

# Europe 1914-1945: Attempts at Peace

*by John R. Smestad Jr.*

World War I, which took place from 1914 -1918, was known as the Great War because it was considered the largest, bloodiest, most costly, and most all-encompassing war up to that point in history. Involving almost all of the countries of Europe, it is no wonder that numerous attempts were made at reaching a negotiated peace to end the destruction. As this paper will deal with the major public peace proposals during the war, it is important that these terms first be defined. They were "major" in that they were widely known and encompassed all of the belligerents, and "public" in that they were widely publicized in the press and among governments; they were not just secret peace "feelers" between governments. The proposals sought to permanently end the war, but, with the exception of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, had little effect on the eventual armistice and peace treaty. Therefore, following a brief summary of the war, five major public peace proposals will be examined: Pope Benedict XV's peace note, initiatives by the Soviets and the International Socialists, the efforts of British moderates, the German Reichstag resolution, and Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points.

To understand the various peace proposals that were issued during the course of World War I, it is first necessary to review the war itself: the course of fighting, who the belligerents were, and the outcome of the war. Following the Moroccan crises in North Africa which pitted German and French interests in the region against one another, the situation in Europe reached a crisis point when a Serbian nationalist assassinated the crown prince of Austria-Hungary, Arch duke Francis Ferdinand. <1> Following Serbian rejection of a German backed Austrian ultimatum, Austria declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914. Russia mobilized in defense of Serbia; Germany declared war on Russia and France, and invaded Belgium, thereby drawing in the British, who had guaranteed Belgian neutrality. Thus, through a complicated system of alliances, Great Britain, France, and Russia (the Allies or Triple Entente) were pitted against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (the Central Powers). <2> Also to blame for the war was the von Schlieffen plan of Germany which required the defeat of France before Russia had completely mobilized. However, early Russian mobilization and underestimated French resistance coupled with a British declaration of war helped cause the German plan to fail. <3> In the west this resulted in a virtual stalemate characterized by trench warfare, especially in the months following the Battle of the Marne. "It was to be four years before the deadlock thus created was broken and the mobility of operations restored. In the meantime, the youth of England, France, and Germany was squandered on futile assaults on each other's fixed positions." <4> The eastern front, however, "was marked with great mobility and with considerable gain and loss of territory." <5> Russian armies battled German and Austrian forces in Galicia and at Tannenberg and Masurian Lakes. <6>

The situation on both fronts remained the same until 1917 when two events changed the course of the war: the overthrow of the Tsar in Russia and the entrance of the United

States into the war on the side of the Allies. In Russia, the provisional government established after the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown by the Bolsheviks, whose leader, V.I. Lenin, concluded the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Germans on March 3, 1918. <7> On the western front American forces joined British and French armies in breaking the stalemate and driving the Germans back to Sedan; the German government, now in chaos following the abdication of Emperor William II, sued for peace. The leaders of the new German Republic signed an armistice on November 11, 1918; the Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28, 1919. <8>

The peace treaty that was finally signed was not, though, the first attempt at securing a negotiated peace settlement. Governments on both sides engaged in internal debate regarding a diplomatic solution while the international press also published suggestions on ending the hostilities. More often than not they failed due to internal disagreement among government authorities within the belligerent nations. Five peace efforts, however, stand out as brave attempts at halting the seemingly endless war: the work of Pope Benedict XV, Soviet and International Socialist efforts, British attempts, the peace resolution of the German Reichstag, and Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points.

Pope Benedict XV, elected September 3, 1914, following the death of Pius X, became involved in seeking peace during World War I from almost its very beginning. <9> With the war having started in the summer of 1914, Benedict, in November of that year, issued his first encyclical, "Ad Beatissimi," in which he outlined the plans for his papacy and issued the first of several calls for the warring nations to lay down their arms.

In his evaluation of the situation, the "murderous struggle" as he brands the war, came about because of four prominent disorders: (1) the lack of mutual love among men; (2) disregard for authority; (3) unjust quarrels between various classes; (4) unbridled cupidity for perishable things, as though there were no better goals for human effort. <10>

The Pope followed this appeal with a letter dated July 28, 1915, and entitled "Allorche fummo chiamati," or "Apostolic Exhortation to the Peoples Now at War and to their Rulers." <11> In it Benedict pleaded "In holy name of God . . . We conjure you, whom Divine Providence has placed over the nations at war, to put an end at last to this horrible slaughter . . ." <12> With no change in the course of the war forthcoming, Benedict XV, on August 1, 1917, issued a specific peace plan which came to be known as the Papal peace note. Addressed again "To the Belligerent Peoples and to Their Leaders," Benedict XV detailed a seven point peace plan. <13> The note was received by Great Britain (which forwarded copies to France and the United States) as well as by the Central Powers. This formal plan for peace stated that (1) "the moral force of right . . . be substituted for the material force of arms," (2) there must be "simultaneous and reciprocal diminution of armaments," (3) a mechanism for "international arbitration" must be established," (4) "true liberty and common rights over the sea" should exist, (5) there should be a "renunciation of war indemnities," (6) occupied territories should be evacuated, and (7) there should be "an examination . . . of rival claims." <14>

Reactions to Benedict XV's proposal came from all sides. Great Britain reacted favorably but was overruled by her ally, the United States. Robert Lansing, U.S. Secretary of State, rejected the proposal on the grounds that a sudden armistice would leave the same people in charge of Germany who started the war in the first place. With the Allies looking unfavorably at the Pope's note, the Central Powers also sent replies. Bulgaria and Austria-Hungary were the most favorable while Germany sent an inconclusive answer which cited the refusal of the Allies to halt the war and the preference that there be no third party involvement in negotiations. "The debacle of this peace effort was perhaps the greatest disappointment Benedict XV suffered during his pontificate." <15> Following these efforts the Pope did not issue any more pleas for peace for the remainder of the war.

Given that a revered figure such as the Roman Pontiff had no success in peace efforts during the war, it is a wonder that others tried, but try they did. In 1917, a series of peace proposals were issued by various (and sometimes conflicting) authorities in Russia. The first of these was proclaimed on March 27, 1917, by the Petrograd Soviet. Addressed "To the peoples of the entire world," the proclamation "appealed to the peoples of the world to join in common action for peace and for a decisive struggle against the territorial ambitions of all governments." <16> Following the proposal, the Soviet, through Menshevik leader Irakli Tsereteli, expanded upon the original peace plan by reexamining the Soviet's desire for a peace with no land transfers or reparation payments. The infighting that characterized relations within the Petrograd Soviet and between it and the Russian provisional government delayed an effective pursuit of the peace proposal, though. Also, the resolution was denounced by two Russian leaders: Milyukov of the provisional government and Lenin of the Bolsheviks; Milyukov believed in pursuing the war till victory while Lenin believed that the Soviet's action signaled compliance with the anti-Bolshevik provisional government. This failure gave way to a second Russian peace initiative, this time by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. <17>

In November 1917, the post-Tsarist provisional government of Russia was overthrown by Lenin's Bolsheviks. The new government issued Lenin's decree on peace, a proposal that came to be known as the Bolshevik peace plan. It outlined an end to secret treaties and negotiations, an immediate and total armistice, and an openness to consider all other proposals. <18> As Lenin himself said at the Soviet Congress in Moscow:

Measures must be taken for the realization of peace . . . We shall offer to all peoples of the warring nations peace on the basis of Soviet conditions: No annexations, no reparations, self-determination of the peoples. At the time we shall make all secret pacts known and declare them invalid . . . The government asks all governments and peoples of belligerent countries to conclude an armistice immediately... <19>

If the appeal had ended there the Allies and the Central Powers might have paid attention to the noble ideals expressed in the proposal. However, the Soviet Congress also included a call to the proletariats to make their voices heard in their respective countries. They also emphasized self-determination, an idea which greatly disturbed the warring monarchs and led to their almost complete rejection of the Bolshevik overture for peace. <20> As the Russian-sponsored initiatives collapsed, hopes of a Socialist-led peace plan dimmed

when the Stockholm peace project, a conference designed to initiate a peace process by the socialist elements of all nations, failed amidst infighting among the various nationalities. The resolution calling for peace that they did manage to pass was severely weakened by the absence of an endorsement from American, British, and French socialist groups. <21>

Even as the Vatican and the Soviet Congress maneuvered for peace, other belligerent nations issued plans designed to bring about a negotiated settlement to the bloody conflict. In Great Britain this attempt was embodied in the November 29, 1917, letter of moderate Lord Lansdowne to the *Daily Telegraph*. "It represented the culmination of the efforts of the moderates in England for a negotiated peace . . . he suggested some system of arbitration . . . for the settlement of international disputes." <22> Such a noble effort met the same fate as appeals of the Socialists, the Pope, and Lenin. The government, in the House of Commons, denied endorsing the letter even when the British Foreign Office confirmed its technical oversight of the content. Lansdowne's effort collapsed in the face of such confusion and opposition. <23>

In Germany the situation was similarly characterized as in Russia and Britain by intragovernmental policy feuds. In December of 1916, Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg's government published a peace note that appealed for an end to hostilities. As G.R. Crosby has noted:

No terms were stated, but the Central Powers felt "sure that the propositions which they would bring forward, and which would aim to assure the existence, honour, and free development of their peoples, would be such as to serve as a basis for the restoration of a lasting peace." <24>

However, due to the absence of specific terms, the peace note was rejected almost unanimously by the Allies. <25> The war, therefore, continued in its destruction. Once the United States forces had reached Europe the chance of a victory by the exhausted German army lessened greatly. With leftist groups in Germany clamoring for peace, the remaining moderates in the government began to plan for a peace initiative independent of the Kaiser and the Supreme Command. Their efforts culminated in the Reichstag Peace Resolution of July 19, 1917. Over the objections of Chancellor Michaelis, Kaiser William II, and the Supreme Command, the Social Democrats, the Catholic Center Party, and the Progressives passed a resolution which called for no annexations, no indemnities, freedom of the seas, and international arbitration. (All of these were points endorsed by the pope, the Soviets, and Wilson.) Unfortunately, this effort also failed when the army command and the chancellor simply ignored the resolution and continued the war with their goals of total victory with annexations. <26>

The final major public peace proposal is significant because it is the one which eventually led to an armistice in November of 1918: the Fourteen Points of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. Announced on January 8, 1918, the Fourteen Points embodied Wilson's ideals for world peace. He called for: "open covenants of peace, openly arrived at," "freedom of the seas," "removal of all economic barriers," reduction of armaments, "adjustment of all

colonial claims," "evacuation of all Russian territory," evacuation of Belgium, restoration of all French territory, "readjustment of the frontiers of Italy," autonomous development of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, evacuation of the Balkans, break-up of the Ottoman Empire, an independent Poland, and the formation of "a general association of nations . . . for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence ..." <27> The Central Powers did not react immediately to Wilson's far-reaching proposal. However, in October of 1918, Germany's new chancellor, Prince Max von Baden, appealed for an armistice based on the Fourteen Points; hostilities ceased on November 11, 1918. <28>

The Versailles conference and its incorporation of Wilson's Fourteen Points into the Treaty of Versailles is beyond the scope of this paper. It is sufficient to say that, as was the case with the other peace proposals, the story was one of failure. The European Allies dictated the terms of peace to the defeated Central Powers, terms which included much in the way of annexations and reparations. The significance of the pope's proposal, Soviet and Socialist efforts, the British letter, the Reichstag resolution, and the Fourteen Points lay in their desire for a conciliatory and lasting peace. Versailles, as history was to show, failed in those respects.

### Notes

1 Kirchberger Joe H., *The First World War: An Eyewitness History* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1992) 21- 23.

2 *ibid.*, 40-41.

3 *Ibid*, 11-14.

4 Craig, Gordon A., *Europe Since 1914* (Hinsdale: Dryden Press, 1972) 463-464.

5 *Ibid*, 465-467.

6 *Ibid*.

7 Kirchberger, 253-255.

8 *Ibid*, 298-299.

9 "Benedict XV, Pope." *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967) 279.

10 Peters, Walter H., *The Life of Benedict XV* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1959). 279.

11 *Ibid.*, 123.

12 "Benedict XV." *The Papal Encyclicals in their Historical Context* ed. Anne Fremantle (New York: Mentor Books, 1956) 215-216.

13 Ibid, 217.

14 Peters, 146-147.

15 "Benedict XV, Pope. 280.

16 Kirby, David. *War, Peace, Revolution: International Socialism at the Crossroads 1914-1918* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 204-205.

17 Ibid, 98-108.

18 Ibid, 204-205.

19 Kirchberger 261.

20 Kirby, 204-205.

21 Nation, R. Craig. *War on War: Lenin, The Zimmerwald Left and the Origins of Communist Internationalism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989). 198-200.

22 Crosby, G.R. *Disarmament and Peace in British Politics, 1914-1919*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957). 52-53.

23 Ibid, 54.

24 Mowat, R.B. *A History of European Diplomacy, 1914-1925*. (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1927). 68-70

25 Ibid, 68-70.

26 Halperin, S. William. *Germany Tried Democracy: A Political History of the Reich from 1918-1933*. (New York: Norton, 1974) 30-32.

27 Kirchberger, 355- 356.

28 Ibid, 214

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