The Great War Christmas Truce: 'They Were Positively Human'

A 19th-century peace activist once asked, "Is it possible that any Christian, of whatever sect, who believes the New Testament to be anything better than a fable, can doubt for a moment that the time will come when all the kingdoms of the earth shall be at peace?"

Jesus Christ, as both a religious and historical figure, has been chronicled as the "Prince of Peace." He was the man (or son of God) who instructed his followers to turn the other cheek. This philosophy of love, forgiveness, and the rejection of violence is difficult to mesh with a modern age that has fought two world wars. Reaching even farther back, it's hard to reconcile Christ's message with the violence inflicted by Christians against both non-Christians and other members of the faith.

But one moment, found in the bloody, secularized 20th century, stands out: the Christmas Truce of 1914.

World War I had begun in August, engulfing most of Europe. On the western front, a German invasion of France by way of Belgium had stalled just 50 miles outside of Paris. Fighting quickly devolved into trench warfare, with German and British-French lines divided by a no-man's land of barbed wire, shell holes, and death. Soldiers lived and died in trenches of mud and dirt, infested with fleas and other vermin and often flooded with water that was knee deep. Winter added frost and bitter cold. The war that people on both sides said would be done by Christmas showed no sign of ending. By December, after barely five months of combat, casualties on all sides numbered over two million.

Yet that Christmas Eve, an unexpected sound could be heard above the din of gunfire: soldiers on the German side singing *Stille Nacht*, the original German-language *Silent Night*. Small fir trees, makeshift replacements for the grand Christmas trees back home, had been placed. The constant fighting might have had the effect of increasing religious reflection. During the opening months of the war in 1914, churches in Germany were fuller than they had ever been, even in working-class areas infamous for secular and anti-clerical politics.

After much hesitation, soldiers on the British side began to poke their heads out of the trenches. The Germans did not fire. The Brits responded by applauding and singing their own English version of the carol. The two sides then met together in no man's land. Frederick James Davies, a private in the 2nd Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers, [described](#) his experiences in a letter home to his mother: "They [the Germans] were only fifty yards away from us in the trenches. They came out and we went to meet them. We shook hands with them…. They also gave us cigars but they didn't have much food. I think they are hard up for it. They were fed up with the war." They exchanged "cigs, jam and corn beef" and Davies added that he had "a good chat with the Germans on Xmas day."

Writer Henry Williamson, then a private in the London Rifle Brigade, [wrote](#)cheerfully home to his mother that he was smoking German tobacco he had exchanged with a live soldier. He recounted, "Yesterday the British & Germans met & shook hands in the Ground between the trenches, & exchanged souvenirs, & shook hands." He describes his military counterparts: "Many are gentle looking men in goatee beards & spectacles, and some are very big and arrogant looking." In other words, they looked positively human. Williamson even showed empathy for their similar motivations: "The Germans put 'For Fatherland & Freedom' on the cross. They obviously think their cause is a just one."

In his own account, Captain A.D. Chater of the 2nd Battalion Gordon Highlanders [wrote](): "This extraordinary truce has been quite impromptu. There was no previous arrangement and of course it had been decided that there was not to be any cessation of hostilities."

This outbreak of peace was entirely spontaneous, started by privates on the front lines as their officers threatened them with court-martial. Soldiers laughed, talked, sang, exchanged gifts, and helped to bury their dead. A few games of soccer were even played.

They had been killing each other for months, indoctrinated for most of their lives to view the "other" as evil, inhuman. But here they were, ordinary men who missed their homes and families, who had only the vaguest idea of why they were there, why they were dying and killing. Karl Muhlegg of the 17th Bavarian Regiment wrote home, "Never was I as keenly aware of the insanity of war."

The truce continued until the end of Christmas. In some spots it continued for days. But slowly men returned to their sides and fighting resumed. Europe would not see another Christmas in peacetime until 1918, after 10,000,000 men had been killed. When the war ended, the French military academy Saint-Cyr listed all its graduates who had fallen. For one year, it contains just one brief but chilling entry: "The Class of 1914." In comparison, only 81 British soldiers died on Christmas Day 1914 in all of Europe.

What is striking is the difference between the propaganda put forward by the governments on the home front and the spontaneous actions that Christmas. Besides Pope Benedict XV, who urged a temporary ceasefire so war cannons would not be booming across Europe on the night the angels were meant to announce Christ's birth, what the soldiers did was opposed by governments on both sides.

There's a case to be made that the truce had nothing to do with Christianity. Periodic and unplanned truces occur in war regularly. Fighting ceases while the two sides take time to bury their dead. And trade and fraternization do occur. One might ask, does the common soldier need a higher reason to stop killing or be killed? But this rejoinder is far too simplistic. It's estimated that roughly 100,000 soldiers participated in the Christmas Truce of 1914 to some degree. This is far too large a number to be written off as a casual occurrence. This event was unplanned, uncoordinated, and not sanctioned by the officer core. Yet it happened. And it just happened to take place on the most celebrated day in the Christian calendar, the observance of the birth of Christ, the "Prince of Peace." If both sides were not united under Christendom, joined together in mutual belief, it is a definite that the truce would not have occurred.

In November 1914, three months into the war, Pope Benedict XV grieved, "Who would imagine, as we see them thus filled with hatred of one another, that they are all of one common stock, all of the same nature, all members of the same human society? Who would recognize brothers, whose Father is in Heaven?" Perhaps on Christmas, with morals engraved on their innermost hearts, the soldiers realized the truth of this statement.

As an event in the history of war, the Christmas Truce of 1914 is barely a footnote; it had no major effects on the fighting or outcome of World War I. But in the history of peace, the truce is a powerful story. This moment, this flash of love, bookended on both sides by destruction and hate, was a triumph of humanity. It's the closest thing we'll see to a miracle in this fallen world.

Frederick Niven, a minor Scottish poet, ended his poem "A Carol from Flanders" with a sentiment that should be prayed for year-round:

O ye who read this truthful rime

From Flanders, kneel and say:

God Speed the time when every day

Shall be as Christmas Day

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