

World War I: Lessons from the Christmas Truce of 1914

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104 years ago this month, one of the most unusual aberrations in the bloody history of warfare – never allowed to be repeated again – occurred. Europe was in the fifth month of the 52 month-long World War (the one that was supposed “to end all wars”) that was to end with the armistice four years later on November 11, 1918.

British, Scottish, French, Belgian, Australian, Canadian, German, Austrian, Hungarian, Serbian and Russian pulpits in those overwhelmingly Christian nations back home (far from the satanic carnage in the trenches) were doing their part in contributing to the un-Christ-like patriotic fervor that was destined to result in a holocaust that destroyed four empires, killed upwards of 20 million soldiers and resulted in the psychological and physical decimation of an entire generation of young men in France, Germany and England.

Tragically, Christianity, which began as a pacifist religion because of the pacifist teachings and actions of the nonviolent Jesus of Nazareth (and his nonviolent apostles), has, for the past 1700 years, been anything but a peacemaking church that follows Jesus by actively resisting its nation’s imperial aspirations, its nation’s wars, its nation’s war-makers and its nation’s war profiteers.

So, it wasn’t any surprise to note that the religious leaders on every side of that war were convinced that God was on their particular side – and, therefore not on the side of the Christians that they were trying to kill. The obvious contradiction – that both sides were praying to the same god – escaped most of them.

Pulpits and pews all over Europe – with few exceptions – reverberated with flag-waving fervor, sending clear messages to their doomed and baptized warrior-sons that it was their Christian duty to march off to kill, maim and even torture – if necessary – the equally doomed Christian soldiers on the other side.

Five months into the mass destruction of the perpetually stale-mated war (featuring the indiscriminate slaughter via artillery, machine gun and, eventually, poison gas), the first Christmas of the war on the Western Front was upon the exhausted and demoralized troops.

Christmas was the holiest of Christian holidays for all sides, and in this time of hunger, thirst, sleep deprivation, shell shock, TBIs, mortal wounds and homesickness, Christmas 1914 had special meaning. Christmas reminded the soldiers of the good food, safety, warm homes and beloved families that they had left behind and which they now suspected they might never see again. The physically exhausted, spiritually deadened and combat-traumatized soldiers on both sides of the battle lines desperately sought some respite from

the misery of the water-logged, putrid, rat-infested, louse-infested, corpse-infested and increasingly frozen trenches.

The cold reality of trench warfare in 1914

By this time, the frontline soldiers on both sides were probably wondering how they could possibly have believed the ridiculous propaganda from their leaders that had convinced them that their side was pre-destined to be victorious and “home before Christmas” – where they would be celebrated as conquering heroes.

Instead every soldier was at the end of their emotional ropes because of the unrelenting artillery barrages against which they were defenseless. If they weren't killed or physically maimed by the artillery shells and bombs, they would eventually be emotionally destroyed by “shell-shock” (now known as posttraumatic stress disorder – PTSD), suffering horrifying nightmares, sleep deprivation, suicidality, depression, hyper-alertness and any number of other mental and neurological abnormalities. Other common “killers of the soul” included perpetual hunger, malnutrition, infections such as typhus and dysentery, louse infestations, trench foot, frostbite and gangrenous toes and fingers.

Poison gas attacks wouldn't appear until 1915, but both British and Germans scientists were working hard to perfect that new technology. Tank warfare – which proved to be a humiliating disaster for the British – wouldn't be operational until the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

One of the most stressful realities for the frontline soldiers was the suicidal “over the top” infantry assaults against German machine gun nests and the rows of coiled barbed wire that stopped them in their tracks and made them sitting ducks. Artillery barrages commonly resulted in tens of thousands of casualties in a single day.

Over the top infantry assaults were stupidly and repeatedly ordered by senior officers like Sir John French and his replacement as British Commander-in-Chief Sir Douglas Haig (apparently preparing for the classical but hopelessly out-dated horse and sabre cavalry charges across the muck of No-Man's Land). The general staff planners of those uniformly disastrous attempts to end the war quickly or at least end the stalemate were safely out of the range of enemy artillery barrages. As they made their plans they were comfortably back at headquarters, eating well, being dressed by their orderlies, drinking their tea, none of them at any risk of experiencing the lethality of war themselves.

The frequent shoveling to improve the comfort of the trenches was frequently interrupted by preparations for attack. Screams of pain would often come from the trapped soldiers out in No-Man's Land who had been wounded by machine gun fire but who were helplessly hanging on the barbed wire or bleeding to death in the bomb craters – their deaths often lingering for days. The effect on the troops in the trenches who had to listen to the desperate, unanswerable pleas for help was psychologically devastating for the troops back in the trenches. By Christmas, the morale of the troops on both sides of No Man's Land had hit rock bottom.

Christmas in the Trenches

So on December 24, 1914, the exhausted troops settled down to Christmas with gifts from home, special food, special liquor and special rest. A magnanimous (and deluded) Kaiser

Wilhelm had 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 was ridiculed by the most hardened military officers, but nobody suspected that the Kaiser's Christmas tree idea would backfire and instead be a catalyst for an unplanned-for cease-fire, a singular event previously unheard of in the history of warfare and one that was ultimately censored out of mainstream histories, especially military histories, for most of the last century.

The Christmas Truce of 1914 was a spontaneous event that happened at a multitude of locations all along the 600 miles of trenches that stretched across Belgium and France, and it was an event that would never again be duplicated although an attempt at a Christmas Truce in 1915 was quickly put down by the authorities. Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton have written an important book about the 1914 event entitled "Christmas Truce: The Western Front, December 1914".

The movie "Joyeux Noel" (French for Merry Christmas) received an Academy Award nomination in 2005 for best foreign film. It tells the moving tale that has been adapted from the many surviving stories revealed in letters from soldiers who had been there.

One of the stories that emerged from the event was that, in the quiet of Christmas Eve night, some young German started singing "Stille Nacht". Soon the British, French and Scots on the other side of No Man's Land (oftentimes measuring only a hundred yards wide) joined in in their own tongues. Before long, the spirit of peace and "goodwill towards men" prevailed over the demonic spirit of war, and the troops on both sides sensed their common humanity. The natural human aversion to killing broke through to consciousness and overcame the patriotic fervor and brain-washing to which they had been subjected.

Once the spirit of peace was felt, soldiers on both sides dropped their weapons and came out of their trenches to meet their former foes face-to-face. To get through to the other side they had to step around shell holes and over frozen corpses (which were soon given respectful burials, soldiers from both sides helping one another with the gruesome task).

The spirit of retaliation had dissipated and the desire for peace on earth emerged. New friends shared chocolate bars, cigarettes, beer, wine, schnapps, soccer games and pictures from home. Addresses were exchanged, photos were taken and every soldier who genuinely experienced the emotional drama was forever changed - and the generals and the gung-ho politicians were appalled.

Fostering Peace on Earth in times of war is treason

Fraternization with the enemy (as in refusing to obey orders in time of war) has historically been regarded by military commanders and politicians as an act of treason, severely punishable, even with death by summary execution. In the case of the Christmas Truce of 1914, most officers tried hard not to draw public attention to the rather wide-spread and therefore potentially contagious incident. Some commanding officers even threatened courts martial if fraternization persisted (it was considered bad for the killing spirit) but relatively few executions took place.

There were still punishments however, including the re-assignment of many of the German "traitors" to the Eastern Front to kill and die on the Eastern Front in the equally suicidal battles against their Orthodox Christian co-religionists from Russia.

This unique story of war resistance needs to be retold over and over again if our modern-era false flag-generated wars of empire are to be effectively de-railed. These futile, unaffordable wars are being fought by thoroughly indoctrinated, macho, pro-war, World of Warcraft expert gamers who, unbeknownst to them, are at high risk of having their lives permanently altered by the physical, mental and spiritual damage from participating in war and violence, after which they might be doomed to a life overwhelmed by the realities of PTSD, sociopathic personality disorder, suicidality, homicidality, loss of religious faith, traumatic brain injury (shell shock), neurotoxic, addictive drug use (from either legal or illegal drugs) and a host of other nearly impossible-to-cure problems that were preventable.

Society's ethical duty to warn

It seems to me that it would be helpful if moral leadership in America, especially Christian leaders, would discharge their duty to warn the adolescents that are in their spheres of influence about all of the serious consequences that participation in the killing professions can have on their souls and psyches.

War planners do whatever it takes to keep soldiers from experiencing the humanity of their enemies, whether they are Iranians, Iraqis, Afghans, Pakistanis, Yemenis, Vietnamese, Chinese or North Koreans. I have been told by many military veterans that military chaplains, who are supposed to be nurturers of the souls of the soldiers who are in their "care", never seem to bring up, in their counseling sessions, Jesus' Golden Rule, his clear "love your enemies" commands or his ethical teachings in the Sermon on the Mount.

Military chaplains seem to just be another cog in the apparatus of making war maximally effective. Christian chaplains seem to not pay much attention to the Ten Commandments either, especially the ones that say "thou shalt not kill" or "thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's oil". In their defense, military chaplains, in their seminary training and perhaps even in their Sunday School upbringings, may have never been schooled adequately in the profoundly important gospel truths about humility, mercy, non-violence, non-domination, non-retaliation, unconditional love and the rejection of enmity.

Theological blind spots of war

These theological blind spots are illustrated near the end of the "Joyeux Noel" movie in a powerful scene depicting a confrontation between the Christ-like, antiwar Scottish chaplain and his pro-war bishop, just as the chaplain was mercifully administering the "last rites" to a dying soldier. The bishop had come to chastise the chaplain for having been merciful to a wounded soldier in No Man's Land and for fraternizing with the enemy. The bishop was relieving the chaplain of his duties because of such "treasonous and shameful" behavior on the battlefield.

The authoritarian, German-hating bishop refused to listen to the chaplain's story about his having performed "the most important mass of my life" (with German troops scandalously participating in the celebration) and that he wished to stay with the troops that needed him because they were losing their faith. The bishop angrily denied the chaplain's request to remain with his men.

The bishop then delivered a rousing pro-war sermon, taken word-for-word from a homily that had actually been delivered by an Anglican bishop from England later in the war. The sermon was addressed to the fresh troops that had to be brought in to replace the veterans

who, because of their consciences having been awakened, had suddenly become averse to killing, and were refusing to shoot their weapons.

The image of the dramatic but subtle response of the chaplain to his sacking should be a clarion call to the Christian church leadership of our militarized, so-called “Christian” America – both clergy and lay. This good man of God hung up his cross and walked out of the field hospital.

“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”.

One of the lessons of the Christmas Truce story is summarized in the concluding verse of John McCutcheon’s famous song about the event, “Christmas in the Trenches”:

“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 at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sji41RWaTCs> and, for a good pictorial history of the reality of WWI’s trench warfare, check out:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTXhZ4uR6rs>

The official trailer of “Joyeux Noel” is available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NXcseNVZGRM>

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