

French Mutinies of 1917

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In 1917, over 100,000 French soldiers lost their life during the Nivelle offensive. They were going to attack the Germans on a 49 mile long front. General Nivelle assembled a massive force of 1.2 million men, 5,000 guns, 200 tanks, 8 squadrons of attack aircraft and many more. The preliminary bombardment from the French fired over 2,000,000 shells at the enemy lines most of them missing the main German lines. When the whistle blew everybody was doomed from the start. Also, unknown to Nivelle, the Germans captured their plans for the offensive so the recipe for disaster was imminent. When General Nivelle was still the offensive he said "We have the formula... victory is certain"¹ he was wrong. In WWI, the French refused to fight after giant bloody offensives with little to no gain. When the French demanded changes, General Petain gave it to them and the mutinies stopped.

Many French soldiers took advantage of the change of commanding generals. After the Nivelle offensive continually failed, the hero of Verdun, General Nivelle, was replaced by General Petain the great WWI hero and the great WWII traitor. French soldiers tried to take advantage of the new leader and started demanding things like better food, more leave, and better living conditions. When officers refused to give this list of demands to higher ranking officers they started mutiny throughout the ranks. French soldiers on leave would sing French revolutionary songs and as French soldiers we're going to the front they would yell, "down with the war,"² with their thumbs down. When the soldiers finally got enough

¹ "Mutiny on the Aisne | World War I Centenary."

<http://ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/war-as-revolution/mutiny-on-the-aisne/>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2018.

² "BRIA 17 3 a The French Army Mutinies of World War I - Constitutional"

<http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-17-3-a-the-french-army-mutinies-of-world-war-i>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2018.

attention from Petain they gave him their list of demands and Petain promised he would try his best to reach them. He kept his promise and soon the French were back to fighting and winning the war.

One of the big things that caused the mutinies were the living conditions and food rations. The food was awful. Most of the bread that was sent to the front was being transported in a dirty truck, and even worse it wasn't wrapped or covered up. The same goes for coffee, they were transported in tin cans without a cover therefore all the dirt and insects are free to climb and make themselves at home. A lot of the food was already disgusting before they arrived at the front. Some canned soup from Great Britain consisted simply of a few veggies and an unknown type of meat and a very thin layer of gravy. Every rare once in awhile red cross parcels arrived with chocolate, alcoholic beverages, tobacco etc. I think for the majority of WWI the Red Cross parcels are what kept the men going, otherwise without them, morale would get decimatingly low and could have started mutinies way before the mutinies of 1917.

When French soldiers did have leave and went to Paris or to go visit their families in France, they would often read anti war pamphlets. These pamphlets sometimes told the truth to the men. This sometime infuriated the men because they were not being told the truth or they were lies and that made matters even worse. French soldiers being pulled often pass by French soldiers on leave, drunk with cheap wine, which was very accessible around Paris and other big cities. While passing by these drunk soldiers, the drunk soldiers would give them a thumbs down and yell "down with the war!". Soldiers at the front also heard of people hurting their loved ones in anti

war pamphlets and they would become infuriated and start protesting and yelling at their superiors. That's why, when Petain became commanding general, he blamed the government for the mutinies because they did nothing to stop the groups printing the pamphlets.

The French soldiers wanted more leave too. They were stuck on the line for months at a time without any kind of leave and conditions on the front line were horrendous. Without leave men went nuts because the smell was horrible and there was constant artillery bombardment. Many of them, since they were not allowed to leave, simply deserted their posts. Groups who mutinied hid or left the front, but typically by the time their officers were capable of getting them back to the front, they already had enough of a break and just went right back up to the front.

To solve the problems of mutinies in large groups, officers were ordered to shoot every tenth person until they went back to the front. The reason they did this was if a small group mutinied, they could easily take them and court martial them, but if it was a large group of 100 men, they couldn't court martial them all. So they shot every 10th person because you can't shoot 100, men you need them to fight. Also officers started listening to the troops that mutinied or threatened to and those reports were passed up the chain of command, right up to General Petain. General Petain agreed to the demands and from then on the soldiers got more leave, slightly better food and best of all, he banned large scale offensives like the Nivelle offensive.

In my opinion, some of the punishments for the mutinies were a bit unfair or uncalled for. There's a story that a couple of guys on the front mutinied and their officer

ordered the machine gun crew to shoot them. The machine gun refused to fire upon their fellow country men. The 3rd time their officer told the machine gun crew to shoot them, they once again refused, so the officer took the machine gun and killed 3 of them and wounded another 5. In my opinion, that's just cruel. The thing is, even though it's cruel, at the time, it was seen as cowardly to mutiny and treason was punishable by death. This was all before France abolished the death penalty in 1981. About 50 Frenchmen were killed by firing squad during the mutinies in 1917 and many more were undoubtedly killed on the front with no record of them ever being killed.

Here's a different view of the mutinies. After the war, french representatives questioned General Ludendorff who said that he never knew about the mutinies until after they stopped. Nonetheless, General Ludendorff said he would not take advantage of it solely because he didn't want his own troops to get the same idea and start to mutiny too. The French mutinies never affected the Germans even though they were practically right next to them. The German troops continued life as normal in the trenches. They had no idea what was going on right next to them. The mutinies never really affected any of France's allies like America or Britain.

Most of the French army was affected by these mutinies. Over 60k French troops were involved in the mass mutinies. The French are lucky that it didn't spread quicker. When asked why they wouldn't fight they said "You have nothing to fear, we are prepared to man the trenches, we will do our duty and the Boches will not get through. But we will not take part in attacks which result in nothing but useless casualties."³ .The

³ "Rebellion in the Trenches: The French Army Mutiny of 1917 - Daily Kos." 23 Dec. 2014, <https://www.dailykos.com/story/2014/12/23/1329450/-Rebellion-in-the-Trenches-The-French-Army-Mutiny-of-1917>. Accessed 13 Feb. 2018.

division that was affected the most were at the front line. I think if it wasn't so isolated at the front, the mutinies could have spread a lot quicker and could have devastated the French army and quite possibly have changed the outcome of the war. The French could have lost their foothold and if the Germans attacked it would have been chaos. If the Germans were to have broke these lines they would have a clear path to Paris. At that point, a couple of things could have happened. One: the Germans could have captured Paris, regrouped, rebuilt and become stronger with their newfound resources. Two: the Germans could still potentially lose the war but it would last another couple of years. And three: if the Germans break the lines, the British, or whatever is left of the French army, could counter attack the Germans and push them back and then win the war adding on a couple of months.

Nivelle had the idea that when attacking the Germans in mass forces, like the Nivelle offensive, it would be an easy victory and he kept thinking after losing battle after battle victory was inevitable, but it wasn't. After a couple of weeks, the casualties were skyhigh and morale was extremely low. The French took so many casualties and made zero progress and that started getting to them. The first mutinies were made up of only two men, and they were court martialed immediately. More and more people began to stop fighting and the mutinies started getting larger. One day, on the way to the front, an entire battalion mutinitied and hid in a cave. A superior officer came down and asked why they refused to fight and they responded "we will man the trenches and hold our ground but we will not attack in big bloody offensives". So these were the first demands to go all the way up to Petain and that's when changes started being made.

So in conclusion I think the French could have handled it a different way. Instead of threatening and shooting them talk to them, send them home for a bit to recuperate. On the other hand, back then, if you were to be involved or start a mutiny you would be seen by the public and higher ranking officers as a coward and the result of that could be the death penalty. Therefore, getting shot wasn't rare, whether it be mutiny, cowardness, or deserting your post you could be court martialed and shot. There still could have been a better way. They could have prevented all of this by simply getting better food, more leave, and even better leadership.

Annotated Bibliography

Leonard, Matt. "Mutiny on the Aisne." *World War I Centenary*,
ww1centenary.oucs.ox.ac.uk/war-as-revolution/mutiny-on-the-aisne/.

This website helped because it gave me information on why they mutinied and events leading up and contributing to the mutinies.

"Mutiny in the French Army." *History Learning Site*,
www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world-war-one/the-western-front-in-world-war-one/mutiny-in-the-french-army/.

This resource helped me greatly because it gave me information on how the mutinies started and how officers were affected by it and the army in general and how they took care of the situations.

Shuster, Mike. "IN FRANCE IT'S MUTINY! THOUSANDS REFUSE TO FIGHT." *The Great War Project*, 21 May 2017,
greatwarproject.org/2017/05/21/in-france-its-mutiny-thousands-refuse-to-fight/.

In WWI french mutinies started to occur after a string of failed offensives and many casualties. This website was important to my paper because it was the first website I used and it was very useful because it gave me plenty of insight on how many mutinied the numbers and just a general description.