

1917–The Fourth War Year

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The Strategic Situation

By the beginning of 1917, the combatants were all suffering from the severe loss of lives in the prior battles, for which little tangible reward had been forthcoming. However, the actual fighting had died down with neither side having been able to deliver a knockout blow. The troops were weary, morale was negative and the losses in men and materiel needed to be replaced. As was the case in the previous years, both sides were looking for some development that would provide hope for victory in the year ahead.

On the Western Front, the French decided to have a try at a strong offensive action. The role of General Nivelle had been enhanced as a result of his success in defending Verdun the prior year, and he elected to unleash a heads-on attack on the Germans in the area of the Aisne River. A major assault began in April with over a million men. However, the defenses were on the alert and the French suffered such heavy casualties that the offensive was called off after ten days. Even more serious was the fact that refusal to obey orders by French infantrymen could be observed as confidence in the generalship began to wane, and this problem would only get worse as the months went by.

Although Russia could still field a large army, its fighting prowess was greatly weakened by heavy casualties and then the first revolution in March 1917, which led to the abdication of the Czar. Later in the year, the Bolshevik revolution in November brought Vladimir Lenin to power, who believed that Russia needed to withdraw from the war so that he could consolidate his rule at home. As a result, he signed an Armistice with the Central Powers in December 1917, which was followed up by the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918.

Events took place in the Balkans and the Near East during 1917 that didn't change the strategic situation in the short run but suggested that more promising developments might occur in the following year. Most important were a change in government in Greece, which led to that country joining the Allies in July, and the liberation of Palestine and Mesopotamia.

Unrestricted Submarine Warfare

Having failed to break the British blockade in the head-to-head naval battle at Jutland, the Germans decided to adopt a new strategy in the program to sharply reduce or cut off the essential supplies of food, medicines and war materiel arriving in Britain by ship. The German U-boats had been successful in sinking many British and other Allied cargo vessels, but supplies continued to arrive in neutral shipping. The German Navy believed that the U-boat used sufficiently aggressively would be a war-winning weapon. The government was less convinced but, as the stalemate on the Western Front wore on, the Kaiser and members of the Reichstag became more willing. The case was made that the loss of imports would force the British to negotiate an armistice before the arrival of American troops could tip the balance on the ground. As a result, the Imperial government declared a new "War Zone" around the British Isles effective on February 1, 1917, which meant that ships in that area flying any flag would be subject to attack, a course almost sure to cause trouble with the United States.

America Joins the War

Obviously, the most important strategic development of this part of the war was the entry into the fray of the United States on April 6, 1917. While it would take some while for the Americans to get geared up for large-scale combat, this event guaranteed that the Allies would be able to draw upon vast new production capacity of war materiel and, once trained, relatively unlimited manpower, neither of which was available to the Central Powers. As a result, it can be argued that the eventual outcome of the war had actually been determined at that point although no one yet knew it.

After the war started in mid-1914, the United States had remained neutral for nearly three years. This reflected the desire of most Americans to stay aloof from European problems and was reinforced by the fact that the country was populated by large numbers of immigrants from countries on both sides of the conflict. In fact, President Wilson won reelection in November 1916 largely with a boost provided by the political slogan that “He kept us out of war.”

However, it would be fair to state that public sentiment had gradually shifted to a more pro-Allied stance, especially when a German submarine torpedoed the S.S. Lusitania in the spring of 1915 with the loss of 128 American lives, and as there were reports of atrocities committed during the German occupation of Belgium (no doubt involving some exaggeration on the part of British propagandists). This feeling was compounded when the Imperial government announced unrestricted submarine warfare in January 1917, thus putting American-flagged vessels at risk.

When the fifth U.S. merchant ship had been sunk, President Wilson decided that enough was enough and asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany on the basis that “the world must be made safe for democracy.” The resolution was enacted on April 6, which action is shown on a photo postcard (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Photo card of American Declaration of War.

Considering that the U.S. Army at the beginning of the war in 1914 was extremely weak—fewer than 130,000 men—mostly assigned to forts located throughout the west-



Figure 2. Photo card of American Troops Marching in Paris-June 1917.

ern states and overseas in the newly-acquired Philippine Islands, a major task would lie ahead for the War Department to create a force of sufficient size and training to compete in European-scale warfare.

In fact, the U.S. appeared sufficiently weak militarily that it has been reported that when Kaiser Wilhelm was warned that his adoption of unrestricted submarine warfare and the associated sinking of American ships could provoke U.S. entry into the war, he was not impressed and is quoted as responding “I do not care.” Well, maybe he should have!

However, to build an effective U.S. fighting force, men would need to be drafted and volunteers enlisted in unprecedented numbers, and numerous training camps would be opened, both at home and in Britain and France. All of this would take a good deal of time and effort, but it would happen. In the meantime, a small number of regular army troops were sent to France, arriving on June 25. In order to boost French morale, they con-



Figure 3. Cover showing ERD of APO No.1 postmark in St. Nazaire.

ducted a parade in Paris as a propaganda move to indicate that support for France would be coming (Figure 2).

To meet the anticipated demand for mail service from the troops arriving in France, a network of Army Post Offices was created, with the first opening in St. Nazaire in July 1917. Figure 3 shows a soldier's letter with the earliest recorded date from APO No.1 on the 28th.

The French Offensive in the West

The so-called Nivelle Offensive took place in April 1917 along the Aisne River, involving more than a million men and the first French use of tanks in the war. Much like the British on the Somme in 1916, there was a tremendous artillery bombardment prior to the attack but the German defense was up to the task, with the men being well protected and thus able to deal with the advance of the infantry. In ten days, the French casualties totaled 134,000, of which 80 percent were suffered on the very first day of the battle. In the face of such bloodletting and only minor gains on the ground, the French High Command was forced to end the offensive relatively quickly.

Nevertheless, with the leaders seemingly unable to come up with a new, potentially more successful strategy, the same pattern seen in the prior years continued elsewhere, with mighty struggles in such places as Ypres, Neuve-Chapelle and Champagne. As before, these produced great loss of life but achieved little in terms of a change in the strategic positions. In fact, for more than three years until the spring of 1918, with few exceptions the trench lines on the Western front did not change by as much as ten miles.

The seemingly endless losses on the battlefield with little to show for it had significant negative effects on French military morale, leading to insubordination, refusal to follow orders and other signs of mutiny as men lost confidence in their leaders. This was to be a problem when decisions needed to be made about subsequent action in the period ahead.



Figure 4. Picture postcard showing action on the Austro-Italian Front.

Breakthrough at Caporetto

The situation on the Southwest Front between Italy and Austria-Hungary was essentially a standoff in 1915 and 1916, described by one observer as "...a vast war of attrition along a wide front without any penetration in depth, but with heavy losses..." A picture postcard (Figure 4) shows action on the Italian Front. However, the Austrians, stiffened by the inclusion of the German 14th Army, had built up their forces in the area for a surprise attack on the Italians. This was unleashed at Caporetto on October 24 and, by the time its momentum was spent, the advance had taken them to the Piave River, less than 20 miles from Venice. The Western Allies became alarmed by the threat to the Italians, and they responded with quick reinforcements by British, French and even some American troops. As a result, by December 1 the situation on that front ended up in another stalemate that lasted until mid-1918. Figure 5 shows a parcel address card franked with Austrian stamps for use in the occupied zone of Italy.



Figure 5. Parcel address card from the Austrian occupation of Venetia.

Romania is Overrun

Romania had joined the Allies on August 27, 1916, on the promise of substantial new territories to be transferred from the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the war. However, its army was unable to make much progress in its early advance into Transylvania and soon faced defeat as a result of an Austro-German offensive led by Field Marshal von Mackensen from the west and the Bulgarians attacking from the south. Figure 6 is a picture postcard depicting the retreat of the Romanian army.

The capital of Bucharest was captured on December 6, 1916. Figure 7 shows a censored cover with the three German stamps issued on July 2, 1917, for the occupied area; the overprint has the initials "M.V.i.R." of the German wording for Military Administration in Romania. The Austrians also issued stamps for occupied Romania



Figure 6. Picture postcard of Romanian army in retreat.



Figure 7. Cover with German stamps issued for Romania.



Figure 8. Money Letter with Austrian stamps issued for Romania.

(Figure 8). With the Bulgarians moving north, the defending Russo-Romanian forces abandoned the Dobrudja in January 1917. Figure 9 shows a cover with the set of four Bulgarian stamps overprinted for use in Romania.



Figure 9. Cover with Bulgarian stamps issued for Romania.

Resistance continued for some months but was undermined by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in November 1917, which led to the withdrawal of all Russian forces helping to defend Romania shortly thereafter. The Romanian army was thus isolated and signed an armistice with the Central Powers at Focsani on December 9, 1917. The withdrawal of Romania from the war was confirmed by the Treaty of Bucharest signed on May 7, 1918.

The Allied Base at Salonica

Greece was something of a conundrum for much of the war. The government was officially neutral, but the Allies suspected it of a pro-German bias, especially as the Queen of Greece was a sister of the Kaiser. However, there was considerable pro-Allied sentiment in the country and among many of the political leaders. The British and French adopted a rather high-handed attitude with Greece, initially using the island of Corfu as a base for the rest and rehabilitation of the Serbian Army in Exile, which had been evacuated by Allied ships from Albania. Later, a large base for a mélange of Allied troops (British, French, Italian, Russian and Serbian) was created at Salonica in spite of Greek objections. Eventually, a pro-Allied government was installed at that city under Prime Minister Venezelos. In time, however, support for King Constantine diminished and he was forced to abdicate on June 25, 1917. At this point, the Venezelists were able to take power in Athens, and the new parliament voted to declare war on Germany on July 2.

For a long time the Allied force at Salonica was primarily engaged in training and conducting maneuvers, so much so that the place was derided by the Germans as a huge concentration camp with large numbers of soldiers doing nothing. However, the presence of thousands of Allied troops in that area did prevent the Bulgarians from occupying even more of Greek Macedonia, and the Austrians from occupying southern Albania. Eventually, however, Salonica served as the jumping-off point for the Allied offensive in the Balkans that would ultimately be instrumental in driving Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria out of the war in late 1918.



Figure 10. Picture postcard of British entry into Jerusalem.

Liberation of the Holy Land

The Sinai Desert proved to be as much of a barrier to the British in the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in its intended invasion of Palestine in 1917 as it had been to the Turkish attack on the Suez Canal in 1915. The main problem was how to support sufficient forces to accomplish the primary objectives in a desert environment essentially devoid of water and with virtually no roads. The British eventually solved these problems by building a narrow-gauge railway to carry supplies and a pipeline along the coast across the peninsula to move fresh water for the men and horses.

As it turned out, the early attacks were stymied outside the Ottoman base at Gaza for nine months. However, in a new assault started on October 31, 1917, the EEF managed a successful flanking movement through Beersheba that threatened to cut the Turkish supply line. This forced a withdrawal from Gaza on November 7 and opened the gate to Palestine, of which the British quickly took advantage. As a result, Jerusalem was captured on December 9, the announcement of which was described by Prime Minister Lloyd George as a “Christmas Present” for the war-weary British people. Much of the rest of Central Palestine was quickly occupied in the ensuing weeks. Figure 10 shows a picture postcard of the official entry of General Allenby at the Jaffa Gate into Jerusalem.

Advance in Mesopotamia

After being resupplied, the Indian Expeditionary Force resumed its advance up the Tigris River, finally capturing Baghdad on March 11, 1917. Figure 11 is a picture postcard of General Maude’s entry into the city. To celebrate this achievement, the British overprinted Turkish stamps with “Baghdad/In British Occupation” which were issued on September 1, 1917. Figure 12 shows a cover franked with these stamps. This event was not so important in itself, but it would provide a base for the eventual assault northward that drove Turkey out of the war late in the following year.



Figure 11. Picture postcard of British entry into Baghdad.



Figure 12. Cover with British occupation stamps for Baghdad.



Figure 13. Picture postcard of revolutionaries attacking the Kremlin.

Russia Leaves the War

1917 was a very difficult year for Russia. Although its army was still large, a high proportion of its best soldiers had been killed or become POWs in Germany as a result of earlier battles, and there were severe logistical problems causing shortages of arms, ammunition, food and supplies of all kinds. As a result, there was no real possibility of significant offensive action. In fact, disobedience by the troops and desertions (2 million in 1917 alone) were common events. In this environment, the Germans adopted a laid-back approach, essentially avoiding casualties while watching the Russian army disintegrate on its own. In fact, the only noteworthy action was the occupation of Riga, the capital of Latvia, on September 3.

On the home front, the situation was even worse as the population was extremely war-weary and there were riots in Petrograd and other cities where shortages of food, fuel and other essential goods were blamed on the Imperial government. Thus, the country was ripe for revolution, which came to a head in March. The Czar was forced to abdicate on March 15, and a Provisional Government headed by Georgy Lvov of the Constitutional Democratic Party was formed. Although this entity was committed to continuing the war, it was unable to do much in that regard or to solve the basic problems. In due course, Lvov was replaced by Alexander Kerensky in July, but he was also unsuccessful.

In the meantime, the Germans sent Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the radical left Bolsheviks, by sealed train from exile in Switzerland to Petrograd, where he agitated against the Provisional Government and the war effort, demanding "Bread and Peace." As a result, a second revolution brought the Bolsheviks to power on November 7, thus changing the history of the world for the next 70 years. Figure 13 shows a picture postcard of revolutionaries attacking the Kremlin in November 1917.

Lenin realized that he needed to take Russia out of the war in order to consolidate his power at home and signed an armistice with the Germans in December, which was confirmed by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918. (Figure 14 is a picture postcard of the Russian delegation arriving at Brest-Litovsk for the peace talks.) Under its provisions, the Russians gave up all territorial claims to the Baltic States,



Figure 14. Picture postcard of Russian delegation at Brest-Litovsk.



Figure 15. Map of territories surrendered by Russia at Brest-Litovsk.

Bessarabia, Ukraine, Transcaucasia and other areas populated by non-Russian ethnic groups. Figure 15 shows a map of the territories given up by Russia as a result of the Treaty.

Summary

The year 1917 was likely a very frustrating period for both sides in the conflict, with little apparent progress toward an end to the bloodletting. There were both favorable and unfavorable aspects for both sides, but nothing that was decisive in a near-term sense. The Allies could take heart from the liberation of Palestine and Mesopotamia as well as the enlistment of Greece, while the Germans could celebrate the victories in Italy and Romania. By far the most important news, however, was the Americans entering the war and the Russians leaving. These events would have an important bearing on what would happen in 1918. The armistice on the Eastern Front provided the resources for a final German offensive in the West in the first half of that year, and the entry of the United States provided the manpower for a turning of the tide on the Western Front in the second half, which eventually ended the war.

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