

Unlearned Lessons from World War I: The Christmas Truce of 1914

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Theme: [History](#)

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When Christian frontline soldiers on both sides of No Man's Land saw the obvious futility of war and just stopped the killing, thus disobeying orders from the out-of-touch Christian Generals and Christian Bishops to whom they had pledged obedience.

"Good morning; Good morning," the General said

When we met him last week on our way to the line.

Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,

And we're cursing his staff - (those) incompetent swine."

- An excerpt from Siegfried Sassoon's poem "The General", commenting on the standard use of World War I frontline soldiers as "cannon fodder"

"...the ones who call the shots (in war) won't be among the dead and lame, And on each end of the rifle we're the same" — John McCutcheon, from his powerful antiwar (and therefore censored-out) song "Christmas in the Trenches"

"The first casualty, when war comes, is truth". — Hiram Johnson (1866-1945) - a Progressive Republican US Senator from California, who died on Aug. 6, 1945, the day the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

In World War I, as happens to be true in most wars involving Christian soldiers, the Christian church leadership joined in the patriotic fervor with very un-Christ-like, nationalistic and racial/religious superiority stances.

Astonishingly, religious leaders on every side of the conflict truly believed that God was on their particular side.

And so the pulpits all over Europe, including British, Scottish, French, Belgian, German, Austrian, Hungarian, Russian and Italian churches reverberated with flag-waving fervor, with clear messages to their doomed warrior-sons that it was their God-given Christian duty to march off to kill the equally brain-washed young Christian soldier-enemies, who were also certain that God was on their side.

Five months into the miserable death and destruction of the perpetually dead-locked trench war (featuring the now-infamous mass slaughter via the recently developed new technology weapons involving artillery, machine guns and poison gas), the first Christmas of the war

came around.

Christmas was the holiest of Christian holidays, but in this time of homesickness, the first one had special meaning. December 24, 1914 reminded the soldiers of the good food, the safe, warm and dry homes and the beloved families that they had left behind – and which they now suspected they would never see again.

The physically exhausted, spiritually deadened, combat-traumatized soldiers on both sides of No Man's Land desperately sought some respite from the misery of the war, especially the water-logged, putrid, rat-infested, corpse-infested and increasingly frozen trenches.

The frontline soldiers on both sides were at the end of their emotional ropes because of the unrelenting artillery barrages against which they were defenseless. If they weren't killed or maimed by the bombings, what would eventually destroy them was the "shell-shock" (now known as posttraumatic stress disorder – PTSD), that caused sleep deprivation, horrifying nightmares, depression, suicidal thinking, hyper-alertness and other mental and neurological distresses. Other common "killers" were the bad and insufficient food, lice, trench foot, frostbite and gangrenous toes and fingers.

Poison gas attacks were yet to come but the futile and suicidal "over the top" assaults against machine gun nests were deeply demoralizing. Such attacks were stupidly and repeatedly ordered by senior officers like Sir Douglas Haig, who didn't have to participate in the assaults themselves.

Winston Churchill, in his British naval command role at the time, had obviously learned nothing from Haig's disastrous tactic when, a year later, he also ordered repeated suicidal charges against machine gun fire at the infamous massacre of Australian and New Zealand troops at Turkey's Gallipoli peninsula, a blunder for which Churchill resigned his Admiralty commission in disgrace.

The day-to-day horrors of trench warfare were punctuated by the screams of pain coming from the wounded soldiers in No Man's Land who were helplessly hanging on the barbed wire or lying in the bomb craters – their deaths often lingering on for days.

The effect on the troops in the trenches who had to listen to the desperate pleas for help was psychologically devastating. The morale of the troops on both sides of No Man's Land had hit rock bottom by Christmas.

Christmas in the Trenches

So on December 24, 1914, the exhausted troops settled down to Christmas gifts from home, special food, special liquor, special tobacco and special rest. A magnanimous (and deluded) Kaiser Wilhelm had even ordered 100,000 Christmas trees with millions of ornamental candles to be sent up to the front, expecting that such an act would boost troop morale. Using the supply lines for such militarily unnecessary items seemed to be an acceptable investment for the over-confident emperor. Nobody suspected that the Christmas tree idea would backfire and instead be a catalyst for a famous event in the history of peace-making that was nearly censored out from recorded history.

AN HISTORIC GROUP: BRITISH AND GERMAN SOLDIERS PHOTOGRAPHED TOGETHER.



Enemies become friendly on Christmas Day, when the British and Germans arranged on the Western Front to be seen photographed together. This is the historic picture, and shows the soldiers

That spontaneous event, the Christmas Truce of 1914, was expressed in a variety of ways at a multitude of locations all along the 600 miles of trenches that stretched across France, but it was an event that would never again be duplicated in the history of warfare.

The tradition that has emerged from this true story was that, in the silence of Christmas Eve night, German soldiers started singing "Stille Nacht".

Soon the British, French, Scots and Canadians on the other side of No Man's Land joined in and all sides sang together in their own tongues. Before fore long, the divine spirit of peace and "goodwill towards men" prevailed over the demonic spirit of war.

Perhaps some Christian soldiers even recalled the often forgotten, indeed, censored-out love-your enemies admonitions and non-violent teachings that had come from Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount teachings.

Listening to the familiar Christmas carols, the troops sensed their common humanity, and the natural human aversion to killing broke through to their consciousness and somehow overcame the brain-washing and pro-war propaganda that they had all been subjected to.

However it happened, for a precious day or two free from the carnage, these men rose to a higher level of humanity and could not be motivated to continue the killing.

Once the spirit of peace was felt, soldiers on both sides dropped their weapons and came out of their trenches to meet their former enemies face-to-face. They had to step around shell holes and frozen corpses, which were soon given respectful burials. And former enemies helped one another with that gruesome and solemn task

And yet there was a celebration of peace and new-found friendship. Pictures from home were shared, as were chocolates, cigarettes, beer, wine, schnapps and soccer games. Addresses were exchanged and every soldier who genuinely experienced the drama was forever changed.

In the Insanity of War, Fostering Peace on Earth is Treason

Fraternization with the enemy (such as refusing to obey orders to kill) has historically been regarded by military commanders and politicians as an act of treason, severely punishable, even by summary execution on the battlefield.

In the case of the Christmas Truce of 1914, trying to not draw public attention to this widespread and potentially contagious incident, most commanding officers threatened summary executions and court martials but relatively few executions took place. There were still severe punishments, however, including the transfer of many of the German “traitors” to the even more lethal Eastern Front to kill and die there in the equally suicidal battles against Russian Orthodox Christian soldiers.

The Academy Award nominated movie that beautifully characterizes the spirit of the Christmas Truce is “Joyeux Noel” (French for “Merry Christmas”). “Joyeux Noel” tells a moving tale that has been adapted from the many surviving stories and letters from soldiers who had been there – most of which had not survived the war.

This unique story of war resistance needs to be retold over and over again if our modern-era false flag-generated, highly profitable, corporate-induced wars of empire are to be effectively de-railed.

Lessons that the Ever-present Glorification of War Propaganda is Keeping Americans From Learning

These poisonous, contagious and futile wars are being endlessly fought by thoroughly indoctrinated, glorification-of-war-influenced male adolescents who, unbeknownst to them, are at high risk of becoming physically, mentally and spiritually damaged because of their training and combat experiences.

These psychologically/spiritually immature (but physically hyper-mature and testosterone-loaded) recruits are highly likely to be doomed to a life overwhelmed by the mental ill health realities of PTSD and sociopathic personality disorder. Those violence-induced realities result in preventable depression, suicidality, homicidality, loss of religious faith, permanent and incurable traumatic brain injuries, toxic drug use (including both legal prescription drugs and illegal street drugs) and a host of other nearly impossible-to-cure problems.

Now, a century after the “war to end all wars”, there are any number of new combat wounds that include 1) post-Anthrax over-vaccination-induced autoimmune and neurological disorders, 2) psychiatric/neurological disorders from a host of new neurotoxic and addictive psychiatric drugs, 3) radiation poisoning from inhaling the dust from depleted uranium armor-piercing weaponry that will poison forever the DNA of soldiers and possibly even future sexual partners and offspring.

Profiteering militarists, corporate oligarchs and corporate-captured politicians do whatever it takes to keep their over-entertained and distracted citizen-subjects from recognizing the humanity of their enemies, whether they are Palestinians, etc. etc/ Iranians, Iraqis, Afghanis, Vietnamese, Chinese, North Koreans, Cubans, Venezuelans, War Refugee immigrant asylum-seekers from countries that have become uninhabitable because of American economic and/or military policies.

Military chaplains, who are supposed to be nurturers of the souls of those soldiers who are in their care, never talk about Jesus’ Golden Rule, his clear command to love their enemies or

the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount.

Military chaplains in particular are part of the apparatus of war that pays no attention to most of the Ten Commandments, especially the one that says: “thou shalt not kill” or “thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s oil”. In their defense, military chaplains, in their seminary training and, sadly, even in their Sunday School upbringing, may have never heard about the profoundly important gospel truths about non-domination, non-retaliation, unconditional love and the rejection of enmity.

Theological Blind Spots in Times of War

These theological blind spots are well-illustrated near the end of the “Joyeux Noel” movie. In a particularly powerful scene there was a confrontation between the Christ-like, antiwar Scottish chaplain and his pro-war bishop that occurred just as the chaplain was administering the “last rites” to a dying soldier. The bishop had come to chastise the chaplain and relieve him of his duties because of his “treasonous and shameful” behavior on the battlefield (ie, being merciful to the enemy and fraternizing with them).

The authoritarian, German-hating bishop refused to listen to the fact that on Christmas Eve the chaplain had just performed “the most important mass of my life” (involving German and Jewish enemy troops). This Christ-like chaplain wished to stay with the troops that were losing their faith, but the bishop angrily denied the chaplain’s request to remain with his men.

Then the bishop, having just de-frocked his chaplain, delivered a rousing pro-war sermon, the exact words of which had been chosen by the film-writers from a homily that had actually been delivered by an Anglican bishop in England later in the war.

The sermon was addressed to the fresh troops that had to be brought in to replace the newly pacifist veteran combatants, who were logically refusing to continue kill their fellow humans on the other side of the battle line.

The dramatic but subtle response of the chaplain to his sacking should be a clarion call to the Christian church leadership in our militarized so-called “Christian” nation – both clergy and lay: the chaplain removed the crucifix from around his neck and left it dangling on a post as he walked out the door. One wonders what happened to his faith in the teachings of Jesus.

“Joyeux Noel” is an important film that deserves to be annual holiday fare. It has ethical lessons far more powerful than “It’s A Wonderful Life” or “A Christmas Carol”.

The lessons of the 1914 Christmas Truce story is summarized in John McCutcheon’s famous – but censored-out – song, “Christmas in the Trenches”:

Christmas in the Trenches

By John McCutcheon

My name is Francis Tolliver, I come from Liverpool.
Two years ago, the war was waiting for me after school.
To Belgium and to Flanders, to Germany to here,
I fought for King and country I love dear.

'Twas Christmas in the trenches where the frost so bitter hung,
the frozen fields of France were still, no Christmas song was sung,
our families back in England were toasting us that day,
their brave and glorious lads so far away.

I was lying with my messmate on the cold and rocky ground,
when across the lines of battle came a most peculiar sound.
Says I "Now listen up, me boys!", each soldier strained to hear
as one young German voice sang out so clear.

"He's singing bloody well, you know!" my partner says to me.
Soon, one by one, each German voice joined in in harmony.
The cannons rested silent, the gas clouds rolled no more
as Christmas brought us respite from the war.

As soon as they were finished and a reverent pause was spent,
"God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen", struck up some lads from Kent.
The next they sang was "Stille Nacht", 'Tis "Silent Night", says I
and, in two tongues, one song filled up that sky.

"There's someone coming towards us!" the frontline sentry cried,
all sights were fixed on one lone figure coming from their side.
His truce flag, like a Christmas star, shone on that plain so bright
as he bravely strode unarmed into the night.

Then, one by one on either side walked into no man's land,
with neither gun nor bayonet, we met there hand to hand,
we shared some secret brandy and wished each other well,
and in a flare-lit soccer game we gave 'em hell.

We traded chocolates, cigarettes, and photographs from home,
these sons and fathers far away from families of their own.
Young Sanders played his squeeze box and they had a violin,
this curious and unlikely band of men.

Oh, soon daylight stole upon us and France was France once more;
with sad farewells, we each began to settle back to war,
but the question haunted every heart that lived that wondrous night
"Whose family have I fixed within my sights?"

'Twas Christmas in the trenches, where the frost so bitter hung,
the frozen fields of France were warmed as songs of peace were sung.
For the walls they'd kept between us to exact the work of war
had been crumbled and were gone for evermore.

Oh, my name is Francis Tolliver, in Liverpool I dwell,
each Christmas come since World War I I've learned its lessons well,
that the ones who call the shots won't be among the dead and lame,
and on each end of the rifle we're the same.

Check out the video of McCutcheon singing his song [here](#) and, for a good pictorial history of the reality of WWI's trench warfare, check [this](#).

Watch the official trailer of "Joyeux Noel" below. The movie is apparently available on NetFlix.

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Since his retirement from his holistic mental health practice, Dr Kohls has been writing his weekly Duty to Warn column for the Duluth Reader, Minnesota's premier alternative newsweekly magazine. His columns, which have been re-published around the world for the last decade, deal with a variety of justice issues. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Featured image: An artist's impression from The Illustrated London News of 9 January 1915: "British and German Soldiers Arm-in-Arm Exchanging Headgear: A Christmas Truce between Opposing Trenches" (Source: A. C. Michael - The Guardian; Originally published in The Illustrated London News, January 9, 1915)

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