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“Staggering across the Finish Line: The French Army at the End of the Great War”
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After performing magnificently during the German spring offensive in March 1918, the French continued fighting but their combat power declined in subsequent battles, and by the last two months of the war they were on their last legs. They could not have made it to the finish line without the support of the British and Americans. Though some French scholars have said Georges Clemenceau preferred an imperfect peace to letting the Americans fight the main battles of 1919 and ultimately dominate the peace, French leaders were more concerned about the ability of their army to continue fighting than they were about any American dominance of the peace treaty.

The French Army of October 1918 was significantly weaker than it had been on March 21 at the beginning of Germans' spring offensive. In the desperate effort to close the gap opened by the Germans' advance and the British withdrawal on the Somme, the French rushed numerous divisions into combat, often without their artillery and sufficient fire support. Within a week, the worst part of the crisis had passed, but the extraordinary demands of the campaign had taken a heavy toll. Two months later, the Germans crossed over the Chemin des Dames and drove toward Paris. As the French (and Americans) rushed additional divisions toward the expanding salient, they threw them piece-meal into the battle and once again forced them to fight under unfavorable circumstances. In retrospect, it is clear that the Germans were closer to victory on June 1 than at any other point in the war. Believing the outcome of the war was at stake, the G.Q.G. began considering “radical actions,” including withdrawing completely from northern France and defending along the Somme or pulling most French divisions out of the front lines east of Reims and abandoning northeastern France. Officers in the G.Q.G. knew this was little more than a final desperate effort before almost certain defeat.

In subsequent weeks the Allies regained the initiative with important offensives at Soissons and Amiens-Montdidier. Yet, the gains of the French slowed as the effect of the March-November 1918 campaign took its toll and the possibility of an armistice appeared. Much as American soldiers in World War II feared a final assault on Japan, French soldiers feared a final assault on Germany. They also did not want to become casualties in the final phase of the war. Additionally, the diversion of significant amounts of weapons and equipment to the Americans drained combat power from the French. The performance of the French army in the final battles of the war illustrates the degree of its exhaustion. After the Germans began a vast withdrawal toward the Meuse, the French pursued them slowly, and sharp prodding from Ferdinand Foch had little effect on the pace of their advance. At the same time the French attempted to organize a large offensive into Lorraine, but the end of the war came before the operation began. After the war French veterans and historians complained about the suspension

of hostilities which enabled the Germans to avoid an “unprecedented disaster,” but the offensive actually had little chance of making significant advances or delivering a *coup de grace* to the Germans.

In the final phase of the war French leaders--Pétain, Foch, and Clemenceau--recognized the fragile condition of the French army and adjusted their actions and decisions accordingly. For Pétain, the weakness meant the French could attack but had to advance cautiously. He knew his forces could not race forward and could operate only under the most tightly controlled conditions, and he wanted to avoid an unfortunate turn of events on the battlefield that could shift the tide of battle and revive the will to fight of the Germans. For Foch, the weakness meant Allied forces had to continue pressing forward on a broad front. After considering a huge offensive in Lorraine and encountering reluctance from Pétain, he decided not to divert significant resources from his broad frontal attack. For Clemenceau, the weakness meant the Americans had to improve their battlefield performance and Foch had to exert greater control over Pershing. It also meant that he was willing to accept an armistice and not continue the war until the Germans surrendered unconditionally.

Unless the Germans collapsed completely, the French were in no condition for a rapid and sustained advance. Under these circumstances they could not refuse any request for an armistice. They clearly preferred another ending, but they knew the limitations of their own power.

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