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The Christmas Never Forgotten:

December 1914

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HIS 490 History Honors Thesis**

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Abstract..... | iv |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter 1: Chapter 1: A Miracle in the Trenches..... | 12 |
| Chapter 2: From Treason to Peace..... | 28 |
| Chapter 3: The Legacy of a Miracle..... | 42 |
| Conclusion..... | 60 |
| Works Cited..... | 66 |

This thesis is dedicated to Christopher and Kristin Facenda. The former for inspiring all of my writing endeavors and setting the precedent for my standards. The latter for her support in all of my labors, regardless of their magnitude.

The Christmas Never Forgotten: **December 1914**

Michael Facenda

Through the hindsight-tinted lens of history, the notion of World War I being a short conflict is preposterous. WWI is remembered in the modern day as one of history's most violent conflicts, yet in its genesis year of 1914, most of the involved nations convinced themselves that the war could end within a year. This line of thought would soon prove to be fallacious, as December approached with the end of the war nothing more than a pipe dream. Understandably, the soldiers participating in the war fell into despair, as an extended conflict only meant more time spent hiding in filthy trenches and praying for safety. Yet as if in response to their despair, the December of 1914 would offer the soldiers the respite they so desperately desired. On Christmas Eve, the soldiers of the Allied and Central Powers each declared an unofficial truce, in honor of the holiday spirit and their yearning for peace. The soldiers cast aside their weapons for a moment of peace, though for many units the truce was maintained well into the New Year. Naturally, the public reaction to this armistice was controversial. While high-ranking officers within both militaries viewed the event as flagrant disobedience, the general public was captivated by the truce's existence. This positive reputation within the general public would forge a legacy far beyond what the soldiers could have imagined. Even a century after the truce had ended, the event has been used as a symbol of peace, particularly in a world that continuously grows weary of war.

Chapter 1 of this thesis focuses on exploring the context of the truce itself, with a particular focus on the event's origin and the activities of the soldiers once it had begun. Understanding the background of the truce is imperative to fully comprehend the scale of the event, as well as how anomalous such a ceasefire is. From there, Chapter 2 discusses the evolution of the truce's reputation. While the truce is universally praised in the modern era, the immediate reaction to the event was far more divisive. Though by that same logic, the truce was not universally despised as some reinterpretations would imply, as negative reactions to the truce were by and large limited to the military. Finally, Chapter 3 will explore how the Christmas truce is depicted within modern media. Recreations of the truce offer insight into how the event is viewed in the modern day, as well as showcasing any nuances that have been left behind in favor of romanticizing the truce.

This thesis makes use of a menagerie of sources, from the most unlikely of locations. In the case of primary sources, newspapers, and first-hand testimonies are used to understand the unfiltered opinions of the soldiers on the event, as well as the general public's opinion. In addition to this, modern recreations have been included under the umbrella of primary sources, as the goal of this thesis is to understand the truce's historical reputation. Therefore, analyzing modern recreations of the truce, such as films and music based on the event, are mandatory. As for secondary sources, historical texts were consulted for the sake of gathering solely factual information to aid in providing context to the period. In short, this thesis argues that the reputation of the Christmas truce has evolved from a minor event in WWI to a universal symbol of peace particularly in the modern era.

Introduction

Take a moment and close your eyes. Picture it: you're tired, you're cold, wet, and you have been caked in mud for so long, it is practically a second layer of skin. Your only company is the rifle by your side and the vermin chewing holes in your food and clothes. You have not slept in days out of fear of a bomb or stray bullets echoing above your head. Now imagine for one night being whisked away from this torment. Pulled out of the pits of hell to celebrate the birth of Christ, complete with food, presents and carols. The only catch is that you must share this oasis in Tartarus with the soldiers your comrades have been hiding from for months. Without a shadow of a doubt, these thoughts danced in the minds of the soldiers throughout the Western Front in the early months of World War I. However, their mental fortitude had finally reached its breaking point in December of 1914, when soldiers on both sides took the initiative upon themselves and hosted a yuletide armistice.

Times of peace and war are not mutually exclusive. Temporary truces between enemies can be found in almost every war chronicled in history. In some cases, truces were extended to combat a greater enemy, such was the case during the Persian War, in which the rival Greek city-states set aside their grievances to combat an invading empire. In ancient Greece, truces were established during the Olympic Games by Iphitos of Elis, Cleosthenes of Pisa and Lycurgus of Sparta, and were to be respected regardless of any wars occurring at the time.¹ For a modern example, take the Battle of Castle Itter, in which American and German soldiers joined forces to defend a castle of French political prisoners from the 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division in the final act of World War II.² Other truces were brought about as a result of holidays. There was

¹Olympics. N.d "Olympic Truce." <https://olympics.com/ioc/olympic-truce>.

² Stephen Harding, *The Last Battle: When U.S. and German Soldiers Joined Forces in the Waning Hours of World War II in Europe*, (Boson, MA, Da Capo Press, 2013).

even a similar case during WWII, in which a woman living in a small cottage in Huertgen brokered a peace between American and German soldiers she had offered shelter to, touching their hearts with her words:

Listen. You could be my sons, and so could they in there. A boy with a gunshot wound, fighting for his life, and his two friends, lost like you and just as hungry and exhausted as you are. This one night, this Christmas night, let us forget about killing.³

With that in mind, few truces come close to the enigma that was the Christmas truce of 1914, in which hundreds of troops throughout the Western Front put down their rifles to celebrate with their enemies. Unlike the previously described truces, there was no common enemy for the men to form a united front against, nor a third party to force them to lower their weapons. In fact, many commanding officers condemned this flagrant disregard for the rules of war once the news reached their desks. Instead, the men almost unanimously agreed amongst one another to temporarily put a stop to the butchery they had grown accustomed to over the initial months of the war. The source of this defiance can be attributed to a growing disillusionment with the war effort amongst the soldiers. Soldiers on both sides were forced to live in conditions that would make even the most hardened soldier shudder with disgust. Furthermore, the soldiers soon found the promises of a just and gallant war to be mere fairy tales discovering real combat to be a gruesome affair. One can only be bent so far before breaking, and the soldiers had reached their breaking point by December. What followed was the only peace these men had experienced in months. They had been transported back home, enjoying Christmas songs and feasts in good company.

³ American Battle Monuments Commission. N.d. "Christmas Eve 1944: A Brief Moment of Peace on the Battlefield." Last Modified December 23, 2020. <https://www.abmc.gov/news-events/news/christmas-eve-1944-brief-moment-peace-battlefield>.

Following that fateful Christmas Eve, word of the unapproved armistice had reached the ears of not only the upper echelons of both militaries, but also the general public. While those within the military and government viewed the truce as a moment of insubordinate disrespect, the general public was left captivated. Christmas had silenced the guns on the Western Front before their very eyes. Moreover, the truce slowly but surely supplanted the notion of a gallant war in the minds of the general public. Decades of unpopular wars both during and following that Christmas soured the taste of war in the mouths of the public. War had gone out of style in the public, and now peace tasted far sweeter. As the legends of glorifying were left to the past, a new age of legends would rise to honor this strange little night.

In this exploration of that fateful December, I examine the conditions leading up to the Christmas truce, as well as the impact it held in the world in the decades that followed. Specifically, this thesis argues that the truce has evolved into a symbol of peace in response to the growing distaste towards war within society following WWI. This usage of the truce as a symbol reached an apex in the 2000s and 2010s, which saw the creation of a number of artistic depictions of the event. As with any major historical event, the truce has been documented and recreated in a number of forms, including films and songs. A common theme throughout all of these mediums is not only a celebration of the truce's occurrence, but also a strong anti-war message. The viewer of each art form is clearly meant to sympathize with the soldiers' decision to host the truce. While the appearance of these depictions may differ, the anti-war message is a pronounced commonality found within all of them.

In spite of its historical significance, the Christmas truce is a sparsely chronicled event in historical scholarship. That said, there are two notable texts that focus solely on the Christmas truce's history. Stanley Weintraub's *Silent Night* (2001) is a relatively short book whose sole

focus is on the Christmas truce. This is also arguably the most impactful of all of the sources because several of the other texts reference Weintraub's work. The book is separated into seven chapters, starting with the events leading up to the truce, the truce itself and the activities that took place during it, and how it ended. Weintraub covers a vast amount of information in a relatively short book, yet none of it is overwhelming. Weintraub provides a wide point of view, choosing not to focus solely on the Allied or Central Powers. For the most part, Weintraub's work reads a bit like a list of facts on the truce, as various pieces of trivia are mentioned such as the songs that the soldiers sang, as well as what gifts the English troops sought the most from their German friends. Moments such as these are essential to understanding the truce since they are factual examples of the holiday merriment that many modern depictions focus on. In addition, Weintraub does an excellent job of making the reader sympathetic to the soldiers. For instance, he makes note of the fact that the trenches were filthy places to live, how the soldiers needed to constantly fight off mud and rats to keep themselves healthy, and even the mental exhaustion faced by the men over the fact that the war was taking longer than they expected.⁴ All of these facts are explained in great detail, so much so that the reader may forget that they are reading a text on the Christmas truce. As a result, once Weintraub does finally begin explaining the events of the truce, they feel like a relief to the reader. Of course, Weintraub also studies aspects of the truce less romantic than the soccer games and gift exchanges. For instance, he states that part of the reason the truce occurred in the first place was that the German troops were in a superior position to the French and British and were, as a result, more confident. Weintraub also explains in great detail how polarizing the reaction on the home front was and spares no detail on how furious the command of both sides was upon hearing of the fraternization.

⁴ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 3.

Finally, Weintraub also makes note of how the truce was downplayed in other historical texts, specifically in the official British history account of WWI. Of course, Weintraub's text is not without its flaws. The final chapter is largely irrelevant because it covers Weintraub's theory as to how the world might have looked if the truce ended WWI entirely. Some of his conjectures include Germany becoming the dominant power of Europe, Hitler never growing popular since he was personally opposed to the truce, and the U.S. never becoming a major superpower since WWII likely would not have happened. This of course is purely speculative, and while some of his points are interesting to read they have very little to do with this thesis. Furthermore, while Weintraub does make note of the detractors of the truce, he primarily focuses on those who were members of the military and offers very few details as to how the general public felt about the soldiers fraternizing. Weintraub also focuses exclusively on the historical aspect of the Christmas truce, and largely disregards the modern understanding and recreations of the event beyond some passing mention of their existence. My research differs in this regard, as understanding the contemporary resonance of the Christmas truce is of equal importance as its historical understanding in order to fully appreciate the event's legacy.

Another detailed exploration of the Christmas truce is Terri Blom Crocker's historical text simply titled *The Christmas Truce* (2015). Similar to the Weintraub text, Crocker's book is solely dedicated to analyzing the historical events of the truce. Interestingly enough, Crocker's text quotes Weintraub's at the start of the third chapter in regards to how the truce resembled some populist movements. As such, Crocker's text can be seen as one that builds on the foundation set up by Weintraub. However, the Crocker text gives far more detailed descriptions of the truce in comparison. For instance, while Weintraub makes note of the fact that ceasefires had occurred before that December, Crocker lists specific cases. Furthermore, Crocker also

provides more details than Weintraub in the form of various images she provides in the text. These include but are not limited to official listings of the soldiers present at the truce, photographs from the event, maps of the trenches, and even artistic depictions of the soldiers interacting with one another. The photos and drawings are particularly useful to this thesis since they are among the earliest examples of the truce being mythologized in some fashion. In addition, the maps and troop listings provide the reader with a better understanding of what life was like for the soldiers. Anyone can read a textbook entry about how many soldiers lived in the trenches or a description of what their layout was. However, being able to see exactly how many soldiers were present and what their bases looked like paints a much clearer picture of what life was like. Her greatest sources in this regard can be found in the ninth chapter, which she appropriately names “The Legendary Christmas truce.” This chapter is dedicated to the work of Malcolm Brown, a documentarian who created the film “Peace in No Man’s Land” based on the experiences of soldiers. Crocker lists each of the soldiers by name and writes down their stories. Due to this, it is noticeable that Crocker takes much of her information from other secondary sources, as she begins each chapter of her book with two quotes from other historical texts on the truce, and dedicates short, but detailed portions of her descriptions of what these authors have to say. Her sources are also quite varied, as she does not focus solely on books and essays. For instance, Crocker includes descriptions from a BBC documentary on the Christmas truce. The only major weakness of Crocker’s text is that her reliance on other texts can at times make her book read a bit like a bibliography of Christmas truce sources rather than once she created herself. That said, the purpose of her text is to provide accurate details of the truce, which she does an excellent job of doing. In addition, Crocker also neglects to mention more obscure modern recreations of the truce, some of which my thesis analyzes in its final chapter. While

Crocker can hardly be blamed for not including every single recreation of the Christmas truce in her research, making note of smaller scale tributes to the event show cases of the perception the general public holds towards the truce.

Beyond simply retelling the events of the truce, understanding the wider scope of the event's legacy is necessary to fully comprehend its significance. This is the sole directive of Catherine K. Shortell and Troy R.E. Paddock's essay *Teaching the Great War Through Peace* (2011). The essay begins with Shortell and Paddock describing the background of the truce, even referencing Weintraub's research such as the fact that the truce occurred partially since both sides were Christian. After describing the history of the truce itself, Shortell and Paddock shift their focus from simply describing the truce to focusing instead on the ramifications of its existence. For instance, there is one section in which Shortell and Paddock note that parallels can be drawn between disillusionment felt by the truce's participants and the drop in popularity many Americans had towards the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵ Connecting the truce to an event that many people may be more familiar with or even may have lived through allows the reader to be more empathetic towards the soldiers. Furthermore, the two authors note the disgust that the soldiers had for the propaganda that supported the war effort at the time, a sentiment that has also grown in popularity ever since the 1960s. Of course, not all of Shortell and Paddock's essay is dedicated to negative aspects related to the Christmas truce. They note that the truce is an early example that peace can emerge in even the most hostile environment, going as far as to say that the truce is vital to understanding social studies since it offers insight into the importance and consequences of peace. In summation, Shortell and Paddock's text is useful, not solely due to

⁵Catherine K. Shortell and Troy R.E. Paddock, *Teaching the Great War Through Peace*, (Southern Connecticut State University, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41304027>), 13

their description of the Christmas truce, but also because of their analysis of the event and its impact.

In addition to texts dedicated solely to the Christmas truce, I also studied a number of works that focused on determining the causes of WWI. While these texts do not mention the Christmas truce in any significant detail, understanding the context which led to the Christmas truce is imperative to understanding why the truce occurred. The first among these WWI analyses was Christopher M. Clark's *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (2014). Unlike the previous two texts, Clark's book is not dedicated to studying the Christmas truce but rather focuses on WWI as a whole. Specifically, Clark states his belief that Serbia was the true cause of WWI as a result of their aggression and the terrorist murder of Archduke Ferdinand. To accomplish this, the text is split into three parts. In the first part, Clark focuses on the rivalry between Serbia and Austria-Hungary leading to the infamous assassination.⁶ The second part focuses on how European foreign policy developed following the assassination and how it led to war. Finally, the third part of the book provides a narrative of the July Crisis and how a series of misunderstandings and poor decisions led to the events described in Part I. As a result, Clark's research can be viewed as an analysis of dominoes right before they began to knock one another over. He goes into great detail as to how tumultuous the political tensions within Europe at the time were and makes it very clear that war was not simply a possible outcome, but the only one. The limitations of this text are somewhat obvious in relation to this thesis, as the Christmas truce is never mentioned within Clark's pages. That being said, the reason why the truce was so miraculous was men that who were seemingly mortal enemies were able to set aside their differences to have one night of humanity. In addition, many of the

⁶Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. (New York, NY, Penguin Books, 2012).

accounts from soldiers at the truce state that they did not truly understand the reason why they were at war. As such, it is imperative to understand the background of WWI to understand the truce. Doing so not only displays why the truce was so improbable, and also gives credence to the soldiers not fully understanding the political climate of their era. After all, the cause of WWI is still a highly debated topic, as can be inferred by the existence of Clark's text.

While Clark's historical research specifically blames one involved country for WWI, most historians agree that the war's beginnings were far too complex for a single nation to be blamed. Take for instance, Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (2000), which he dedicated to his grandfathers who served in both WWI and WWII. Similar to the Clark text, Ferguson's text primarily focuses on WWI as a whole rather than just the Christmas truce, Ferguson does mention the truce a few times in his text, albeit briefly.⁷ Ferguson's research focuses on ten questions which include but are not limited to: was the war inevitable, who truly was responsible for the victory of the Allies, and how propaganda affected the war. This last question is particularly notable, as much of Ferguson's research looks into the feelings that both soldiers and civilians viewed the war. Though ultimately Ferguson notes that the majority of historians and people at the time have concluded that the war was a necessary evil. These contrasting feelings can be found in both the participants and the detractors of the Christmas truce. Following their shared time together, both sides found it nearly impossible to continue fighting once their armistice was forcibly called off. Furthermore, the stance that the war was necessary, particularly on the side of the British, was perfectly reflected by the British commanders that harshly punished or reprimanded their soldiers for refusing to fight. The importance of this source is that just like Clark's text, it provides context to the conflict in which

⁷ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I*, (Great Britain, The Penguin Press, 1998).

that truce occurred, but places more emphasis on the cultural and emotional aspects that made the truce so controversial at the time, as well as how incredible it was that a ceasefire was even capable of occurring.

Building on these works, my thesis explores the historical and contemporary understandings of the Christmas truce. The first chapter of this thesis will explore the historical context of the Christmas truce, with a notable focus on the factors that lead to the truce's inception. This includes the poor living conditions the soldiers throughout the Western Front were forced to endure, the poor estimations of the war's length spouted by propaganda, and a loss of motivation in the minds of young soldiers. Establishing this context is imperative to understand why seeking a moment of peace would be attractive to soldiers, as both sides shared in their suffering nearly identically. The first chapter will also discuss the events that took place during the truce, such as the specific details leading up to the individual armistices, and the activities the soldiers took part in, as detailed in testimonials and newspaper reports of the time. Following this, the second chapter will explore how the truce's reputation has evolved with time, going from an obscure and at times condemned event, to the universally praised moment of peace it is viewed as currently. The research here focuses on the ending of the truce and the contrasting reactions between the military and the public in regards to the truce. From there the chapter discusses the general opinions the public held towards war prior to WWI. The chapter will then discuss the decay of favor in the general public's opinion of war, as enforced by anti-war movements following the Vietnam War and War on Terror. Conversely, the Christmas truce's reputation saw an increase in favor, becoming a beacon for the anti-war movement to stand behind. Finally, the third chapter will discuss the various ways in which the Christmas truce has been recreated in modern media, both in their historical accuracy and their promotion

of peace. Together these chapters thus show how the truce has become mythologized in public memory from being a minor anomaly in 1914 to a symbol of peace.

Chapter 1: A Miracle in the Trenches

The length and carnage of World War I has been recorded and studied to the point of exhaustion. WWI became one of the longest and bloodiest conflicts in history rather than the scuffle so-called experts of the time initially believed. Predictions as to how short the war would be were commonplace in the era, with arguably the most popular line of thought being that the war would be over by Christmas. That being said, while the war was not over by Christmas, it was at the very least put on hold. To fully understand the complexities and contradictions of the Christmas truce, it is imperative first to grasp the greater context of WWI itself. In many ways, the Christmas truce was unavoidable when one takes into consideration the broken promises that would have inevitably danced in the minds of soldiers amidst the gore of combat. Upon Britain officially joining the war on August 4, 1914, the majority opinion among the British public was one of excitement. Britain had been granted a crusade through which they could flaunt their military prowess, all while casting the illusion of fighting for the sake of world stability. Justifying the war on the home front was a simple matter of playing into the general public's patriotic desire to support their king and country. Leo Braudy, an expert on cultural studies, noted that "propaganda therefore linked personal honor to the national interest."⁸ Unfortunately, the soldiers on the battlefield likely paid little mind to trivial matters such as national pride amidst the horrors they faced daily.

The toppling row of dominoes that was the events leading into World War I have been exhaustingly rehearsed by historians. Whether it was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, or binding forces of alliances, WWI drew nations into the conflict like moths to a flame and would ultimately leave them just as burned. That being said, despite being one of the

⁸Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*, (New York, NY, Random House, Inc., Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 376.

dominant factions participating in WWI, Britain's entrance into the war was surprisingly lethargic. For instance, on August 2nd, after Germany officially declared war on Russia, London witnessed an enormous pacifist movement.⁹ The general public largely believed that Britain had no place getting involved in the war. This sentiment was purely expressed by the British, as "nothing of this kind took place in any other European country."¹⁰ France and Belgium were particularly aggressive in their hatred of Germany's actions, as Belgium's borders were close enough to Germany to invade, and France lost control over Alsace and Lorraine due to Prussian advancements.¹¹ Britain on the other hand was far enough from Germany that its borders were at no immediate risk and, therefore, there was seemingly no need for concern. These opinions were primarily dictated by the Labour and Liberal parties, though it was not a controversial stance regardless. The British would gain a change of heart towards the war barely two days later. On midnight of August 4th, the United Kingdom entered the war with unanimous popular support.¹² This change in philosophy was due in part to Germany's violation of Belgium's neutrality by invading and the atrocities that followed. Britain's desire for war may have also been influenced by the press, and in some cases were known to have invented outright lies regarding the atrocities Germany committed against Belgium and France in order to sway British opinion.¹³ In any case, Britain ultimately entered the conflict, though many would underestimate the length and impact of the war.

⁹Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker., *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 94.

¹⁰ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker., *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 94.

¹¹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 4.

¹² Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker., *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 94.

¹³ Terri Blom Crocker, *The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory, and the First World War* (Lexington, KY, The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 6-7.

A commonly spoken phrase that is synonymous with the mindset of the Allied and Central Powers leading into the First World War was that it would be “over by Christmas.” Interestingly enough, the origin of this turn of phrase is not credited to a single person, but is rather viewed as a piece of collective rhetoric amongst the British public at the beginning of the war. That being said, the phrase is somewhat of a stereotype of the era, as historians have found a surprisingly scarce number of sources of referencing the belief.¹⁴ For instance, the phrase is most often attributed to the press and government as a method to drum up support for the war effort. At first glance this is plausible considering the fact that Britain did not have an official war draft until 1916 and there was a general lack of preparation for a long-term conflict.¹⁵ The idea of Christmas being the deadline for the war likely stemmed from its cultural and religious sentimentality. However, most of these claims were not accepted by the general public as some may believe. Lord Herbert Kitchener, for instance, was recorded to have requested that British men enlist “for three years or the duration,” the implication being that the war could very well last longer than predicted.¹⁶ The viceroy of India also struck down the notion of the war ending within the year and “was perfectly shocked when he read in the papers of people talking about

¹⁴ Stuart Hallifax, *Over by Christmas: British Popular Opinion and the Short War in 1914*. (Oxford,UK, The Queen’s College, October 2010), <https://providence.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=30h&AN=54330125&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8475809>.

¹⁵ Stuart Hallifax, *Over by Christmas: British Popular Opinion and the Short War in 1914*. (Oxford,UK, The Queen’s College, October 2010), <https://providence.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=30h&AN=54330125&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8475809>.

¹⁶Stuart Hallifax, *Over by Christmas: British Popular Opinion and the Short War in 1914*. (Oxford,UK, The Queen’s College, October 2010), <https://providence.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=30h&AN=54330125&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8475809>.

the war being over by Christmas.”¹⁷ Even newspapers of the era mocked the concept of the war being over by Christmas, with the *Daily Mirror* claiming that the phrase was made up by men that did not wish to enlist in the war themselves.¹⁸ In reality, the myth seems to have been supported by active soldiers rather than the home front. For instance, in his book *Echoes of the Great War*, historian Andrew Clark noted that the only prediction of the war ending by Christmas he was aware of came from an artillery officer on sick leave.¹⁹ Though this was not a universal opinion, as shown by one Private Bryan Dewes, who personally predicted that the war would last until the May of 1915. It would be more accurate to describe the idea of the war ending by Christmas to be a coping mechanism for soldiers, many of whom wished the constant fighting could come to an end for the sake of their mental and physical health.²⁰ Though perhaps their naivety is excusable when one takes their living situations into account. The first year of the Great War was arguably its most bloody, as both sides made use of highly aggressive tactics to

¹⁷Stuart Hallifax, *Over by Christmas: British Popular Opinion and the Short War in 1914*. (Oxford,UK, The Queen’s College, October 2010), <https://providence.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=30h&AN=54330125&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8475809>.

¹⁸Stuart Hallifax, *Over by Christmas: British Popular Opinion and the Short War in 1914*. (Oxford,UK, The Queen’s College, October 2010), <https://providence.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=30h&AN=54330125&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8475809>.

¹⁹ Stuart Hallifax, *Over by Christmas: British Popular Opinion and the Short War in 1914*. (Oxford,UK, The Queen’s College, October 2010), <https://providence.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=30h&AN=54330125&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8475809>.

²⁰Stuart Hallifax, *Over by Christmas: British Popular Opinion and the Short War in 1914*. (Oxford,UK, The Queen’s College, October 2010), <https://providence.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=30h&AN=54330125&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8475809>.

secure early victories.²¹ Unfortunately, the style of strategy was hardly an improvement for morale.

Imagine the poems and songs of ancient warriors going into battle. Achilles and Hector or Arthur and Mordred, leading their armies into honorable one-on-one duels to be sung about for centuries to come. World War I was not like the songs. What good would honor be in the face of machine guns, bombs, and bayonets? As the 800,000 casualties for both sides in 1914 displayed, this war could not be won using the old ways.²² To say that WWI was the first conflict in which technology decided the outcome of a battle would be ignorant. Of course, the world had never seen technology capable of such destructive power. Honor fell out of fashion in the minds of WWI tacticians, in favor of firepower.²³ WWI did not only end the notion of a noble war, but also the romantic image of knights in shining armor going into battle.²⁴ Soldiers now wore shabby colored uniforms as opposed to bold colors in order to camouflage from enemies.²⁵ Though this rise in pragmatism over honor also led to an increase in impersonality towards battle. This is best demonstrated through the concept of trench warfare. As the name suggests, trench warfare is a style of combat in which soldiers attack inside of partially underground

²¹ Stuart Hallifax, *Over by Christmas: British Popular Opinion and the Short War in 1914*. (Oxford,UK, The Queen's College, October 2010), <https://providence.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=30h&AN=54330125&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8475809>.

²² Stuart Hallifax, *Over by Christmas: British Popular Opinion and the Short War in 1914*. (Oxford,UK, The Queen's College, October 2010), <https://providence.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=30h&AN=54330125&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8475809>.

²³ Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*, (New York, NY, Random House, Inc., Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 384.

²⁴ Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*, (New York, NY, Random House, Inc., Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 387.

²⁵ Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*, (New York, NY, Random House, Inc., Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 387.

shelters. While inside of their trenches, soldiers become extremely resistant to small arms fire, and even from artillery. Considering the flat terrain with very little natural cover the soldiers encountered in their battles along the European countryside, trench warfare was the only possible option. Trench warfare is by nature impersonal, as it encourages a defensive fighting style that cannot allow simply charging across a battlefield. Though in this lies the main weakness of trench warfare: its tedious nature. Both sides would fight for control for only a few feet of territory, yet were only rewarded through substantial casualties.²⁶ Interestingly enough, the trenches were often close together, in some cases as close as sixty yards.²⁷ All that stood between either side was the dreaded No Man's Land, a stretch of technically neutral land with no barriers or trenches to hide in. Stepping onto here meant certain death, but was ultimately necessary in order to advance towards the enemy. There was no glory as promised in fairy tales, just the smell of iron in the air as your fellow soldier was cut down. They could not even claim to be fighting out of a desire to protect the innocent. Civilians that lived near the battlefields were known to give false reports of German advancements to get the soldiers to protect them.²⁸ While the civilians simply wished to return to farming, the fact of the matter was that they did not see the men as humans, just glorified guard dogs. Once the advancing soldiers finally entered an enemy trench, all pretenses of a gentlemanly war were cast aside. Men wielded shovels, knives and whatever other crude weapons they could jury-rig together as opposed to their standard issue

²⁶ Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*, (New York, NY, Random House, Inc., Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 387.

²⁷ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 5.

²⁸ Dec. 30, 1914. "Letters From the Front: British Officer's Narrative." *The Times* (London, England). https://link-gale-com.providence.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CS50529182/TTDA?u=providence_main&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=6523e138.

weapons, which were of no use in such close proximity.²⁹ Of course, that is assuming that the soldiers did not find themselves tangled in barbed wire during their battle charge. Psychological warfare was also prominent, as one British soldier recounted in an issue of *The Times*:

Eventually the Germans sent a flag of truce here proposing an armistice ‘for the sake of our wounded,’ though it turned out later they had only one wounded officer of ours, who was shot through the knee. Several others were taken ‘prisoners,’ including a doctor and others were missing, but most of them turned up again after a week’s wandering in the bush. All the rest were killed, the German native soldiers having ‘outed’ all the wounded.³⁰

Even the French units, whose motivations for fighting were arguably the most justified, felt nothing in the face of their generals’ lustful need to reclaim Alsace-Lorraine.³¹ To top it all off, the fighting did not cease after the last bullet was shot, as the men also needed to fight in order to survive the rancid conditions of their own bases. Considering these conditions, mental weariness from the soldiers was not only understandable, but also justifiable. The general public seemed to agree, as by December of 1914, the soldiers of both sides would receive some support from their nations to lessen the burden of war.

In spite of the horror of combat, the soldiers had the minor solace in the fact that the battles would end one way or another. Yet once they returned to their subterranean homes, they would become tormented by various localized enemies within their own bunkers. To start with, trenches were crudely constructed with sandbags and some wood for support. Despite constructing walls and roofs, the soldiers did not construct flooring, likely as a way of

²⁹ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker., *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 40.

³⁰ Dec. 30, 1914. “Letters From the Front: British Officer’s Narrative.” *The Times* (London, England). https://link-gale-com.providence.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CS50529182/TTDA?u=providence_main&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=6523e138.

³¹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 65.

conserving resources. However, this led to issues whenever it rained, as their dirt floors and walls would quickly melt into mud. The soldiers needed to watch their step each time they moved about their trenches, lest they drown in the bottomless quagmires beneath their feet. German trenches were slightly better since they were made on higher terrain, though even that provided little protection from the inevitable swamps that would form before them.³² Mud was not the only danger, as the trenches lacked proper latrines, meaning that the soldiers would also be stepping through feces.³³ Besides being disgusting, the presence of fecal matter in the trenches led to the constant threat of gas gangrene, which in turn could lead to necrosis.³⁴ Amputations could be performed to cease the spread of gangrenous tissue, though doing so was not a true cure as soldiers could still perish from infection.³⁵ The soldiers also contended with various vermin sharing the trenches. Rats scampered about the trench tunnels, spreading disease and eating rations. While the soldiers did hang their food from the ceiling as a defense, more often than not the rodents would feast as the men starved.³⁶ Lice and fleas were commonplace, and extremely difficult to remove.³⁷ After all, bathing was difficult when the all of the water around them was contaminated with manure. The lives of soldiers in these early days was a cruel cycle of fighting on the battlefield and fighting in their homes, only to repeat it the following

³² Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 3.

³³ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 2.

³⁴Penny Starns, *Sisters of the Somme : true stories from a First World War field hospital*, 2016.

³⁵Starns, Penny. *Sisters of the Somme : true stories from a First World War field hospital*. 2016.

³⁶ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 2.

³⁷ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 3.

day. A person can only be bent so far without breaking. While their superior officers did little to alleviate this strain, the men would take it upon themselves to take a break from the madness of war.

The occurrence of the Christmas truce is in of itself impressive, though the event is more impressive considering the fact that there was a failed attempt to broker an armistice in the same year. Pope Benedict XV made a request to the nations of the world to cease fighting for Christmas Eve.³⁸ However, the request was cast aside by both sides, seemingly being the only thing the powers-that-be could agree on. In fact, *The New Republic* mocked the notion and claimed that “the stench of battle should rise above the churches where they preach goodwill to men. A few carols, a little incense and some tinsel will heal no wounds.”³⁹ Others came to believe that Benedict’s constant attempts to mediate peace signified that he was in league with their enemies, and therefore could not be trusted.⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that these opinions were expressed not by soldiers, but civilian journalists. As history would soon display, the men that stood amongst the “stench of battle” were more than happy to accept Pope Benedict’s offer.

Contrary to what one may believe, the approach of winter brought more joy than dread to the soldiers of the trenches. As if dictated by the spirit of Christmas, the soldiers received a

³⁸ "Christmas Finds Warring Nations Still Fighting Fierce Battles. Pope Benedict's Hoped-for Truce Fails To," *Montgomery Advertiser* (Montgomery, Alabama) LXXXV, no. 359, December 25, 1914: [One]. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.providence.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A11B0124EA8AEC7F0%40EANX-11B99923682085A0%402420492-11B9992377ACF5D0%400-11B999240AD76400%40Christmas%2BFinds%2BWarring%2BNations%2BStill%2BFighting%2BFierce%2BBattles.%2BPope%2BBenedict%2527s%2BHoped-for%2BTruce%2BFails%2BTo>.

³⁹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), XVI.

⁴⁰ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 120.

number of gifts to make their stay in the trenches more bearable. For one, the muddy quagmires they called trenches were effectively tamed by the incoming frost, which essentially gave the soldiers a proper floor to walk on.⁴¹ The German troops more quickly adapted to the holiday spirit, and were known to have decorated their trenches with wreaths and small, candlelit Christmas trees.⁴² This acceptance of the holiday spirit was eventually noticed by German newspapers, who used photos of the holly-draped trenches to have care packages sent to the Germans.⁴³ The British also received similar gifts at the behest of Princess Mary. Packaged in specially branded brass boxes, Mary provided cigarettes, pipe tobacco, and a card that said, “May God protect you and bring you home safe.”⁴⁴ Mary even provided special boxes for non-smokers, British Indian troops, and nurses to ensure that all that served under the crown would be able to feel some comfort. Humorously, the constant stream of Christmas gifts to the British troops ended up becoming a nuisance, as there was little to no space to store them alongside ammunition and rations.⁴⁵ The Yuletide celebrations had begun.

It is important to recognize that the concept of a truce was not completely foreign prior to the December of 1914. Small, unofficial armistices were commonplace throughout the war, especially for the trench dwellers. This was akin to a “live-and-let-live” philosophy; as long as

⁴¹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 23.

⁴²Kathryn N. McDaniel, “Commemorating the Christmas Truce: A Critical Thinking Approach for Popular History,” (*History Teacher* 49, 2015) (1): 89–100, <https://search-ebscohost-com.providence.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=30h&AN=111804947&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁴³ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 9.

⁴⁴Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 9-10.

⁴⁵ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 10.

one side did not instigate a conflict, there would be no conflict.⁴⁶ Whether it was done in order to repair the damage to trench barracks, or simply to have a moment of peace in war, these little armistices were commonplace and little could be done about them. These moments of peace sowed the seeds for what would become the truce as we understand it. Soldiers on both sides were known to have become friendly with one another by yelling to one another over the trenches. There were even instances of soldiers throwing one another newspapers and rations to enemy trenches.⁴⁷ However, greater acts of fraternization were not unheard of either. On December 19th, Lieutenant Geoffrey Heinekey of the Queen's Westminster Rifles recounted an instance during which both the British and German forces had climbed into no man's land in order to bury their dead.⁴⁸ Heinekey further explained that the Germans eventually approached the British and assisted in burying their dead, and engaged in a civil conversation with the very men they were meant to be fighting.⁴⁹ Then there was the time the 23rd Berkshires were approached by a few German soldiers with cigars, for no purpose other than to socialize.⁵⁰ In most cases, the German forces were the progenitors of these truces, likely due to their station.⁵¹ Towards the end of 1914, Germany was winning the war, and thus had much less at stake if they

⁴⁶ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 6-7.

⁴⁷ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 5.

⁴⁸ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 5.

⁴⁹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 5.

⁵⁰ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 14.

⁵¹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 50.

decided to light up a Christmas tree instead of a British bunker. The Germans were equally exhausted with a war they were promised would be short.⁵² Taking this into account, the truces were naturally met with suspicion, and as a result both sides were on guard as Christmas Eve inched closer.⁵³ However, these short interactions did little to alter the perceptions of the soldiers in the short-term, however, they provided the precedent through which the night of infamy could take place.

Accounts of what happened on the Christmas Eve of 1914 vary depending on the region, though most versions of the story share certain details. For instance, the truce as a whole appears to have been initiated by the one language all of humanity can understand: song. The unity of music spread like a germ throughout all trenches, some in honor of the holiday, and others out of national pride. For instance, the Germans sang *Heil di rim Siegerkranz*, the national anthem of the time, as well as a parody of the British song *God Save the Queen* to honor their emperor.⁵⁴ Of course considering the time of the year, Christmas carols were the far more commonly sung genre. One carol particularly associated with the Christmas truce was *Silent Night*, or *Stille Nacht*. The song was originally composed by German musician Franz Xaver Gruber, though its translated version was popular to English speaking nations as well. The English forces were also known to have sung songs as well, such as *Home, Sweet Home*, and *God Save the King*.⁵⁵ Once

⁵² Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 50

⁵³ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 43.

⁵⁴ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 47.

⁵⁵ Jan. 2, 1915. "Letters From the Front: Friendly Meetings With the Enemy." *The Times* (London, England). https://link-gale-com.providence.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CS50529314/TTDA?u=providence_main&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=126aff87.

these performances concluded, the opposite side would often engage in mockery and profanity,⁵⁶ though the hecklers were outnumbered by those that chose to join the chorus. One man under Lieutenant Charles Brewer was such a singer, who upon hearing the Germans singing stated, “ere, let’s sing ‘em something back! Come on!”⁵⁷ Other British units were said to have been gracious audiences, offering applause and demanding encores of the Germans. German Lieutenant Kurt Zemisch called the entire experience “a wonderful night,”⁵⁸ and at least one German unit told the opposing Scottish units “No shoot tonight! Sing tonight! Jock! Sing tonight!”⁵⁹ Beneath the frosted stars and blood-stained snow, WWI had ended for the briefest of moments. There were no sergeants, no lieutenants, or gunmen of any kind. These men had returned home for Christmas, in spirit if not in body. Fortunately for them, their Christmas was only just beginning.

The singing had broken down the walls between both sides, now it was time to officially call a truce for Christmas. Most of the truces officially began as the men sang on Christmas Eve. One officer reported that his men had actually gone to a German trench to socialize on Christmas Eve, with the truce officially being declared shortly after.⁶⁰ Others waited until Christmas Day,

⁵⁶ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 47.

⁵⁷ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 45.

⁵⁸ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 49.

⁵⁹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 49.

⁶⁰ Jan. 2, 1915. “Letters From the Front: Friendly Meetings With the Enemy.” *The Times* (London, England). https://link-gale-com.providence.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CS50529314/TTDA?u=providence_main&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=126aff87.

so that the dead scattered across No Man's Land could be laid to rest.⁶¹ One British unit even managed to get on the good side of the Germans by giving them wooden crosses. In another section of the Western Front, an English priest and a German soldier studying to be a minister led a mass funeral attended by each of their units.⁶² The officer in question stated that the act of kindness had "completely won them over, and soon the men were on the best of terms and laughing."⁶³

Another theory as to why both sides managed to get along so easily was the fact that many of the Germans spoke English, which allowed them to communicate easily. Some German soldiers were "German Londoners," meaning that they had studied or even lived in London, further exhibiting similarities between the two armies.⁶⁴ That is not to say the truce did not have some caveats, as trust was not solidified even after both sides put down their rifles. Both sides agreed to forbid resetting barbed wire for however long the truce would last, and any gunfire would be treated as an immediate act of war.⁶⁵ There was also a good number of insults thrown both ways under the veil of jokes. The Germans mocked the British for their inferior military while the British returned the favor by reminding the Germans of their failures on the Eastern

⁶¹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 54.

⁶² Terri Blom Crocker, *The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory, and the First World War* (Lexington, KY, The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 53.

⁶³ Jan. 2, 1915. "Letters From the Front: Friendly Meetings With the Enemy." *The Times* (London, England). https://link-gale-com.providence.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CS50529314/TTDA?u=providence_main&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=126aff87.

⁶⁴ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 124.

⁶⁵ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 55.

Front.⁶⁶ Furthermore, not all of the soldiers had been won over by the concept of a truce. French troops were largely opposed to fraternizing with the Germans, with one unit shooting at German soldiers that left their trenches to propose a truce.⁶⁷ The feeling was mutual, as many Germans outright refused to commit to the truce. One notable German soldier who refused the call of the truce was Corporal Adolf Hitler, who vocally condemned his men for seeming lack of honor.⁶⁸ Another notable failed attempt at initiating a truce occurred to future German author Ernst Jünger's unit. According to Jünger, he and the Germans attempted to initiate a ceasefire by singing Christmas carols, only to be drowned out "by the enemy machine guns."⁶⁹ Tragically, the British attempted to call for a truce the following morning, however this occurred after Jünger witnessed them shooting a German soldier through the head, leaving the Germans too embittered to consider peace.

In spite of the constant fighting that they took part in prior to that fateful Christmas, most of the soldiers quickly accepted their former enemy's company. Their shared religion certainly helped in this regard as recounted by one unnamed British officer who was told by a German officer "you are of the same religion as us, and today is the Day of Peace."⁷⁰ A Day of Peace indeed, as both sides engaged in the Christmas festivities that one would expect in a holiday

⁶⁶ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 51.

⁶⁷ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 94.

⁶⁸ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 71.

⁶⁹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 123.

⁷⁰ Jan. 2, 1915. "Letters From the Front: Friendly Meetings With the Enemy." *The Times* (London, England). https://link-gale-com.providence.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CS50529314/TTDA?u=providence_main&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=126aff87.

story. Cigarettes and liquor were shared until both sides were singing songs like *Auld Lang Syne*, albeit more off-key than their performances the night before.⁷¹ Christmas dinners were also prepared for both sides to enjoy. Men hunted and prepared wild rabbits and pigs, Germans provided sauerkraut while the British offered chocolate cakes for dessert.⁷² Though fitting with the holiday, other gifts were distributed amongst them. Both sides shared buttons and belt buckles, with the British troops even having a sort of ranking system as to what the most valuable gift a German soldier could give them. The most desired German gift was one of their *Pickelhaube*, the intimidating, but impractical spiked helmets. One notable gift exchange occurred between German officer Lieutenant Holst and British officer Lieutenant Thomas of the 15th Westphalians. Holst gave Thomas a stack of letters that belonged to a British soldier that had died in the German trenches. Touched by the gesture, Thomas had the scarf he had received as a gift from home to Holst, who in turn gave Thomas a pair of gloves he had received from home.⁷³

Perhaps the most famous event to take place during the truce was the infamous football match between both sides. Several units were reported to have hosted football matches, though the authenticity of these reports is questioned by many historians. This is primarily due to the fact that most accounts come from hearsay of soldiers that had heard about games, rather than participants.⁷⁴ One such example comes from Lieutenant Charles Brewer of the 2nd

⁷¹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 85.

⁷² Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 86.

⁷³ Williams, Valentine, Late Captain, Irish Guards. Dec 23, 1914. "Greatest of All Tributes to Christmas: An Officer Recalls the Day Twenty Years Ago When Guns Were Silent and Good-Will Spread Over No Man's Land the Greatest of All Christmas Tributes A British Officer Recalls The Day Twenty Years Ago When Guns Were Put Aside and Good-Will Spread Over No Man's Land Christmas On the German Front." *New York Times* (New York, USA). <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/greatest-all-tributes-christmas/docview/101203434/se-2>.

⁷⁴ Terri Blom Crocker, *The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory, and the First World War* (Lexington, KY, The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 52.

Bedfordshires, who in a letter to home explained “higher up the line...they are playing a football game.”⁷⁵ Not to mention the fact that the soldiers conveniently claimed that their side won the game, even if they were not present. There was also the matter of practicality casting more doubt on the game. No Man’s Land was the only possible location the men could have played a game, yet it was riddled with barbed wire and craters, certainly not ideal football terrain. Of course, the sheer number of reports of games give plausibility to some of the games having happened.

Sergeant H.D. Bryan of the 1st Scots Guard recalled a game that the Scottish “easily won by 4-1.”⁷⁶ One humorous account came from Corporal George Ashurst, whose men could not find a ball, and instead used an old sandbag.⁷⁷ Though, while some historical accounts can be simply disregarded as the exaggerated tales of old soldiers, several of the games were documented with photographs, confirming that the games did take place in some sections of the trenches.⁷⁸

The legacy of WWI is one of death and destruction, carnage incarnate that left a scar on the earth itself. The men of the trenches, there either by force or by patriotism had their rose-tinted glasses shattered to pieces in the face of their true education of war. It was not through battle that they achieved glory, it was through singing and making merry. No bomb or bullet could strike down the peace of December 24th, 1914, not amidst this goodwill towards men. The soldiers managed to uphold the broken promises of their nations: stopping the war by Christmas. While this peace was not permanent, its existence is something to behold. The celebrations

⁷⁵ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 105.

⁷⁶ Terri Blom Crocker, *The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory, and the First World War* (Lexington, KY, The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 5

⁷⁷ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 106.

⁷⁸ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 110.

would be remembered fondly by an innumerable number of participants, though the emotions they all likely shared can be summed up by one unnamed British officer in a poetic candor:

So there you are; all this talk of hate, all this fury at each other that has raged on since the beginning of the war, quelled and stayed by the magic of Christmas.⁷⁹

At the risk of sounding clichéd, one may call it a Christmas miracle. Having established itself as a unique moment amongst the trenches, the Christmas truce's legacy was almost guaranteed to be an engrossing tale amongst historians. Yet as history would show, its legacy would easily captivate the hearts and minds of the average layman, particularly in the wake of society's evolving stance on warfare.

⁷⁹ Jan. 2, 1915. "Letters From the Front: Friendly Meetings With the Enemy." *The Times* (London, England). https://link-gale-com.providence.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CS50529314/TTDA?u=providence_main&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=126aff87.

Chapter 2: From Treason to Peace

It is a romantic notion to imagine a world in which the war ended that fateful December. Unfortunately, history did not see conflict end that night, nor on the days that followed. For many men, that night in 1914 would be their final Christmas, though judging by many of their opinions to the impromptu armistice, they would not have it any other way. That being said, the public reaction to their little Christmas celebration was not as universally appreciated as it is in the modern day. The initial reactions to the Christmas truce were mixed, with some indifferent and others outraged by this apparent treason. The negative reactions were primarily limited to the military, as a majority of civilians found the story of the truce fascinating. This difference in opinion regarding the actions of the soldiers display a disconnect in how warfare is understood and valued by the government and noncombatants. The former took issue with how the truce shattered the narrative of a just war against a monstrous force, while the latter viewed the event as a righteous celebration of the human spirit. The civilian stance would prove to be increasingly popular throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, following the altered values regarding warfare. The years that followed WWI have made garnering support for wars more arduous than in years before, with even more difficulty in maintaining support once the battles begin. The general public came to view the Christmas truce as a token moment in history, and this chapter will argue that it invokes the creed of the anti-war movement that enveloped the world post-WWI.

It is said that all things must come to an end, though fitting for the Christmas truce, its ending was as complex as its inception. There was no organized end of the truce, just as there was no organized beginning, though that being said there are some similar trends that can be tracked. Just as some units did not take part in the truce at all, there were several units that took

no issue in simply returning to combat. This lack of guilt likely rose due to preexisting tensions between the armies that could never truly be quelled by the truce. One recorded exchange of this tension occurred between one of the English 3rd Rifles, who had his hair cut by a German soldier. The German barber morbidly joked as he cut the Englishman's hair that "maybe I cut your throat today, yes? Save ammunition tomorrow."⁸⁰ Another German unit outright refused to accept an English plea for peace, replying to them that:

Gentlemen, you are not, it is true, the responsible leaders of English politics, and so you are not directly responsible for their baseness; but all the same you are Englishmen, whose annihilation we consider to be our duty. We therefore request that you take such action as will prevent your mercenaries, whom you call 'soldiers,' from approaching our trenches in the future.⁸¹

Amongst the Allied Powers, the French troops adjusted to returning to combat the most easily. Even during Christmas Eve, the French command attempted an assault on German troops by dropping flechettes, five-inch steel darts, from their planes, only to be foiled by poor weather.⁸²

Regardless of the existing tensions between the two armies, the real push for the truce's end came from the mouths of the soldier's commanding officers. In accordance with the gentlemanly code of honor that dominated war of the time, violations of the rules of war were viewed as treachery. As such, most commanding officers were unsympathetic to any soldiers that shared presents instead of bullets on Christmas Eve. The British commanders in particular took issue with the fact that the soldiers had taken it upon themselves to issue an armistice, as opposed

⁸⁰ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 124.

⁸¹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 130.

⁸² Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 131.

to waiting for the proper authorities to wear down enemy governments first.⁸³ Realizing that the war effort would die should the truce continue at its current pace, commanding officers from both sides brought it upon themselves to whip their men back into shape. Generals visited the trenches and commanded the men personally, ensuring that the war remained on schedule. One British unit was ordered by a commander to gun down several Saxon soldiers simply on the parapets of their trenches, in spite of the fact that they were unarmed.⁸⁴ German soldiers were ordered to follow a new philosophy: “*Die Schützengrabenfreundschaft verboten,*” meaning friendship between trenches forbidden.⁸⁵ In addition, the German High Command enacted random inspections of German trenches by generals to ensure that the fighting continued. The generals would even force their disobedient men to fire upon the enemy trench to prove their loyalty to the German cause.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, soldiers deemed too unreliable to follow such orders found themselves transferred to new units and replaced by men uncorrupted by the truce.”⁸⁷ That is not to say that none of the soldiers attempted to protest. The 2nd Yorks, for instance, assured the German units that they would purposefully aim too high whenever shooting at them.⁸⁸ However, such actions were few and far between, and the war continued as desired. The only

⁸³ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 150.

⁸⁴ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 149.

⁸⁵ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 151.

⁸⁶ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 151.

⁸⁷ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 148.

⁸⁸ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 151.

power that prolonged the life of the truce in the wake of the High Command was Mother Nature. Several battlefields such as Flanders, once been tamed by the frost, became muddy quagmires as spring encroached on the land.⁸⁹ Attempts in 1915 to host a second truce were quickly quashed by each side's top brass. The Christmas truce had come to an end, though its story could scarcely be considered finished.

While the Allied and Central governments brooded over the existence of the truce, the general public was left largely in the dark towards the situation. In fact, while British newspapers were reporting news of the war daily, stories covering the truce were oddly absent. For instance, in a December 25th story by the *Montgomery Advertiser* titled "Christmas Finds Warring Nations Still Fighting Fierce Battles," the article only speaks of the brutality of combat and Pope Benedict's failed attempt to broker a peace.⁹⁰ There is no mention of the actual truce taking place, despite the fact that it had started only the day before. This is not for lack of interest in the subject of course, as coverage of the truce in Britain began appearing in newspapers after New Year's Day, and as shown in the previous chapter, soldier testimonies were heavily promoted in the British newspapers. However, any articles concerning the truce were completely absent in Britain, and even Europe as a whole. Though that is not to say that there was absolutely no coverage of the Christmas truce in the news. The first newspaper story on the fraternization was

⁸⁹ Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001), 149.

⁹⁰ Dec. 25, 1914. "Christmas Finds Warring Nations Still Fighting Fierce Battkes." *Motogomery Advertiser* (Montgomery, Alabama). https://infoweb-newsbank-com.providence.idm.oclc.org/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=WORLDNEWS&req_dat=C9144615FA8D4BD1873DB37A270DECC6&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Aimage%252Fv2%253A11B0124EA8AEC7F0%2540EANX-11B99923682085A0%25402420492-11B9992377ACF5D0%25400-11B999240AD76400%2540Christmas%252BFinds%252BWarring%252BNations%252BStill%252BFighting%252BFierce%252BBattles.%252BPope%252BBenedict%252527s%252BHoped-for%252BTruce%252BFails%252BTo/hlterms%3A

published on December 31st by the *New York Times*, in an article titled “Foes In Trenches Swap Pies For Wine.”⁹¹ The story details a group of soldiers hosting a Christmas mass and sharing mince pies with one another. The *New York Times* released another story the same day which contained a letter from an English soldier, who referred to the armistice as “the funniest and most amusing Christmas I have ever spent.”⁹² While the lack of coverage in Britain could at first glance be brushed off as simply news traveling slowly, that does not answer the question as to why the United States, a nation that was not involved in the war at this point managed to put stories of the truce to paper. The answer to this enigma is in its question: the reason that the American press was able to report on the truce was because the United States was not involved in the war, whereas the British press was under the scrutiny of censorship laws at the time.

In spite of the nation’s right to freedom of speech, the British government was no stranger to infringing upon this right should it be deemed necessary. In the seventeenth century for instance, theaters were closed, mail was opened, and films were censored in the name of public welfare.⁹³ The circumstances of WWI would also be deemed worthy of the government’s obstruction, and so the British leadership looked to construct loopholes. The Defense of the Realm Act 1914, also called DORA was the answer they sought. DORA was amended six times throughout the war, and its powers included granting the government the ability to requisition

⁹¹ Special Cable to THE NEW YORK TIMES. "FOES IN TRENCHES SWAP PIES FOR WINE: BRITISH AND GERMANS EXCHANGE GIFTS DURING CHRISTMAS TRUCE ON FIRING LINE. PASS SEASON COMPLIMENTS ENGLISH AND SAXON OFFICERS PHOTOGRAPHED TOGETHER BETWEEN THE HOSTILE TRENCHES." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Dec 31, 1914. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/foes-trenches-swap-pies-wine/docview/97615001/se-2>.

⁹² Special Cable to THE NEW YORK TIMES. "Fraternizing between the Lines." *New York Times (1857-1922)*, Dec 31, 1914. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/fraternizing-between-lines/docview/97628822/se-2>.

⁹³ Lisa Z. Siegel, “Censorship in Inter-War Britain: Obscenity, Spectacle, and the Workings of the Liberal State.” *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 1 (2011): 61–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41678817>.

buildings needed for the war effort and enforcing prohibition.⁹⁴ However the most relevant power of DORA was its censorship of the press and communications. The British government even appointed censors to actively govern over what could and could not be reported on in the press. While this usually only amounted to the rephrasing of a few words, the censors were known to remove entire paragraphs should they be deemed too controversial.⁹⁵ DORA was not the only law that censored the press within Britain. The War Regulations Act of 1914 for instance prohibited German and socialist newspapers and pamphlets for similar reasons.⁹⁶ By controlling the press, the British government could control the narrative of the war, and by controlling the narrative they could control public opinion. An unauthorized peace between the British and Germans was in direct violation of these plans, as it showcased the Germans as human beings rather than faceless demons to be excoriated. When the truce was finally reported on, only letters from the soldiers were allowed to be published, without any input from the journalists themselves.⁹⁷ This way if there was any backlash, it could be pinned on the soldiers, as it was their words being printed rather than the government's. However, this strategy backfired, as the truce stories proved to be extremely popular. In fact, between December 31st 1914 and January 20th 1915, several British newspapers published over sixty letters describing the truce, far eclipsing any official reports from the government regarding the

⁹⁴ UK Parliament. 2023. "Defence of the Realm Act 1914." <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/parliament-and-the-first-world-war/legislation-and-acts-of-war/defence-of-the-realm-act-1914/>.

⁹⁵ C.E. Montague, *Disenchantment*. 2011, 240.

⁹⁶ New Zealand History. "First World War Laws and Regulations." 2015. https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/index-wartime-laws-and-regulations-1914-21#_Toc332613736.

⁹⁷ Terri Blom Crocker, *The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory, and the First World War* (Lexington, KY, The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 91.

subject.⁹⁸ The advent of the soldiers' perspectives revealed a new side to the war, bleached of propaganda.

The emergence of the Christmas truce was problematic for the justification of the war effort. War is a machine; its coal is support from the populace and its flames are stoked by hatred. If the public has no vitriol towards the enemy power, it is near impossible to justify the violence necessary of warfare. After all, killing a person is sinful, but slaying a demon is saintly. Recruitment requires similar emotions to be invoked in the populace, with propaganda acting as the universal *modus operandi*. Propaganda had a fairly easy task, and a draft was not in effect until 1916. In fact, English citizens of all social classes, from aristocrats and factory workers alike accepted their rifles and bayonets with open arms.⁹⁹ The top priority of British propagandists was focused on countering the efforts of anti-British propaganda circulating the world, courtesy of Germany. The most famous of all propaganda methods of course were recruitment posters, which often displayed patriotic images or regurgitated the same message of combating German atrocities as the written reports. Others romanticized the military, such as *An appeal to you*, which depicts a British soldier beckoning the reader to join the army.¹⁰⁰ However, English recruitment posters were particularly notable for their emotional manipulation. Many would attempt to guilt the reader into believing that it was their duty as a citizen to join the military and aid in the war effort. One such example was created by Johnson Riddle & Co, titled *Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?* The poster showcases two children asking the titular

⁹⁸ Terri Blom Crocker, *The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory, and the First World War* (Lexington, KY, The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 91.

⁹⁹ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 98-99.

¹⁰⁰ Hoover Institution Library & Archives. "An Appeal to You." 1914/1915. <https://digitalcollections.hoover.org/objects/28089/an-appeal-to-you>.

question to their father, who stares directly at the reader. The question is clearly intended for the reader to consider how their future children may view them if they choose to remain civilians. A less subtle poster that also focused on guilt tripping the reader was published by Chorley & Pickersgill Ltd. The poster depicted the silhouette of a soldier with the following caption: “Think. Are you content for him to fight for you? Won't you do your bit? We shall win but you must help. Join today.”¹⁰¹ This message is far more direct than the Johnson Riddle poster, the intent clearly being to make the reader believe that their inaction would actively hinder the war effort. This spoke to the renewed sense of masculinity that came with the advent of war. While the romanticism of war fell out of favor from most soldiers once they approached the battlefield, as discussed in the previous chapter, the public held a different viewpoint. To the average citizen, serving one’s country in war was heroic, elite, and romantic, just as described in the songs and stories of Arthur and his Round Table.¹⁰²

Of course, not every soldier was guilted into service through appealing to primal masculinity. To answer this call to metaphorical arms, the War Propaganda Bureau, better known as the Wellington House was established, to serve as a headquarters for an improved propaganda movement. Several notable authors of the era were recruited in secrecy, including H.G. Wells, Gilbert Murray, and even Arthur Conan Doyle to write and distribute literature depicting the British government’s official stance on the war.¹⁰³ This was not limited to England, as the efforts of the Wellington House were intended to inspire neutral nations to join the Allied Powers,

¹⁰¹ Hoover Institution Library & Archives. “Think. Are you content for him to fight for you? Won't you do your bit? We shall win but you must help. Join today.” 1914/1915. <https://digitalcollections.hoover.org/objects/28241/think-are-you-content-for-him-to-fight-for-you-wont-you-d>.

¹⁰² Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*, (New York, NY, Random House, Inc., Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 380.

¹⁰³ Soirin Radu, *Wellington House and British Propaganda in an Original Document of 1916*, <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/42878>, 66.

particularly the U.S.¹⁰⁴ Early propaganda focused on drawing attention to the atrocities of the German army, with the earliest example being written in 1915 through *The Bryce Report*.¹⁰⁵ This document utilized testimony from Belgian citizens to describe German soldiers executing civilians and burning villages indiscriminately, and seemingly without reason.¹⁰⁶ Other disturbing entries included described a German soldier at Epeghem who pinned the corpse of a two-year old child to the ground with a lance, and another toddler nailed to the door of a farmhouse by their hands and feet at Haecht.¹⁰⁷ The shocking scenes detailed in *The Bryce Report* were successful in convincing the U.S. of the depravity of the German army, so much so that German responses to the report were completely brushed aside. Drawing attention to atrocities was not a form of propaganda only utilized by the English, as the French also made use of this style. Newspaper headlines throughout 1915 drew claimed that “plunder, rape, arson and murder are common practice among our enemies.”¹⁰⁸ British propaganda also consisted of pamphlets that described the empire as a benevolent force bent on preserving the liberty of smaller nations threatened by Germany.¹⁰⁹ Titles such as “the peace of the world threatened by ‘Prussian Militarism’” and “the long prepared readiness for war of Germany” were used to

¹⁰⁴ Soirin Radu, *Wellington House and British Propaganda in an Original Document of 1916*, <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/42878>, 67.

¹⁰⁵ Soirin Radu, *Wellington House and British Propaganda in an Original Document of 1916*, <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/42878>, 64.

¹⁰⁶ Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library. “The Bryce Report.” https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/brycere.asp.

¹⁰⁷ Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library. “The Bryce Report.” https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/brycere.asp.

¹⁰⁸ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker., *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 101.

¹⁰⁹ Soirin Radu, *Wellington House and British Propaganda in an Original Document of 1916*, <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/42878>, 72.

further characterize Germany as a nation of war-mongering despots.¹¹⁰ While the Christmas truce could not extinguish this inferno of malice stoked by the British government towards the Germans, it did provide a hole in the message of this propaganda. There were no mindless beasts described in the soldier's letters; there were sons, fathers, and brothers. The foundation of Britain's propaganda had been shaken and would soon collapse in the following years.

While WWI was still largely popular in the year of 1915, its popularity declined by the very next year. Battles with high casualty counts such as Verdun, the Somme, and the Brusilov offensive initiated the first changes in opinion towards the war, particularly after footage from the Somme was made public that same year.¹¹¹ This was the first literal look into the lives of soldiers for civilians, many of whom were disturbed by the brutality of battle.¹¹² This continued in 1917, in which mutinies and desertion slowly became more commonplace in nearly every army involved.¹¹³ This is not even to mention the aftermath of the war, which was littered with young men with minds broken by PTSD. Called "shell-shock" at the time, "post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a disabling psychiatric disorder that results from being exposed to real or threatened injury, death, and sexual assault."¹¹⁴ Cases of PTSD skyrocketed in England in the

¹¹⁰ Soirin Radu, *Wellington House and British Propaganda in an Original Document of 1916*, <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/42878>, 72.

¹¹¹ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 105.

¹¹² Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 105-106.

¹¹³ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 106.

¹¹⁴ Sukhmanjeet Kaur Mann and Raman Marwaha, National Library of Medicine, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. 2023, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK559129/>.

years following WWI, with around 100,000 cases being reported in 1922.¹¹⁵ Public acceptance of the war being the cause of the poor mental health of soldiers was practically universal, and signified a change in how war would be viewed for the rest of history.

WWI would largely be overlooked after its conclusion, especially with the beginning of the far larger WWII. Of course that is not to say it had no attention focused on itself, as the initial conflict was mocked for its disproven title of “the war to end all wars.”¹¹⁶ WWI’s reputation was further damaged, as many came to blame WWI as being directly responsible for WWII’s beginning.¹¹⁷ This line of thinking was not without merit, as the terms of the Treaty of Versailles are recognized as being partially responsible for Hitler’s rise to power within the weakened Germany. The post-WWI era was marked by a rise in an anti-war mentality throughout society, particularly from the mouths of surviving soldiers. Some turned to poetry to express their disgust of the war. John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields” (1915) describes the number of dead from the war would be enough to fill the titular field, remembered only by the crosses to mark them:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.¹¹⁸

The use of Flanders as the namesake of the poem is meant to give an example that a reader of the time would likely be familiar with. Flanders is a region located within Belgium, host to several

¹¹⁵ Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*, (New York, NY, Random House, Inc., Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 393.

¹¹⁶ Terri Blom Crocker, *The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory, and the First World War* (Lexington, KY, The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 171.

¹¹⁷ Terri Blom Crocker, *The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory, and the First World War* (Lexington, KY, The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 171.

¹¹⁸ John McCrae, *In Flanders Fields*, May 3, 1915. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47380/in-flanders-fields>.

major battles throughout WWI. In fact, with the exception of 1916, Flanders was the location of a major battle for every year of the war, leaving nothing but bodies in its wake. Just as described by the poem, the formerly peaceful countryside of Flanders was corrupted into a graveyard, dyed red with blood instead of poppies.

Other poems of the time aimed their criticism with the glorification of war at the hands of the government. This is seen in Siegfried Sassoon's "They" (1917), which portrays Britain as a bishop attempting to portray WWI as a holy crusade against the anti-Christ. Sassoon however has to say about this line of thought;

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.
 For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
 'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
 'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
 'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.
 ' And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'¹¹⁹

The graphic descriptions of each soldier's injuries is meant to shatter the noble expectations that the bishop holds towards warfare. The boys viciously condemn the bishop's justifications, as they are the ones sacrificing their eyes, legs, and lungs for a cause they have no love for. In response, the bishop cannot justify the horrors of war beyond claiming that the ways of God are strange, obviously a stand in for the governments of the time attempting to wipe their hands clean for the greater good.

The romantic, heroic image of the war was brutally demolished by Erich Maria Remarque's graphically realistic novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, albeit in a much less sarcastic tone than Sassoon's poem. The novel depicts a German soldier named Paul Bäumer

¹¹⁹Siegfried Sassoon, *They*, 1917, https://www.best-poems.net/siegfried_sassoon/they.html.

having his romantic images of battle shattered, while also criticizing civilians that attempt to justify war without any knowledge of what their soldiers live through.

These anti-war texts provide a look into an often-overlooked aspect of the early twentieth century, though not an unfamiliar one. The need and justifications of war have been the subject of criticism in nearly every conflict following WWI. Take the Vietnam War, for instance, arguably the least popular war in American history. The Vietnam War was the subject of immense media coverage, from death tolls to live footage that would be played on the evening news.¹²⁰ Just as it happened in WWI, the revelation of how brutal war was shocked the public, though a scale far greater than what would have been capable in 1916. Protests blanketed the nation in many forms. Some such as Muhammad Ali and Martin Luther King Jr. used their positions to call out the injustices of taking part in a seemingly pointless war, sometimes at the risk of their reputations.¹²¹ Young men also protested the war through dodging the draft, often by fleeing to other countries such as Canada or Sweden.¹²² The war's popularity had all but hit rock bottom by 1968, its approval rating was a mere 28.4 out of 100.¹²³

This poor reputation remains in the modern day, as polls conducted from 1990-2000 discovered that seven in ten Americans viewed becoming involved in Vietnam as a mistake.¹²⁴ Of course, the modern day is no stranger to unpopular wars, as shown by the War in Iraq. While

¹²⁰ Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*, (New York, NY, Random House, Inc., Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 533.

¹²¹ Mitchell K. Hall "The Vietnam Era Antiwar Movement." *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 5 (2004): 13–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163716>, 14

¹²² Mitchell K. Hall "The Vietnam Era Antiwar Movement." *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 5 (2004): 13–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163716>, 14

¹²³ E. M. Schreiber, "Anti-War Demonstrations and American Public Opinion on the War in Vietnam," *The British Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 2 (1976): 225–36. <https://doi.org/10.2307/590029>, 229

¹²⁴ Joseph Carroll, "The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison." (Gallup, 2004), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx>.

the war was largely popular in the initial years, particularly following the 9/11 attacks, this approval would wane as the casualties and length of the conflict increased. Polls taken in 2003 displayed that 89 percent of Americans did not believe entering the war was a mistake, and this would rise to 93 percent the following year.¹²⁵ This rating would then steadily decline every year, dropping to 72 percent in 2004, 66 percent in 2008, and finally 58 percent in November of 2010.¹²⁶ The negative legacy of the Iraq war remains fresh in the minds of many Americans, 50% of whom believed that the war was a mistake in 2014.¹²⁷

Taking this growing distaste for war into account explains the sudden rise in popularity of the Christmas truce in the twenty-first century. From being written off as a strange event from the first year of the war, the truce found itself thrust into the spotlight as a moment of humility and compassion. War was simply no fun anymore, and to see that peace was possible in the most unlikely of moments was viewed as worthy of celebration. For instance, on December 23, 1923, *The New York Times*, the newspaper that first discussed the Christmas truce in 1914 published an article on the titled “GREATEST OF ALL TRIBUTES TO CHRISTMAS: An Officer Recalls the Day Twenty Years Ago When Guns Were Silent and Good-Will Spread Over No Man's Land THE GREATEST OF ALL CHRISTMAS TRIBUTES.”¹²⁸ The article went on to detail

¹²⁵ Joseph Carroll, “The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison.” (Gallup, 2004), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx>.

¹²⁶ Joseph Carroll, “The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison.” (Gallup, 2004), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx>.

¹²⁷J. Baxter Oliphant, “The Iraq War Continues to Divide the U.S. Public, 15 Years After It Began,” (Pew Research Center, 2018) <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/03/19/iraq-war-continues-to-divide-u-s-public-15-years-after-it-began/>.

¹²⁸ Williams, Valentine, Late Captain, Irish Guards. Dec 23, 1914. “Greatest of All Tributes to Christmas: An Officer Recalls the Day Twenty Years Ago When Guns Were Silent and Good-Will Spread Over No Man’s Land the Greatest of All Christmas Tributes A British Officer Recalls The Day Tweny Years Ago When Guns Were Put Aside and Good-Will Spread Over No Man’s Land Christmas On the German Front.” *New York Times* (New York, USA). <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/greatest-all-tributes-christmas/docview/101203434/se-2>.

testimonials from several In 1934 for instance, *The New York Times* published an article recounting the story, complete with several testimonials from soldiers present.¹²⁹ This push to the forefront of the public's minds was not limited to the immediate decades of the war. The near-universal aversion towards war by the early-2000s transformed the truce as not just a unique story, but a legend. And as with all legends, the truce would soon find itself reshaped and retold for a new audience.

¹²⁹ Williams, Valentine, Late Captain, Irish Guards. Dec 23, 1914. "Greatest of All Tributes to Christmas: An Officer Recalls the Day Twenty Years Ago When Guns Were Silent and Good-Will Spread Over No Man's Land the Greatest of All Christmas Tributes A British Officer Recalls The Day Tweny Years Ago When Guns Were Put Aside and Good-Will Spread Over No Man's Land Christmas On the German Front." *New York Times* (New York, USA). <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/greatest-all-tributes-christmas/docview/101203434/se-2>.

Chapter 3: The Legacy of a Miracle

As discussed in the previous chapters, the evolution of the Christmas truce's reputation of denunciation to one of commendation was a natural progression, albeit a significant one. While the military and governments of the involved nations dubbed the event as simple disobedience, the general public viewed it as a novel moment of peace. It is this inspirational aspect of the event that has come to define it in the modern world. This is not particularly surprising considering the fact that the truce's popularity can be attributed to the rise in anti-war sentiments in the years that followed it. Twenty-first century retellings of the truce have a habit of focusing on the values of Christmas, such as peace and brotherhood amongst one's fellow man, while downplaying the reluctance some soldiers expressed in participating. Furthermore, creating a heartwarming display is also a common trope within recreations, not only to match the theme of the holiday, but also to invest the viewer on an emotional level. This is reflected in several reinterpretations, particularly in the 2000s, including short ad feature-length films, commercials, and even songs. Granted that while most Christmas truce stories do not shy away from the fact that it took place during a violent war, all of them convey the modern narrative of goodwill between men that the Christmas truce adopted for itself. This chapter will argue that the modern understanding of the Christmas truce has evolved from a unique moment of WWI into a legendary symbol of peace.

Most modern depictions of the Christmas truce tend to share a few details, such as the meeting in No Man's Land and the caroling between soldiers. One particular event that is almost guaranteed to make an appearance in reinterpretations is the soccer game between the British and the Germans. The soccer match is a perfect representation of the themes of unity between rival armies that modern works generally aim to depict. This is not found solely in the realm of

fictional honors for the truce, however. The reverence for this particular event during the Christmas truce was perhaps best displayed in 2014, when the British and German NATO forces held a soccer match to honor the hundredth anniversary of the truce. This event was the brain-child of German Lt. Gen. Jurgen Weigt and British Lt. Gen. Sandy Storrie out of a desire to honor the event. They even managed to capture the very spirit of the truce, as the British and German soldiers had been deployed in Afghanistan at the time, meaning that they took a similar break from warfare to celebrate a Christmas in peace. As one news report of the event put it:

The sidelines were a confetti of uniforms as soldiers from NATO partner countries, including Australia, Italy, Romania, Belgium, and Czech Republic, together with officers from the Afghan army. A handful of Afghans from a school next door spilled through a gate and watched from the far side of the field.¹³⁰

Due to the fact that it was meant to be a symbolic event, “the game remained scoreless until late in the second half when the British managed to score. With only minutes left on the clock, the Germans failed to equalize.”¹³¹ One soldier’s words perfectly encapsulate the importance of this event: “German soldiers and British soldiers for a moment forgot the brutality of war and humanity triumphed.”¹³² Following the end of the game, the troops decided to sing Christmas carols, specifically “Silent Night” just like the original troops. Fitting with the feeling of camaraderie that the event stood for, German and British soldiers were not alone in their celebrations. In a final twist of irony in the celebrations, the match was eventually postponed “after a Black Hawk helicopter had to land on the make-shift pitch. On board was US Senator

¹³⁰E.B. Boyd. “German, British soldiers commemorate WWI Christmas Truce on Kabul soccer field.” December 25,2016. https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/german-british-soldiers-commemorate-wwi-christmas-truce-on-kabul-soccer-field-1.446056. Accessed 11/3/2022

¹³¹ E.B. Boyd. “German, British soldiers commemorate WWI Christmas Truce on Kabul soccer field.” December 25,2016. https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/german-british-soldiers-commemorate-wwi-christmas-truce-on-kabul-soccer-field-1.446056. Accessed 11/3/2022

¹³² Poslaekr, Gihaksa. “NATO troops recreate WW1 Christmas truce...” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUj5-eMTaXY>. Accessed 11/3/2022

John McCain who was visiting American troops for Christmas.”¹³³ Whereas the original Christmas truce was canceled and condemned by the soldier’s superiors, this truce was allowed to continue with the blessing of a major political figure. This displays a shift in context of the perception of the truce. Of course, this sentiment is somewhat dampened by the differing political climates of the twenty-first century and the early twentieth century. Germany and Britain are not at war and are in fact allied alongside much of Europe. Due to this, the NATO reenactment cannot fully capture the bonds forged during the original event. However, the NATO reenactment is able to serve another purpose: to display how the forged bonds have become tempered with time. Instead of looking back on the Christmas truce with revilement like their predecessors, modern-day militaries and leaders view the event as being worthy of honor.

While reenactments like the one performed by NATO are certainly a notable method to reenact the Christmas truce, they are far from the most popular mediums to do so. That honor belongs to film, through which countless creative and unique interpretations of the truce have been able to grace both the silver and small screens. One of the most unique reinterpretations of the Christmas truce can be found in the form of a short film called *Battlefield 1- Christmas Truce of 1914- Cinematic Movie*. The video is credited to a YouTube channel called PS4GameCapture Ari, which specializes in using assets from the video game Battlefield 1 to make short WWI films. Created by Electronic Arts, Battlefield 1 is a highly realistic first-person shooter that effectively simulates the Great War with stunning graphics and intuitive gameplay. Ari’s film distinguishes itself from others on the truce because it only depicts two soldiers holding an armistice rather than their entire units. The film begins with two German soldiers crawling through their trenches while acknowledging that it is Christmas. One of the German soldiers, a

¹³³ DW. “Christmas Truce remembered.” December 24, 2014. <https://www.dw.com/en/german-and-british-troops-commemorate-1914-christmas-truce-football-match/a-18150798>. Accessed 11/3/2022

field medic named Hans, is told by his comrade that he wishes to call a ceasefire for Christmas. From there, Hans throws a smoke bomb to signal to some nearby British soldiers to meet him. Reluctantly, Hans goes along with his comrade's plan and enters No Man's Land alone. A single British soldier meets Hans, all while keeping his rifle pointed at the German medic. However, Hans is undeterred and drops a crate with medical supplies, telling the British soldier to take as much as he needs. The soldier complies and the two appear to shake hands before leaving. The film ends with a few shots of the battlefield and ends with a quote from WWI poet Wilfred Owen that reads, "The Germans started it. That's the miracle. For the first time, it wasn't the Germans who waged war but started peace."

The film possesses some uncanny qualities due to the limitations of the format. For instance, the models of the soldiers cannot drop their weapons, which makes their handshake a bit awkward since they do so while holding guns. However, quirks such as these add character to the film and make the stronger scenes even more impressive. For instance, the unnamed British soldier walks very slowly toward Hans and keeps his gun trained on the medic the entire time. This immediately conveys the uneasiness of the situation. Furthermore, it is also notable that only two soldiers take part in the truce in the film. While the majority of Christmas truce reenactments depict entire battalions joining in the celebrations, this film treats the event as an anomaly of war. This is further supported by the fact that Hans was hesitant to even greet the British soldier and needed to be spurred on by his fellow soldier. Both sides are clearly uncomfortable with the idea of approaching one another regardless of intention. This, however, is not an unusual response, and in fact adds to the film's realism. As documented in the previous chapters, many of the participating soldiers held reservations as to how sincere their former enemies were. While the *Battlefield 1- Christmas Truce of 1914- Cinematic Movie* is not nearly

as detailed as the NATO reenactment or the other interpretations within this chapter, the core themes of the video match those associated with the truce's modern perceptions. It simply displays two enemies finding peace in the most unlikely of places for no other reason than a desire to feel human.

While the *Battlefield 1- Christmas Truce of 1914- Cinematic Movie* depicted the truce as an intimate and private event, most 21st century retellings depict the story on a larger scale. One such example is J Sainsbury plc's (a British grocery chain) 2014 Christmas advertisement, which reenacts the truce on Christmas Eve with entire battalions participating. Well-known for their heartwarming Christmas advertisements, Sainsburys created this nearly four-minute commercial in honor of the one-hundred-year anniversary of the truce. In spite of the short length of the video, the commercial manages to depict the truce with surprising authenticity. This is evident from the costumes of the actors within the commercial, all of whom wear era-appropriate uniforms and even winter gear. Even smaller details such as the tin boxes of food and chocolate that Princess Mary sent to the British troops are depicted, which also serves as a clever way for Sainsburys to advertise their products. Furthermore, the cramped quarters of the trenches and blankets of snow billowing into them emphasize the dread likely felt by the soldiers at the time. Due to their wish for the advertisement to be as respectful and authentic as possible, Sainsburys collaborated with the Royal British Legion, a British military charity, to fact check their project. In a short behind-the-scenes video on the making of the commercial, a number of historians and even descendants of the soldiers that took part in the truce were shown to have contributed to the making of the advertisement.¹³⁴ One such descendant is Andrew Hamilton, the grandson of Captain Robert Hamilton who described meeting two German officers on Christmas Day. It is

¹³⁴ Sainsbury's. *The story behind 1914 Christmas Ad Sainsbury's*. November 12, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s1YvnfcFVs> . Accessed 11/3.2022.

evident from these testimonials that a great deal of love and care went into the production of the advert. Charles Byrne of the Royal British Legion described the commercial as “a really good way for people to understand the First World War and the humanity.” Specifically, he believed that the commercial highlighted “those small moments of charity and support, and human contact that easily get lost.”¹³⁵

While the background of the commercial contains a great deal of respect towards the truce, it is the content of the commercial itself that truly displays the modern perspective of the event. The Sainsbury commercial is in many ways the quintessential modern depiction of the truce, as it portrays all of the notable stories of the event, while also appealing to the emotions of the viewer to further enhance the viewing experience. The ad begins on Christmas Eve, with British and German soldiers in their trenches as the snow falls, both sides sitting with truly miserable frowns on their faces. Without a line of dialogue, the viewer is able to understand the sadness and frustration of the soldiers as they are forced to spend their Christmas Eve away from their families. The camera then pans to a British soldier who is later identified as Jim opening his tin box to see his chocolate bar, a gift from his homeland.¹³⁶ From here, the British and Germans begin to sing the words to Silent Night each in their native tongues before harmonizing together. This is one of many scenes of the commercial that directly taken from accounts of the soldiers present at the truce. Other notable moments that are depicted in this fashion can be seen during the truce itself, such as the often-debated soccer game, exchange of gifts, and even a minor story of a German soldiers shaving the soldiers of both sides. Even when the truce is ultimately ended by the sound of cannon fire, officers and soldiers on both sides quickly salute one another and

¹³⁵ PS4GameCapture Ari. *Battlefield 1 - Christmas Truce of 1914 - Cinematic Movie*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stHYyRlvtFQ&t=217s>. Accessed 10/31/2022

¹³⁶ Sainsbury's. *1914 Sainsbury's Ad Christmas 2014*. November 12, 2014.

bid each other farewell, showcasing that there is no ill will between the men even though they must return to war. However, the most notable aspect of the commercial is the brotherhood formed between the British soldier Jim and a German soldier named Otto. Both are the first among their respective units to enter No Man's Land and initiate the truce.¹³⁷ They show one another pictures of their wives, and even take part in the soccer game. Furthermore, when they are forced back to the reality of war, the two still give one another gifts in the form of chocolate from Jim and a cracker from Otto and wish one another a "Merry Christmas."¹³⁸ It is worth noting that the commercial does advertise Sainsburys-brand chocolate, which could potentially come off as insensitive marketing. That being said, the commercial only shows the chocolate in two scenes, devoting the majority of its runtime on the story of the truce. Sainsburys also donated all of the profits made from the chocolate bar shown in the commercial to the Royal British Legion, further challenging the notion that the ad was a cash-grab scheme.¹³⁹ This depiction of the event focuses more on the true spirit of the Christmas truce, men from enemy nations laying "down their arms, exchange smokes, and wish each other happiness."¹⁴⁰

A common aspect of most reinterpretations of the Christmas truce is their relatively small scale. Some such as the Sainsburys commercial depict the event as only taking place on Christmas Eve and the following morning or as in the case of the Battlefield 1 video downplay the scale of the event entirely. This weakness is avoided by the 2005 war drama film, *Joyeux*

¹³⁷ Sainsbury's. *1914 Sainsbury's Ad Christmas 2014*. November 12, 2014.

¹³⁸ Sainsbury's. *1914 Sainsbury's Ad Christmas 2014*. November 12, 2014.

¹³⁹ About.Sainsbury.co.uk. "Sainsbury's and The Royal British Legion partner to bring First World War Christmas truce story to life." November 12, 2014. <https://www.about.sainsburys.co.uk/news/latest-news/2014/12-11-2014>. Accessed 10/9/2022

¹⁴⁰ Charles Byrne, 2014, "The making of 1914 Christmas Ad Sainsbury's." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jx3pQWbysmM>, Accessed 10/10/2022

Noel. Written and directed by Christian Carion, *Joyeux Noel* is a historical drama that depicts the eve of December 24th, 1914 through the eyes of the Scottish, German, and French troops present. Specifically, it takes inspiration from an event in which Prince Wilhelm of Germany sent the lead singer of the Berlin Imperial Opera to sing to the troops, which led nearby French troops to applaud the performance. This decision alone makes the film stand out amongst other interpretations of the truce, which tend to focus only on British and German interactions. Furthermore, *Joyeux Noel* fully takes advantage of its status as a film. Unlike the Sainsbury commercial or the Battlefield 1 video, which are only a few minutes in length, *Joyeux Noel* has a runtime of nearly two hours. As a result, the film can more easily take its time in building its setting and developing its characters.

While the film divides its focus amongst several characters, the main character of the first main section of the film is a German private named Nikolaus Sprink.¹⁴¹ Sprink's character acts as the catalyst for the truce in the events of the film. Sprink is not a soldier by nature, and his first appearance in the movie involves being drafted into the army. Furthermore, the lieutenant of his unit barely conceals his resentment for Sprink's privileged upbringing, so the private cannot find camaraderie with his fellow soldiers. This resentment is further exacerbated when Sprink is allowed to temporarily leave the trenches and personally perform for Prince Wilhelm. However, Sprink is far from the spoiled child that others believe him to be, and secretly resents the fact that he must perform in front of the generals and nobility that can sit comfortably at home while the foot soldiers suffer in filth and snow. However, Sprink can use his talents to give what he considers his greatest performance. On Christmas Eve, Sprink sings "Silent Night" for his fellow

¹⁴¹Christian Carion, director. 2005, *Joyeux Noel*. UGC Fox Distribution. https://www.amazon.com/Joyeux-Merry-Christmas-Diane-Kruger/dp/B000KNHCO4/ref=sr_1_1?crid=305VQ3R6PR1CF&keywords=joyeux+noel&qid=1682303380&s=instant-video&sprefix=joyeu%2Cinstant-video%2C189&sr=1-1.

soldiers to brighten their spirits amidst the chaos of war. This is of course based on the multiple accounts of soldiers singing the famous Christmas carol to lift their spirits as discussed in the first chapter. It is Sprink's training as an opera singer, for which he was put down by his lieutenant that allows the truce to occur, as his singing is carried over to the other trenches. Sprink is then joined by Father Palmer of the Scottish unit, who accompanies the song with his bagpipes. Sprink is visibly touched by the Scot's contribution and proceeds to sing louder as if answering Palmer's challenge. His demeanor also noticeably lightens when hearing the bagpipes, completely eclipsing the cynicism he expressed when performing for the prince. By the end of the song, the entire Scottish unit is applauding Sprink's performance.¹⁴² Palmer then wordlessly asks Sprink to sing again by playing the first few notes of O Come, All Ye Faithful, to which Sprink answers by stepping out of his trench with a small Christmas tree, all while singing with open arms. The performance is further enhanced by several other bagpipe players joining Palmer, creating a small orchestra to back up the now ecstatic Sprink. At the end of the song, Sprink sets down the tree in No Man's Land and greets the Scottish troops, humorously mistaking them for the British.

Lieutenant Audebert is the commanding officer of the French troops present in the trenches. Audebert is hesitant to trust his enemies after having fought them for so long, understandingly because he was nearly killed in battle early in the film. That being said, Audebert ultimately proves to be very open-minded about accepting the armistice. For instance, he stops one of his men from shooting Sprink as he sings. While he is the last officer to enter No

¹⁴² Christian Carion, director. 2005, *Joyeux Noel*. UGC Fox Distribution. https://www.amazon.com/Joyeux-Merry-Christmas-Diane-Kruger/dp/B000KNHCO4/ref=sr_1_1?crid=305VQ3R6PR1CF&keywords=joyeux+noel&qid=1682303380&s=instant-video&sprefix=joyeu%2Cinstant-video%2C189&sr=1-1.

Man's Land, Audebert is the one that makes the truce official by toasting champagne.¹⁴³ The lieutenant further proves his humanity by assisting the Germans long after their truce is meant to have ended. For instance, he takes Sprink and Anna prisoner at their request so that they will not be separated. Audebert is also the only officer who actively argues with his superiors when punished for fraternization, citing his disgust for the civilians and leaders that pass judgment on him despite never seeing a battlefield.¹⁴⁴

Lieutenant Horstmayer is the commanding officer of the German forces in the trenches and is initially an example of a model soldier¹⁴⁵. Horstmayer is a dutiful man who despises those he believes have an easy life, which is specifically the reason he resents Sprink so strongly. Furthermore, Horstmayer expects his troops to act in a disciplined manner and is infuriated when Sprink brings his fiancée Anna to the trench and begins his concert on the battlefield. Horstmayer fears that Sprink's actions will give the enemy an advantage. This is best seen when he scolds Sprink after he walks into No Man's Land while singing, reminding the private that he is not acting in an opera. While he is reasonable enough to agree to a truce with the Scottish and French lieutenants, Horstmayer is the only man who notes that it will only be for the evening. However, Horstmayer immediately changes his mind after getting to know his former enemies. For instance, he returns Lieutenant Audebert's wallet having found it earlier in a battle, showing

¹⁴³Christian Carion, director. 2005, *Joyeux Noel*. UGC Fox Distribution. https://www.amazon.com/Joyeux-Merry-Christmas-Diane-Kruger/dp/B000KNHCO4/ref=sr_1_1?crid=305VQ3R6PR1CF&keywords=joyeux+noel&qid=1682303380&s=instant-video&prefix=joyeu%2Cinstant-video%2C189&sr=1-1.

¹⁴⁴Christian Carion, director. 2005, *Joyeux Noel*. UGC Fox Distribution. https://www.amazon.com/Joyeux-Merry-Christmas-Diane-Kruger/dp/B000KNHCO4/ref=sr_1_1?crid=305VQ3R6PR1CF&keywords=joyeux+noel&qid=1682303380&s=instant-video&prefix=joyeu%2Cinstant-video%2C189&sr=1-1.

¹⁴⁵Christian Carion, director. 2005, *Joyeux Noel*. UGC Fox Distribution. https://www.amazon.com/Joyeux-Merry-Christmas-Diane-Kruger/dp/B000KNHCO4/ref=sr_1_1?crid=305VQ3R6PR1CF&keywords=joyeux+noel&qid=1682303380&s=instant-video&prefix=joyeu%2Cinstant-video%2C189&sr=1-1.

that he is sympathetic to the loneliness that Audebert feels. Horstmayer also agrees to extend the truce the following day to bury the dead, and he later does not object to the more intimate fraternization that follows between his men and the other units. Horstmayer even continues his friendship with Audebert by offering to send a letter to the Frenchman's wife for nothing in return.¹⁴⁶ That being said, the implication that Horstmayer is willing to return to being enemies is still very much present, which makes his decision to warn the Scottish and French troops of an upcoming bombing raid all the more unexpected. Horstmayer even invites the Scottish and French units into the German trenches personally to ensure that his newfound friends will not be harmed in the attack. Horstmayer then reveals to Audebert that his wife is French, further humanizing the German lieutenant since it displays the fact that he is not blind to the fact that the men he is currently fighting against are not monsters for him to kill indiscriminately.

Part of the mystique of the Christmas truce is that the soldiers ceased their fighting, though it should be noted that not all of the soldiers were combatants. Father Palmer for instance is a Scottish priest who also serves as a stretcher-bearer. Palmer is shown to be the second most accepting of the truce, as he accompanies Sprink's singing with music from his bagpipes, and even encourages Sprink to keep singing by playing "O Come, All Ye Faithful." Palmer's religious vows are particularly notable, as he performs a Mass on Christmas Eve for all of the troops while speaking in Latin. When reprimanded for doing this by an English bishop, Palmer notes that Christianity is a religion that emphasizes goodwill and humanity, virtues that the truce honored. Palmer ultimately rejects Christianity after witnessing the same bishop preaching a sermon that depicts the Germans as demons that the Scottish should feel proud of killing. In

¹⁴⁶Christian Carion, director. 2005, *Joyeux Noel*. UGC Fox Distribution. https://www.amazon.com/Joyeux-Merry-Christmas-Diane-Kruger/dp/B000KNHCO4/ref=sr_1_1?crd=305VQ3R6PR1CF&keywords=joyeux+noel&qid=1682303380&s=instant-video&sprefix=joyeu%2Cinstant-video%2C189&sr=1-1.

response, Palmer rips off his crucifix and walks away, symbolizing his disdain for how blind patriotism has corrupted Christianity.

While *Joyeux Noel* primarily portrays the Christmas truce fondly, the film is not without the event's detractors. These primarily take the form of the commanding officers for each of the lieutenants, all of whom react furiously when the truce is exposed to them. For instance, the Scottish major personally goes to the trench to scold his men and then orders them to fire upon what he believed to be a German soldier walking across No Man's Land, not knowing that it is a disguised French soldier.¹⁴⁷ The German soldiers are transported to the Eastern Front and are admonished by the German Crown Prince, who states that Horstmayer is unworthy of his Iron Cross. The French command, however, was the exception to this rule. Audebert is confronted by his father, a French general who informs him that he will be removed from his post and sent to Verdun instead. However, unlike the Scottish major and German Prince, General Audebert never once tells his son that he is undeserving of his position, and even accepts Lt. Audebert yelling at him despite being a superior officer. In addition, the general also discusses the truce with Lt. Audebert in private, unlike the Scottish major and German prince, who dress down their entire units to humiliate them. Granted, the general's more subdued reaction can be attributed to the fact that he is speaking to his son rather than a random soldier, but his acceptance of the situation is still notable.

Joyeux Noel does not only depict the upper ranks of the military being disgusted with the notion of the truce, as it also shows a rare example of a civilian disagreeing with the truce. Father Palmer is confronted by a nationalistic bishop after he is transferred, who condemns the priest for

¹⁴⁷Christian Carion, director. 2005, *Joyeux Noel*. UGC Fox Distribution. https://www.amazon.com/Joyeux-Merry-Christmas-Diane-Kruger/dp/B000KNHCO4/ref=sr_1_1?crid=305VQ3R6PR1CF&keywords=joyeux+noel&qid=1682303380&s=instant-video&sprefix=joyeu%2Cinstant-video%2C189&sr=1-1.

the “heresy” of leading a Christmas mass with Germans. The bishop then goes on to give a disturbingly xenophobic sermon on Germany to a group of recruits:

Christ our Lord said, "Think not that I come to bring peace on earth. I come not to bring peace, but a sword." The Gospel according to St. Matthew. Well, my brethren, the sword of the Lord is in your hands. You are the very defenders of civilization itself. The forces of good against the forces of evil. For this war is indeed a crusade! A holy war to save the freedom of the world. In truth I tell you: the Germans do not act like us, neither do they think like us, for they are not, like us, children of God. Are those who shell cities populated only by civilians the children of God? Are those who advanced armed hiding behind women and children the children of God? With God's help, you must kill the Germans, good or bad, young or old. Kill every one of them so that it won't have to be done again. The Lord be with you.¹⁴⁸

However, *Joyeux Noel*'s most shocking detractor of the Christmas truce is Private Jonathan. Jonathan is a Scottish soldier who is given a small amount of focus at the beginning of the film alongside his brother William. During the battle at the start of the film, William is killed in battle, completely breaking Jonathan's spirit and filling him with rage. When the truce officially begins, Jonathan refuses to take part in the festivities and instead sleeps in No Man's Land next to his brother's corpse. Jonathan acts coldly to any German soldiers that come near him, which is understandable considering his trauma. It is also not unheard of, as discussed in previous chapters, the Christmas truce was not a universally agreed upon event, as many soldiers refused to take part. Jonathan even roughly shoos a German soldier away when he attempts to assist Jonathan in burying William's body. This ultimately comes to fruition when the Scottish major orders the men to shoot a German soldier. While the rest of the unit purposefully misses their shots, Jonathan refuses to play along and shoots the man dead.

¹⁴⁸Christian Carion, director. 2005, *Joyeux Noel*. UGC Fox Distribution. https://www.amazon.com/Joyeux-Merry-Christmas-Diane-Kruger/dp/B000KNHCO4/ref=sr_1_1?crid=305VQ3R6PR1CF&keywords=joyeux+noel&qid=1682303380&s=instant-video&prefix=joyeu%2Cinstant-video%2C189&sr=1-1.

While the film does depict several characters who are opposed to the notion of the Christmas truce, the soldiers who take part in the armistice ultimately refuse to allow themselves to be broken by the pressure. As previously mentioned, the Scottish soldiers except for Jonathan refuse to shoot the German soldier, and rebelliously aim their rifles into the air, as if to mock their unyielding major. Father Palmer has a similar moment of rebellion with his implied decision to leave the church out of disgust for the bishop's disregard for his religious vows in exchange for toxic nationalism. Audebert manages to reach a point of understanding with his father, who while not approving of the truce, accepts his son's decision and wishes him well.¹⁴⁹ The German soldiers even stand against their prince by singing a Scottish folk song as the train carries them to the Eastern Front while still in earshot. These men may never see another Christmas, yet they refuse to allow the memory of a peace they forged themselves to be trampled on by those too ignorant to understand the true cost of war. This somber ending is particularly surprising in comparison to the Battlefield video and Sainsbury ad, both of which end on hopeful notes. While *Joyeux Noel* is willing to relent by displaying the holiday celebrations associated with the truce early in the film, at the end of the day the film acknowledges that it is a war story. Miraculous as it may be, a cheerful tone is ultimately not appropriate, especially knowing that WWI would go on to continue for several years following the truce.

It should be apparent based on the previous examples listed, that the Christmas truce is a popular subject for works of art. That being said, a majority of these examples downplay the war aspect of the truce and instead focus on the soldiers fraternizing. While this is understandable given the heartwarming feelings that can be elicited from focusing on the more cheerful aspects

¹⁴⁹ Christian Carion, director. 2005, *Joyeux Noel*. UGC Fox Distribution. https://www.amazon.com/Joyeux-Merry-Christmas-Diane-Kruger/dp/B000KNHCO4/ref=sr_1_1?crid=305VQ3R6PR1CF&keywords=joyeux+noel&qid=1682303380&s=instant-video&sprefix=joyeu%2Cinstant-video%2C189&sr=1-1.

of the truce, disregarding the fact that it occurred on a battlefield is a disservice to its memory. One piece of art that does acknowledge the violence of the setting well is the band Sabaton's song "Christmas Truce." Sabaton is a Swedish power metal band that is known for making songs inspired by historical events and figures, from the Battle of the Bulge to Simo Hayha. Their music invokes awe in regards to the battle and figures they represent, portraying them as grandiose legends. With this in consideration, the Christmas truce may appear to be an unusual choice for the band to cover considering the reason it is so fondly remembered due to it being an example of soldiers choosing not to fight. The band seemed to agree with this assessment to a degree, as band member Pär Sundström noted that they chose not to include the event in their initial WWI album due to it not fitting in with the tone of the war. However, the truce remained the most requested historical event amongst the band's fans. Sabaton would finally compose a song about the truce in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sundström described the song as one that "captures the Christmas spirit."¹⁵⁰ The music video that accompanied the song is particularly notable for the fact that the first minute of the video has no music and instead shows a brutal depiction of trench warfare. Both German and English soldiers offer looks of terror as they run through their trenches in attempt to dodge bullets and grenades, all leading to a shot the following morning of bodies littered across No Man's Land in blood-stained snow. Only after this does the music begin to play, with a German soldier playing the piano while another looks at a picture of his family. The singers begin to question why they must continue fighting, repeating the lines "we are all friends."¹⁵¹ From here, the soldiers in the trenches begin to rise, both physically standing and singing louder, announcing their wish to host the truce. This leads to a

¹⁵⁰ Pär Sundström, *Sabaton History*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJq64dF5ZfQ&list=LL&index=1&t=1050s>, Accessed 11/2/2022

¹⁵¹ Sabaton, *The Christmas Truce*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPdHkHslFIU>, Accessed 10/31/2022

single German soldier walking into No Man's Land, shortly followed by a British soldier and then their entire units. The entrance to No Man's Land is accented by the lines "and today we're all brothers, tonight we're all friends, a moment of peace in a war that never ends," an encapsulation of the tragedy of the Christmas truce.¹⁵² As the men enter No Man's Land, typical events associated to the Christmas truce are depicted, such as the soldiers shaking hands and the famous soccer match. Sabaton also depicts one soldier from each unit playing an instrument that can be heard in the background music: a Scot playing the bagpipes, a Frenchman playing the guitar, and a German playing the piano from the beginning. This clearly symbolizes the union of the armies allowing the truce to occur, just as their musical collaboration gives birth to the chorus. However, unlike most depictions of the truce, the music video does not overlook the fallen soldiers once the celebrations have begun. The main German soldier has what appear to be PTSD-laden flashbacks to the night before the truce, and the video cuts to the mangled corpses of soldiers on both sides. The soldiers then take a break from their festivities to put up a cross to honor their comrades. Finally, the truce comes to an end as the sound of gunfire can be heard in the distance, similar to the cannon fire ending the truce in the Sainsbury ad. However, before the soldiers return to their trenches, they repeat the lyrics while smiling and hugging:

We were all friends
 (Yes, we were friends)
 And today we're all brothers
 Tonight we're all friends
 A moment of peace in a war that never ends
 Today we're all brothers
 We drink and unite
 Now Christmas has arrived and the snow turns the ground white.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Sabaton, *The Christmas Truce*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPdHkHsIFIU>, Accessed 10/31/2022

¹⁵³ Sabaton, *The Christmas Truce*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPdHkHsIFIU>, Accessed 10/31/2022

While most reinterpretations of the truce end alongside the truce itself, the Sabaton depiction suddenly takes a dark turn. After the soldiers return, the scene cuts to them fighting one another presumably the following day. The lyrics that further emphasize the misfortune of the event “We thought about our friends, those who never made it home, when the battle had commenced.”¹⁵⁴ The scene ends with the piano being destroyed in an explosion, symbolizing that the truce has indeed ended. Even *Joyeux Noel*'s ending was less depressing, as it at the very least showed that the soldiers would go on to remember the truce for the rest of their lives. Meanwhile, the soldiers within the music video died only a day later, unable to hold onto the memory of the truce. However, the video ends on a hopeful note as the cross from before is spared from the battle, and a German soldier is seen carving the phrase “1914 Christmas Truce Lest We Forget.”¹⁵⁵ While the piano signaled the end of the truce, the cross represents the fact that it will never be forgotten. This is further enforced by the fact that the cross also has the year 2021 carved into it as well, in reference to the year the song was published. Sabaton's song on the Christmas truce is paradoxical in nature, as the tone is equal parts heartwarming and tragic. This coincides well with the paradoxical nature of the Christmas truce, a moment of peace in a war that was never meant to last.

Considering the multitude of events from WWI that can be adapted in media, the Christmas truce truly stands out amongst its competition. While it is easy to be caught up in the holiday zeal that most reinterpretations shroud themselves in, it is not the day the truce occurred that makes the Christmas truce memorable. The true source of the event's immortality is the courage exhibited by the participating soldiers. Regardless of the threat of treason, the soldiers

¹⁵⁴ Sabaton, *The Christmas Truce*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPdHkHsIFIU>, Accessed 10/31/2022

¹⁵⁵ Sabaton, *The Christmas Truce*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPdHkHsIFIU>, Accessed 10/31/2022

decided to forswake their duties to live as human beings instead of mindless men with guns. It is this boldness amid a war, this incorruptible sense of humanity that allows the Christmas truce remains a fixture within the public consciousness. As the modern world grows more dissatisfied with the concept of war, the truce's popularity grows in response. Whether it be through the inspirational lens of Sainsbury's commercial, or the gritty depiction of Sabaton, the Christmas truce has been bestowed in a number of forms. What gives each of these depictions their substance, is their adherence to showing the soldier's desire for peace and brotherhood.

Conclusion

“It remains one human episode amid all the atrocities which have stained the memory of war.”¹⁵⁶ These words were spoken by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, when asked of his opinion of the Christmas truce. Looking back upon the Christmas truce’s legacy, Doyle’s words are truer than he could have possibly imagined. The Christmas truce not only stained the memory of war, but its existence also completely shattered the concept of a noble war. While the world can never be freed from the yoke of war, the popularity of the Christmas truce is proof of humanity’s growing distaste for what was once seen as the pinnacle of honor.

The suffering endured by the soldiers of WWI is difficult to comprehend in this day and age. Their nations had promised a quick and easy war, one that would turn them into the heroes they always dreamed of becoming. These were not soldiers tempered by battle; they were naïve boys who believed war would be like those retold by Homer. There was no glory as promised in the songs and stories of old. They were not like Heracles rising to Olympus for their heroics. Instead, they were like Ixion, strapped to a flaming wheel in torment. Their days were spent watching their comrades fall left and right to enemy fire whilst wallowing in the muck like pigs. Once the fighting stopped, a new war began within their trenches, against the vermin and gangrene eating away their flesh and sanity. Beyond the physical and mental toll of living in constant battle, the worldview of these young men was reduced to ashes. A person can only bend so far before breaking, and these boys had been broken more times than what should have been possible. The truce they took upon themselves to form was a rejection of honorable war they finally realized was nothing more than a myth. Contrary to the words of propaganda, the soldiers

¹⁵⁶Kathryn N. McDaniel, “Commemorating the Christmas Truce: A Critical Thinking Approach for Popular History.” *The History Teacher* 49, no. 1 (2015): 89–100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24810501>.

they had lost sanity over were not inhuman creatures bent on destroying society. Rather, they too were just idealistic boys who wished to bring honor and glory to their homes. But the glory they achieved would not be found in the slaughter of one another, but rather in the peace they forged.

Acceptance in the peace found that night would be quick to some and slow to others. The commanding officers of the truce's participants would do all in their power to stomp and hide the truce's existence, all in service to protect the myth of an honorable war. Yet, while they succeeded in ending the Christmas truce, they were powerless to stop its legacy from forming. The general public did not react with contempt for the soldiers disobeying their orders but rather viewed the event with curiosity. This curiosity would serve as the foundation of a new outlook on war in general. Following the end of WWI and the revelation of what the soldiers on both sides went through, the myth of the honorable war slowly but surely lost its footing in the public consciousness. As the decades rolled through, the myth's standards of honor were shown to be impossible to uphold in modern warfare. Conversely, the truce's message of peace resonated with those exhausted with the constant loss of life.

Just as Doyle said, the truce had stained the memory of war, exposing it for the brutal reality it truly is, and thus a new myth was born. This mythology of peace generated from the Christmas truce would quickly take on countless new forms. Whether in the shape of a rock song, a war drama, or even a commercial, the message of the Christmas truce would remain the same: peace is possible even in the darkest of times. No bomb or bullet could strike down the peace of that fateful December, not amidst this goodwill towards men. The soldiers managed to uphold the broken promises of their nations. Not only had they stopped the war by Christmas, but the soldiers secured the honor promised to them by the propaganda their governments forced them. While the failure to maintain the truce indefinitely was certainly a tragedy, its

existence is something to behold. This thesis has argued that the Christmas truce has become a modern symbol of peace. A peace such as the Christmas truce may never grace the world with its presence again, but its place in the pages of history will forever be remembered as a day in which the human spirit conquered the battlefield. At the risk of sounding cliché, one may call it a Christmas miracle.

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