, he asked “whether the Imperial Chancellor is speaking merely for the constituted authorities of the Empire who have so far conducted the war.” The implications of this final query were considerable. There were many, a growing number, who felt that Wilson was seeking the abdication of the emperor and probably also of the crown prince as a condition precedent to further action.

The temperate quality of the American answer was well received in Berlin. Ludendorff, in conference with the government, was willing to accept the evacuation of occupied territories. But there were some who noted that the general’s pressure for an immediate armistice was not so urgent as it had been a week before. Only the extreme right newspapers were angry; they began to suggest that the armistice was being forced by the civilians upon the military.
Max decided on a conciliatory answer; it was approved by the High Command and dispatched on October 12. The one new point it raised was the question of whether the other Allies also accepted the Wilsonian peace program, a wise precaution. In answer to Wilson’s question about the German government, Max pointed out that his ministry had been formed “in agreement with the great majority of the Reichstag” and stated unqualifiedly that he spoke “in the name of the German Government and of the German people.”

By this time the reaction to the German approach in Britain and France, and from American public opinion, was making itself heard in Washington. The consensus was clear that Wilson was behaving too leniently toward the Germans and that there should be a hard peace. A further influence was the torpedoing on October 12 of a passenger vessel in the Irish Sea, an event which strengthened anti-German sentiment. Finally, Austria-Hungary seemed closer than ever to the brink of dissolution. The result of these forces was Wilson’s note of October 14, a good deal stronger than the earlier one. He pointed out that armistice and evacuation of troops were matters which had to be left to the military authorities and that any armistice terms had to guarantee the continuance of the current Allied supremacy. He made a stern indictment of the “illegal and inhumane practices” still continued by Germany, citing the sinking of passenger ships and wanton destruction during the retreat in France. He ended with a clear indication of doubt that the German government was one with which the Allies could deal, and by implication demanded further proof that Max didn’t represent the “arbitrary power” hitherto exercised in Germany.

The reaction to this note was sharp. The emperor, the chancellor, all levels of public opinion, and even the Social Democrats interpreted this as an end to the chance for a negotiated peace and felt that Germany was placing herself voluntarily under the heel of a vindictive enemy. A highly dramatic and fateful conference was held on October 17, at which Ludendorff made it clear to the government that he was no longer anxious for an immediate armistice. Moreover, he declared that he had changed his mind completely and now felt that Germany should continue to fight to preserve her honor. He expressed his belief that morale at home could be repaired, and in particular based his new opinion on the promise of a much larger intake of men into the army in the next few months than he had previously thought possible. He wanted to continue the negotiations with Wilson but believed that Germany should send a strong note and risk a rupture of the interchange by Wilson. In this attitude Ludendorff was supported by Admiral Scheer, director of naval operations, who was strongly opposed to ending the submarine war.
Max, who had drafted and obtained parliamentary support for a note promising to end unrestricted submarine warfare, was astonished and angry at the position taken by the High Command. He and his ministers felt that it was an effort to place on the shoulders of the government the responsibility for Germany’s future woes. They recalled that the military had forced upon Max a demand to take precipitate steps. Max called on the emperor and made his continuance as chancellor dependent on the concession regarding submarines demanded by Wilson. The emperor reluctantly agreed, and on October 21 the third German note was sent to Washington.

In this note Max agreed to military evacuation but not to anything incompatible with German honor. He took great exception to the allegation of “illegal and inhumane actions,” but stated that orders had been given to end the torpedoing of passenger ships. Finally he gave Wilson a short lesson on the constitutional changes which had recently taken place in Germany and concluded with the statement, “the offer of peace and an armistice has come from a Government which, free from arbitrary and irresponsible influence, is supported by the approval of the overwhelming majority of the German people.”

The debate by cable on political science between the professor-president and the prince-chancellor continued with Wilson’s third note dated October 23. In it he promised to take up the question of an armistice with the Allies. He reported that he had suggested that the Allied military leaders draw up armistice conditions which would protect Allied interests. Finally Wilson said that, although important and interesting changes had apparently been made in the German constitution, there still remained a good deal to be done, particularly in the clarification of the position of the king of Prussia. He warned that if the United States would have to deal with “the military masters and the monarchical autocrats of Germany,” it would have to demand “not peace negotiations, but surrender.” In the meantime, in France the military leaders were losing no time in drafting armistice conditions and passing them up to Foch, the Allied commander in chief.

Faced with the necessity of taking the rostrum next in the debate, Prince Max awaited the passage of the constitutional amendments on October 26. In addition to the changes previously mentioned, the chancellor now became dependent on the support of the Reichstag, he was responsible more clearly than before for the political actions of the emperor, and he received considerable control over personnel matters in the armed forces. Yet even after accomplishing this, Max was not free to turn to the negotiations. First he had to resolve the struggle with the High Command which had been simmering for some days.
Several events precipitated the final conflict between government and army. In the first place, the cabinet felt that in getting its military advice it should consult generals other than Ludendorff, which hitherto had not been possible. At headquarters in Spa, aware that vital decisions were in the making, Ludendorff and Hindenburg decided to go immediately to Berlin. Max ordered them not to do so, for he did not want it to appear abroad that he was taking dictation from the military. Nevertheless, they left Spa on October 24 after they issued a proclamation to the troops stating that Wilson’s answers were unacceptable to “us soldiers” and in effect calling for the end of the negotiations. When Max, who was ill with influenza, heard of these two actions, he wrote to the emperor and made clear that it was now a choice between himself and Ludendorff, though he hoped earnestly that Hindenburg would not resign.

When the generals arrived in Berlin, an acrimonious conference with the government took place. On October 26 Ludendorff waited on Emperor William and after an unhappy interview offered his resignation. The emperor accepted it. Hindenburg promised to remain at his post, and at his suggestion the emperor appointed General Wilhelm Groener as Ludendorff’s successor. Ludendorff returned home sulkily to write his memoirs, to become a leader in the neopagan movement, and within five years to affiliate himself with the National Socialist program of Adolf Hitler. Groener was an able choice. His reputation had been made by handling the very complex transportation problems of the army; he was to live to be an important figure in Germany in the next decade.

Freed from the incubus at Spa, Max now turned to his last note to President Wilson. It was a short one, repeating comments on the changes in the government and specifying that the military power was now subject to the civilian. The final sentence read: “The German Government now awaits the proposals for an armistice, to pave the way for a peace of justice of the kind indicated by the President in his pronouncements.” A few hours before the dispatch of this note the Germans learned that Austria-Hungary had asked her enemies for a separate peace.

Wilson’s last note was dated November 5. It too was short and direct, stating that the Allied governments were willing to make peace on the basis of the Wilsonian program. There were, however, two reservations. At Britain’s insistence, the first concerned freedom of the seas, which Britain considered impossible. Second, there was the question of restoration of invaded territories. By this the Allies understood that “compensation will be made by Germany for all damage done to the civilian population of the Allies and their property by the aggression of Germany by land, by sea and from the air.” This last reservation opened
the whole knotty problem of war guilt and its corollary, reparation. By this note a meeting of minds on the question of an armistice was reached, and the way was paved for the signature of the armistice itself.

Early in October the High Command had named a commission to conduct the actual negotiations with the Allies. However, after the military leaders reversed their demand for an immediate end to the fighting, Prince Max became fearful that an all-military commission would simply refuse possible Allied demands and end negotiations with the enemy. He therefore decided to name a civilian chairman of the commission and on November 6 appointed to this thankless post Matthias Erzberger, who was known to the world as the sponsor of the Peace Resolution of 1917 and as the leader of the second largest party in the Reichstag.

Erzberger arrived at Spa on the morning of November 7. There he joined the other members of the four-man commission: a general, a naval officer, and a representative of the foreign office. Contact had been made with Foch, and the commission proceeded behind the French lines first by automobile and then by train. Early on November 8 the German train drew up to a siding near the village of Retondes in the forest of Compiègne. Nearby stood the train of the Allied command. At 9 A.M. Marshal Foch received the German delegates in a dining car which had been made into a conference room. With Foch were General Weygand and two British admirals. Foch approved the Germans' credentials, signed by Prince Max, and maneuvered Erzberger into asking for an armistice, not simply for "proposals." He then read aloud the armistice conditions. Erzberger asked for an immediate end to hostilities, but Foch replied that fighting would continue until the armistice was signed. The Germans then sent the conditions by radio to Berlin and informed the government that while they felt the Allies would be unwilling to make any substantive changes in them, the delegation would try to get concessions on the timing of the evacuation, the numbers of weapons to be handed over, and especially on the matter of victualing Germany. They reported that the German reply was required by 11 A.M. on November 11.

The task of the German delegation was rendered more difficult by the fact that the two days of grace, November 9 and 10, were the days when momentous and revolutionary events were occurring in Germany. During those days Emperor William fled to Holland, a republic was proclaimed in Berlin, and Prince Max handed over his authority to Friedrich Ebert. This news caused Foch and Premier Clemenceau to wonder if Erzberger and his colleagues still possessed legal power to treat with the Allies; Erzberger and his colleagues wondered the same thing. Almost no official news arrived from either Berlin or Spa. The
fact was that the leaders of the state were so harassed by the events immediately around them that they simply did not get around to Erzberger and his plight. Finally on the evening of November 10 a message with a code number proving its authenticity arrived from Ebert accepting the armistice conditions; later another message arrived asking that the question of food for Germany be raised.

The final conference lasted from about two o’clock until after five on the morning of November 11. The main subject of discussion was the blockade of Germany and the urgent state of food supplies for the civilian population. Erzberger was successful in getting a statement from Foch that consideration would be given to furnishing food during the period of armistice. Actually, Germany endured a frightful winter and did not begin to receive food in any quantity until the spring of 1919; this rankled in German hearts for years afterward. The Germans got minor adjustments in the numbers of weapons to be forfeited, but in essence the armistice did not differ from Foch’s original demands. The document was signed shortly after five o’clock on the morning of November 11 and was placed in effect at eleven o’clock.

The armistice terms were severe. They rendered Germany incapable of renewing the struggle if peace negotiations should fail. They were territorial, military, and economic in nature. Germany had to evacuate Alsace-Lorraine and all occupied territory in France and Belgium within two weeks. She had two weeks more to evacuate all German territory west of the Rhine, which was to be occupied by Allied troops. Further, a neutral strip ten kilometers deep on the right bank of the Rhine was stipulated. In the east the German forces were to retire from former Austria-Hungary, Romania, and Turkey to within the German borders as they existed on August 1, 1914. In the case of Russia, German troops were to withdraw within those same borders “as soon as the Allies shall think the moment suitable, having regard to the internal situation of these territories.” German East Africa, which still held out, was to be surrendered. Very considerable supplies of cannon, machine guns, mortars, planes, locomotives, railway cars, and trucks were to be forfeited. All submarines were to be surrendered and the rest of the fleet placed under Allied control. All Allied prisoners of war were to be liberated, but not German ones in Allied hands. The treaties of Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest were declared null and void. There were various other detailed provisions concerning economic matters and shipping, the most important being maintenance of the blockade. The armistice was to remain in force for thirty days but was renewable. There was no question in anyone’s mind that Germany had lost the war.

Since 1918 many people have criticized the armistice severely. Most
of this criticism has revolved around two points. The first is that the Allies should not have permitted the war to end before any Allied troops were fighting on German soil. Some even say that the Allies should have pushed on to Berlin. Then the German people would have known beyond any doubt that they had been beaten. Foch’s answer to this criticism was simply to give some idea of the hundreds of thousands of casualties which would have occurred in several months more of fighting.

The other criticism is that the Allies should not have refused to deal with the German High Command, that in fact they should have refused to deal with a civilian and insisted on Hindenburg’s surrender of his sword to Foch. Then, they argue, there could have been no stab-in-the-back legend, no accusations that civilians, Jews, socialists, defeatists, etc., at home sabotaged the “undefeated” army. This suggestion was, of course, followed in 1945. It is certainly true that the onus for the signature of the armistice, and later the peace treaty, fell on the Majority Social Democrats and the Centrists, the two groups most likely to create a democratic Germany. However, it would have been a hardy prophet who in 1918 could have predicted coming events, in particular the Great Depression and the emergence of such a phenomenon as Adolf Hitler.