

# The Armistice and the reaction in Malta – November 11, 1918



CHARLES DEBONO

was determined to impose huge reparations on Germany. Wilson compromised by accepting both objections while threatening to negotiate a separate peace on behalf of the US if Britain and France continued with their objections. His ploy was successful, and details of a proposed settlement were sent to Germany on November 5 by the Supreme War Council.

A major potential stumbling block to peace was Wilson's insistence on the abdication of the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II. This was overcome by German Chancellor Max von Baden's exasperated decision to announce Wilhelm's reluctant abdication to the public on November 9, 1918. On November 8, a German delegation met with Allied Supreme Commander Ferdinand Foch, who was to lead the military negotiations in the forest of Compiègne, France. The armistice between the Allies and Germany for the cessation of hostilities on the Western Front was formally signed in Foch's railway carriage between 5.12 and 5.20am on November 11, and it was agreed that the ceasefire would take effect at 11am on the 11th day of the 11th month.

That same day the Malta Government Gazette announced: "His Excellency the Governor has been officially informed that an Armistice with Germany was signed at 5 o'clock this morning."

In a telegram sent eight days later to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Governor of Malta said that when news of the armistice reached Malta the people rejoiced by the ringing of bells, the waving of flags, and by demonstrations in the streets in which thousands of people participated. The celebration of the victory culminated when the Governor appeared on the balcony of the Palace and addressed an estimated 8,000 demonstrators.

In his address, the Governor told the multitude: "The day has at length come which we have longed for during the last four and a half years. This war has been waged for religion and freedom from thralldom, and as Mr Lloyd-



General Charles Huntziger signing the armistice on behalf of France on June 22, 1940.

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George said, there was no half-way house, and militarism has to be crushed. There are few who can stand a defeat, there are still fewer who can bear victory well. We have now not only to think of ourselves but we have to lend a helping hand to those countries to put their house in order, who have through militarism been brought into their present condition.

"When I knew Germany 40 years ago, I liked her people next best to our own, but ivy destroys a tree, so militarism has ruined the Germany as I remember her; let us hope in years to come she may find herself free from militarism and the nation she once was.

"How proud we must all feel of our nation, above all of our womanhood who have come forward so nobly throughout this war. Now let me call on you for three cheers for our King, who together with the Queen has done such a splendid service to the Empire throughout the war."

During the morning of November 12 there was a renewal of celebrations which continued throughout the day. At 5.30pm, the Archbishop of Malta led the singing of the Te Deum at St John's Co-Cathedral as a thanksgiving for the cessation of hostilities. The Governor attended, together with the heads of the civil, naval and military departments, ladies, officers and other people.

In the evening a grand gala performance was given in the Royal Opera House, at which the Governor was present. There was a large and distinguished audience and the proceedings were of a very animated character, the warmest enthusiasm being aroused by the playing of God Save The King and the Allied national anthems.

The terms of the armistice required the Germans to evacuate German-occupied territories on the Western Front within two weeks. Allied forces were to occupy the left bank of the Rhine within a month, and a neutral zone established on the right bank. Notably, all German-occupied territories elsewhere were to be abandoned and the treaties already negotiated with Russia and Romania were officially annulled.

In terms of military equipment, under the terms of the armistice the Germans lost 5,000 artillery pieces, 30,000 machine guns, 3,000 minesweepers, 2,000 aircraft, 5,000 trains, 150,000 railway wagons, 5,000 trucks and its entire submarine fleet. The majority of Germany's surface naval fleet were interned; the remainder were disbanded.

Although the armistice signed on November 11, 1918, ended the actual fighting, it took six months of Allied negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference between Germany on one side, and France, Italy, Britain and other minor Allied powers on the other, to sign the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919.

Every part of the British Empire, including Malta, received a number of war trophies captured from the Germans. Malta was to receive 10 machine-guns, 20 steel helmets, one German pack, one signal thrower, four wire cutters and two trench mortars. From photos and other information it seems that from the opening of the old National War Museum until November 2007, only two German 25cm trench mortars (Schwere Minenwerfer), one heavy machine-gun (Maschinengewehr 08), one light machine-gun (Maschinengewehr 08/15), an M1916 Stahlhelm and two M1918 Stahlhelm (Ear cut-out steel helmets) were exhibited. In the early years of the old National War Museum one of the ear cut-out steel helmets was probably painted in the typical camouflage used by the German storm troopers. The other eight machine-guns and four sledges were kept in the Reserve Collection.

Through the Treaty of Versailles, France tried to place conditions on Germany that would prevent the latter from being able to threaten the former again in the near future. France wanted the German Rhineland demilitarised because this created a physical security barrier between itself and Germany, thereby hindering a future German attack. The sum of reparations and coal payments was initially set at 269 billion gold marks, around 96,000 tons of gold, before being reduced to 112 billion gold marks by 1929, payable over a period of 59 years. The inordinate amount of reparations and coal payments, and the principle of a demilitarised Rhineland, were viewed by the Germans to be insulting and unreasonable.

In response to Germany falling behind in its coal payments the French invaded and occupied the Ruhr, the German coal-producing region. The majority of Germans were enraged with this French action and blamed their humiliation on Germany's Weimar Republic that had replaced the monarchy. The reparations bankrupted Germany in the 1920s and the fledgling Nazi party capitalised on the resulting public resentment against the terms of the Versailles Treaty. Germany suspended annual payments in 1931 during the global financial crisis and Adolf Hitler unsurprisingly declined to resume them when he came to power in 1933.

It is interesting that after Germany crushed France in May-June 1940 during World War II and the French surrendered, Hitler deliberately chose Compiègne forest as the site to sign the armistice due to its symbolic role as the site of the 1918 Armistice of November 11, 1918, that had ended World War I. It is also interesting to note that Germany made its last reparations



The Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany.

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payment for World War I on October 3, 2010, settling its outstanding debt from the 1919 Versailles Treaty and quietly closing the final chapter of the conflict that had shaped the 20th century.

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Photograph taken outside the railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne after the 1918 Armistice agreement was signed.



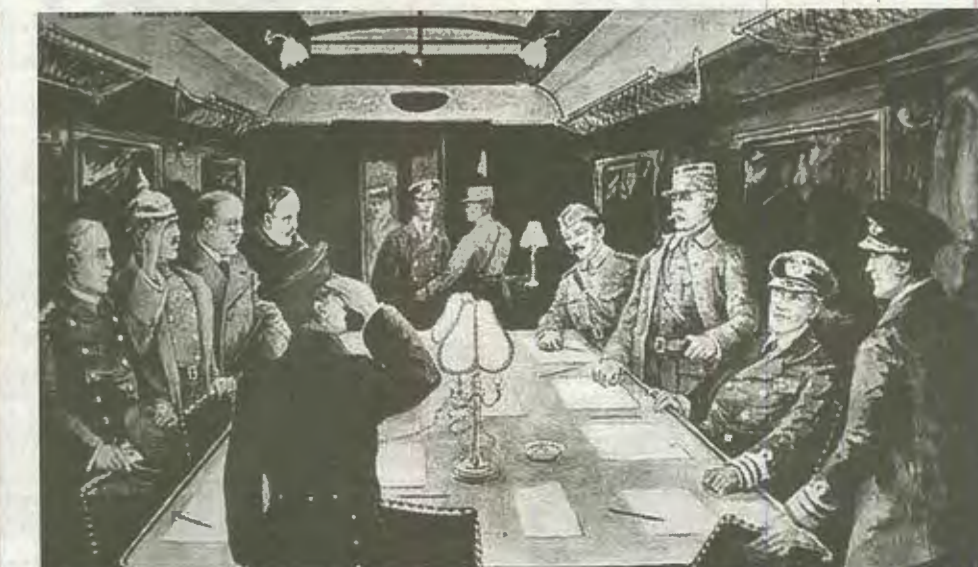
The heads of the Big Four nations at the Paris Peace Conference, May 27, 1919, (from left) David Lloyd George, Vittorio Orlando, Georges Clemenceau and Woodrow Wilson.



The signing of the armistice following the French surrender in World War II, in Compiègne, France, on June 22, 1940, was held in the same railroad carriage where the 1918 Armistice had been signed. Photo shows Adolf Hitler (centre) and other Nazi officers in front of the carriage.



The two German 25cm trench mortars (Schwere Minenwerfers) exhibited at the National War Museum.



A sketch of the signing of the Armistice that ended World War I in railway carriage 2419D, in Rethondes, in the forest of Compiègne, November 11, 1918.