

Gearóid Barry (NUI Galway): '1917: year of mutiny and revolt'

E-mail: gearoid.barry@nuigalway.ie

Intro: hopes for 1917.

At the very end of 1916, Fr Fridolyn Mayer, Catholic priest and German military chaplain serving in occupied northern France, wrote wearily in his field diary as he looked ahead to 1917: *'What with the New Year bring? Everyone has the word, "Peace" on his tongue, and wishes Peace to himself and to others for the New Year. Will 1917 live on in world history as a year of peace? In 1914 I was an optimist for 1915, in 1915 I was an optimist for 1916 and now, on New Year's Eve, I am a pessimist for 1917.'*¹

Fr Mayer was right to wonder if 1917 would live on in world history. It has. However, not for the reasons he hoped. In spite of **war-weariness** the war ground on in Europe and across the world. 1917 was indeed a **year of mutiny and revolt** but also a year when the war became even more global. I first look at the **geostrategic position** in 1917 as then at **revolt and mutiny**. This presentation considers **yearnings for peace** – from various sources- that crystallized in the **summer of 1917**. My final section will look at 1917 as a **hinge moment** redirecting war towards revolution in some cases.

OUTLINE SKETCH

The geostrategic position in 1917

Germany resumes use of unrestricted submarine warfare.

The Americans enter the war. Congress accepted Wilson's request that America declare war on Germany in April 1917...

¹ Patrick J. Houlihan, *Catholicism and the Great War : religion and everyday life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1922* (Cambridge 2015), p. 209.

Causes of unrest within empires/ belligerent powers:

Food supply – protests in Vienna, shortage in Germany, revolution in Petrograd – Russia's February Revolution 1917.

A year of mutinies?

'Mutinies' in armies – wave of indiscipline in the French Army on the Western Front in May-June 1917. After the so-called 'Nivelle Offensive'.

Calling for peace

By mid-summer 1917, there were some **prominent voices for peace** making themselves heard, even if they were not effective. Moderate German socialists joined forces with liberal and some Catholic deputies in the Reichstag to pass the **Reichstag Peace Resolution in July 1917**. In coded language, it appealed for a peace without annexations, not peace at any price.

The other prominent voice appealing for peace was that of **Pope Benedict XV** himself. The Peace Note of 1 August 1917 was the pope's most politicized gesture during the war, taking the form of a memorandum to the heads of government of the belligerent powers suggesting terms for a negotiated peace, a peace without annexations. In the preamble to the Peace Note of August 1917, Pope Benedict asked rhetorically;

Is the civilized world to become nothing more than a heap of corpses? Shall Europe, so rich in glory and achievement, precipitate itself into the gulf and commit suicide, as if seized by universal madness?².

The Marian apparitions at **Fatima** in Portugal (May-October) were received by many Catholics in Portugal as an anti-war sign also.

² HOULIHAN, *Catholicism and the Great War*, p. 199.

Simultaneously, war presented **opportunity and challenges to nationalists within multi-ethnic empires.**

Polish nationalists led by Pilsudski and the Polish Legion – there were Poles who had sided with the Central Powers against Russia and the Entente since 1914 in the hopes of national sovereignty after the war- were riven by a crisis in July 1917 however concerning an oath the Germans wished them to take to serve the German Kaiser as guarantor of the client-state ‘the Kingdom of Poland’ proclaimed in 1916. The ‘Oath Crisis’ led to political imprisonment for Pilsudski and other Polish nationalists for the duration of the rest of the war.

Final game-changer – the Bolshevik Revolution...

In **April 1917**, Lenin, leader of the Bolshevik party, was smuggled back into Russia on board a German sealed train, preached revolutionary defeatism – using peace as a strategy to gain power, not an end in itself. After the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power in the October Revolution, Lenin’s Decree on Peace won soldiers’ support and set out a vision of peace through socialist revolution, terrifying the European bourgeoisie.

Meanwhile, Finland took advantage of the Bolshevik revolution in **November 1917** to break ties with Russia when its parliament in Helsinki declared independence.

Suggested further reading:

Adrian Gregory, *A War of Peoples, 1914-1919* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), chapters 3 & 4.

Lawrence Sondhaus, *World War One: The Global Revolution* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011)..