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### **Christmas at the Battlefield**

On Christmas Eve 1914, a spontaneous cease-fire was observed across the whole of the Western Front. The Christmas Truce of the First World War, a singular event unprecedented in the history of warfare, initially received widespread media coverage in the New York Times of 31 December 1914, followed by British newspapers, such as the Mirror, The Illustrated London News, and the Times, which printed front page photographs of British and German troops mingling and singing Christmas carols.

### **Undermining Propaganda**

The French government was the first to severely censor any reports on what they called "*fraternisation with the enemy*."

Political pressure was brought to bear to censor all reports of the event from mainstream history books for decades. For years the extraordinary event was known only by word of mouth from participants. The damage caused by the Christmas Truce to propaganda campaigns to demonise the enemy was regarded as a serious threat to the war. It has taken decades to unearth the details of the fascinating events surrounding Christmas 1914.

### **Devastating**

In the first five months of the Great War, over a million Europeans had already been killed in action, most by artillery fire. The initially fast moving campaigns had degenerated into static trench warfare with a continuous frontline of barbed wire and trenches running from the North

Sea to the Swiss frontier.

### **Emily Hobhouse**

The famous Englishwoman, Emily Hobhouse, who had exposed to the world the horrors of Lord Kitchener's scorched earth campaign against the Boer Republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State and the horrors of the British concentration camps in South Africa, was the most prominent campaigner against British involvement in the First World War.

### **Open Christmas Letter**

Emily Hobhouse authored the Open Christmas Letter calling for peace. 101 British women signed Emily's Open Christmas Letter which was endorsed by 155 prominent German and Austrian women in response. Under the heading: *"On Earth Peace, Goodwill towards Men"*, Emily Hobhouse wrote:

*"Sisters: The Christmas message sounds like mockery to a world at war, but those of us who wished, and still wish, for peace, may surely offer a solemn greeting to such of you who feel as we do."*

She mentioned that

*"as in South Africa during the Anglo Boer War (1899-1902), the brunt of modern war falls upon non-combatants, and the conscience of the world cannot bear the sight."*

### **May Christmas Hasten Peace**

*"Is it not our mission to preserve life? Do not humanity and common sense alike prompt us to join hands with the women... and urge our rulers to stave off further bloodshed?... May Christmas hasten that day..."*

### **Female Solidarity**

The German Mothers responded: *"To our English Sisters, sisters of the same race, our warm and heartfelt thanks for Christmas greetings... women of the belligerent countries, with all faithfulness, devotion, and love to their country, can go beyond it and maintain true solidarity with the women of other belligerent nations, that really civilised women never lose their humanity..."*

### **Love for One's Enemies**

Emily Hobhouse also oversaw the raising of funds and shipping of food and medicines to the women and children of Germany and Austria who were suffering as a result of the English Naval blockade.

### **Preaching for Peace**

Numerous ministers were proclaiming from the pulpit: *"That the guns may fall silent at least upon the night when the Angels sang."*

Although these messages were officially rebuffed, and suppressed in the heavily censored media, many of the soldiers in the frontlines seemed to share these sentiments. A

### **Fraternising with the Enemy**

From the first week of December, informal truces were observed by soldiers on the frontline. In a letter dated 7 December 1914, Charles De Gaulle expressed his dismay at *fraternisation with*

*the enemy* , where French and German troops had exchanged newspapers and recovered their dead and organising burial parties in no-mans-land. French General d'Urbal, expressed alarm over soldiers staying too long in the same sector becoming friendly with their enemies, to the extent that they were conducting conversations between the lines and even visiting one another's trenches!

### **Compassion for Ones Foes**

After heavy rains near Ypres, where the Germans held the high ground and the British the lower ground, English troops came out of their flooded trenches in full view of the Germans who expressed their sympathy and did not open fire on their soaked and vulnerable enemy.

### **East Saxon Meets German Saxons**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Essex Regiment recorded on 11 December, in their War Diary, that their officers and men met the German Saxon Korp half way between the trenches and exchanged food, cigarettes, chocolates and conversations.

### **Silent Night**

On Christmas Eve German soldiers began decorating their trenches with Christmas trees and candles. The Christmas Truce began in the region of Ypres, in Belgium, where the Germans were enthusiastically singing Christmas carols in their trenches. When British soldiers joined in singing Silent Night and then responded with carols of their own, the two sides began shouting Christmas greetings to each other. Shortly after that soldiers spontaneously came out of their trenches and walked across no-mans-land to greet one another, exchange gifts and souvenirs.

### **Fellowship in No-Man's-Land**

This truce spread rapidly across the entire Western Front with over 100,000 German and British troops involved in this unofficial cessation of fighting. Soon Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, Belgian and French troops joined in the Christmas celebrations in the frozen strip of no-man's-land. Joint worship services were held. Respectful burial services were conducted by the combatants for the dead between their lines. Soldiers swapped ration packs, wine, pies, chocolates and souvenirs, such as buttons, badges and hats.

### **Football Between the Frontlines**

The next day football matches were played between the lines. British officer Robert Greys wrote of the football match between the 133 Saxon Regiment and his Scottish troops. The Germans won 3 - 2. The Glasgow News on 2 January, reported that the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders won their match 4 - 1. Royal Field Artillery Lt. Albert Wynn, wrote of their soccer match against the Hanoverians, near Ypres, on Christmas Day.

### **Refusal to Open Fire**

Commanders threatened repercussions for lack of discipline and numerous officers ordered their artillery to open fire on the fraternising troops in no-mans-land. On none of these occasions did the artillery obey orders. There are numerous complaints on record by officers shocked at the total breakdown of discipline as men point blank refused orders to open fire on their own soldiers, mingling with the enemy, in no-mans-land, on Christmas Day. General Sir Horice

Smith-Dorrien, (a survivor of the battle of Isandlwana, during the Anglo-Zulu War), then commanding the British II Corp, issued orders forbidding fraternisation with the enemy and complained that his orders were disregarded by the soldiers!

### **Youth Hostel Ministry Inspired**

Richard Schirrmann was so impressed by the comradery experienced between his German regiment and French soldiers during the Christmas Truce, even exchanging addresses with one another, that he went on to found the Youth Hostel Association in 1919, to provide meeting places where young men of all countries could get to know one another.

### **The Eastern Front**

There was also a general observance of a Christmas Truce on the Eastern Front where German, Austrian Hungarian, and Russian commanders observed cease-fires for the duration of Christmas. Commanders ordered no offensive actions for the duration of both the Western calendar (24 December) and the Eastern calendar (6 January). This two week Christmas Truce was observed throughout the Eastern front, except for the Serbian front.

### **Attempts to Crush the Christian Spirit of the Soldiers**

Numerous French and British officers were court martialled for participating in this *fraternisation with the enemy*

. Whole units had to be pulled back from the front and sent to other fronts, when they displayed reluctance to fire on

"enemy"

that they had celebrated Christmas with. Numerous artillery units began to fire only at precise locations, at pre-arranged times, to avoid causing casualties. Many instances of soldiers firing high, and ineffectually, were reported.

### **1915 Truces**

An Easter Sunday Truce was attempted by German units in 1915, but they were suppressed by British artillery fire. In November 1915 a Saxon unit briefly fraternised with a Liverpool Battalion, and conducted burial services together. In December 1915, there were explicit orders directed by Allied commanders, and elaborate procedures made, to forestall any repeat of the previous Christmas Truce. But even the multiple artillery barrages ordered along the entire frontline, throughout Christmas Day by the British, were not completely effective and a number of truces were observed on the Western Front, Christmas 1915. On some sections of the Western Front, carols and gifts were exchanged between German and British troops and at least one football match, with about 50 soldiers on each side was recorded in 1915.

### **Court-Martialed**

Sir Iain Colquhoun of the Scots Guards was court-martialed for defying orders by maintaining a short truce to bury the dead between the lines, on Christmas Day 1915. Because he was related to British Prime Minister H.H. Asquith, this punishment was commuted.

### **Suppressing Christmas**

German attempts in December 1916 and 1917 to observe Christmas Truces were rebuffed by British Artillery barrages.

### Vimy Ridge 1916

Recently evidence has come to light of a successful Christmas Truce in 1916, between German and Canadian soldiers near Vimy Ridge, where they exchange Christmas greetings and presents. The Canadians and Germans visited one another's lines on 25 December 1916.

### Memorial in France

A Christmas Truce Memorial was unveiled in Frelinghien, in France, on 11 November 2008, on the spot where 25 December 1914, the Royal Welsh Fusiliers played football with the German 371 Battalion. The Germans won 2 - 1.

### Imperial War Museum

The Christmas Truce is now openly acknowledged at the Imperial War Museum in London with photographs of German and British troops celebrating Christmas together.

### Joyeux Noël Film

The 2005 French film, *Joyeux Noël* dramatizes the Christmas Truce of 1914 through the eyes of French, Scottish and German soldiers on the Western Front.

### The Prince of Peace

It remains an extraordinary testimony to the power of the Gospel that, during such a terrible time of world war, soldiers of so many armies, on opposite sides, could cease fighting, come out of their trenches and embrace their enemies, in honour of the Prince of Peace.

***"For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the Government will be upon His shoulder. And His Name will be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His Government and peace there will be no end..."*** Isaiah 9:6-7

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See also:

[\*The Best of Enemies\*](#)

[\*A Tale of Two Conferences\*](#)

[\*How Propaganda Changes Perceptions and People\*](#)

[\*The Causes and Catastrophic Consequences of the First World War\*](#)

### [Some Surprising Facts About the First World War](#)

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To view or download the *Christian Action* magazine, which includes **The Christmas Truce** as the main article, click [here](#)