Christmas 1914, and After

The outrage that Christmas was tarnished by the ugliness of the First World War was felt by both British and German soldiers. In some cases, it led to a brief moment of truce.

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The British soldiers at the front in France receive their Christmas mail. Nationaal Archief. Public Domain.

Wars of religion - like civil wars - are commonly considered to be the most merciless, the most cruel, the most destructive. Divine sanction or divine instruction has generally tended to increase this savagery, casting a holy glow over what might otherwise be looked on simply as barbaric deeds. Where religious war has taken on the character of a civil war as well - in the rise or suppression of heresies - the cruelty increases accordingly. Yet the notion persists that Christianity at any rate (despite the record) is somehow incompatible with war, and the central Christian feast, the official birthday of Christ himself, Christmas Day, enshrining the concepts of Peace on Earth and Goodwill among Men, seems particularly offended by the context of war.

This acute sense of the incongruity of war on Christmas Day is, however, a relatively recent development, confined almost entirely to the Protestant nations of northern Europe (and their offspring overseas). Extreme sentimentality about Christmas in Britain is a Victorian legacy which owes much to German influence. By 1914 Britain, and Germany were both predominantly urban nations; their mass populations were sufficiently literate to be accessible to mass suggestion on many subjects, including Christmas; mass production was already part of the lives of their people, and not slow to take advantage of the opportunities that Christmas presented. Both countries shared the mixture of sentiment and commercialism which increasingly pervaded the feast. They also shared a Christmas imagery, centred around the fir tree from the vast forests of the European north, lit by candles (a Lutheran innovation), Yule logs (from Lithuania), a distinctly Central European Santa Claus (perversely pronounced ‘Claws’ in Britain) with reindeer (rare fauna around Bethlehem) to draw his gift-laden "sleigh, snow-drifts, glittering frost, and boards groaning with the ample, heavy dishes appropriate to a northern winter. The sense of outrage in December 1914 at encountering a Christmas tarnished by the ugliness of war was common to serious and religiously-minded people in both countries. So we find a thoughtful German Hussar officer (Captain Rudolf Binding) writing to his father from Flanders on 20th December:

If I had my way some person in authority would proclaim that Christmas will not be celebrated this year. I cannot attain to the lack of imagination necessary to celebrate Christmas in the face of the enemy ... The simplicity of Christmas with the laughter of children, surprises, the joy of giving little things - this is as it should be when it appears alone. But when it enters the lists with a war it is out of place. Enemy, Death, and a Christmas-tree - they cannot. live so close together.

Captain Binding had just come through the grim experience of the First Battle of Ypres. He was serving in one of the 'Young Reserve Divisions' - a unique and unhappy experiment in German recruiting. Shortly after the outbreak of war the formation of thirteen new divisions was ordered, seventy-five per cent of the personnel being volunteers, of whom the majority were students between seventeen and twenty years old. Full of patriotic enthusiasm, but practically untrained and seriously short of trained officers and NCOs, ten of these divisions were thrown into the Battle of Ypres in October; the result was a tragedy similar in kind to that which overtook the ardent volunteers of Kitchener's Army on July 1st, 1916 on the Somme. The Germans called it 'Der Kindermord von Ypern' - 'the Massacre of the Innocents at Ypres'. Binding had watched it happen; he had seen 'the intellectual flower of Germany' go singing into the attacks that laid them low by thousands. His Christmas spirit was accordingly somewhat marred. Nor was it improved by the arrival of unusual visitors at the Front:

This Christmas-gift stunt, organized by novelty-mongering, snobbish busybodies in a glare of publicity, creates such an unsavoury impression here that it fairly makes one sick. The fact that they make their appearance with a thousand packages of bad cigars, indifferent chocolate, and woollies of problematical usefulness, sitting in a car, seems to make them think they have a right to have the war shown to them like a leather factory.

These visitors reflected Germany's mood that Christmas. Buoyed up with the satisfaction of great victories - the conquest of Belgium and a huge, rich area of northern France, as well as the defeat of the Russians in Poland - the German public was still in a state of euphoria, despite the Army's heavy losses. In Britain there was not yet even that corrective; the war had not really come home. British casualties in the five months' fighting of 1914 amounted to just under 100,000; by Boer War standards (about 120,000 *in thirty-two months*, of whom less than 6,000 killed in battle) this was, of course, very shocking. The British public knew nothing of such matters as France's loss of 206,515 in August alone (virtually all in the last fortnight of that month); the Russian ally's losses were equally hidden in silence; Germany's casualties were pronounced by the Press to be enormous, but no-one had any means of envisaging what that might really mean. So it was a shock to think of nearly 100,000 British soldiers being killed or wounded so soon - but it was a shock tempered by the nature of the victims themselves. The overwhelming majority of them were Regulars; Britain was shortly to put a vast Citizen Army into the field for the first time in her history, but in December 1914 this hardly existed. A few Territorial units had been sent to the front, and some, like the London Scottish, had suffered heavy casualties. But by and large the men who had fallen so far were the 'old sweats', not people that respectable people knew.

Soldiers buying a chicken for their Christmas dinner, c. 1916-18. National Library of Scotland. Public Domain.

So Britain's first Christmas on what would later be called the Home Front was fairly uninhibited, despite what Michael MacDonagh of *The Times* described as 'the greatest national crisis for a hundred years'. He asked himself how this first wartime Christmas differed from those 'when peace reigned on earth', and came to this conclusion:

In most respects it was the same old Christmas. It has withstood the shock of this greatest war in the world's history, as the festival of family affection and good fellowship There have been the customary crowds of shoppers in the West End. The Strand, Piccadilly, Regent Street and Oxford Street were as thronged as I have ever seen

them at Christmas time ... In the suburbs the butchhers' shops were bulging with beef and mutton; the poulterers' with geese and turkeys; the grocers' with wine, spirits and beer; the fruiterers' with apples and oranges.2

Was there no difference at all, then? One, perhaps:
As for the 'Compliments of the Season', friends were moved, because of the War, to shake hands with heartier vigour, and wish each other a Merry Christmas in sincerer and more gladsome voices.

There was a reason for cheerfulness which, with our awareness of the three more wartime Christmases to come (and the six between 1939 and 1945), now seems strangely naive:

... there are no widespread misgivings as to the future. The belief as well as the hope prevails that long before next Christmas we shall have celebrated the restoration of peace to Europe by the victories of the Allies.

At the Front there was naturally a conspicuous absence of butchers, poulterers and fruiterers; nevertheless, as Captain Bruce Bairnsfather wrote:

The spirit of Christmas began to permeate us all; we tried to plot ways and means of making the next day, Christmas, different in some way to others. Invitations from one dug-out to another for sundry meals were beginning to circulate. ... I was billed to appear at a dug-out about a quarter of a mile to the left that evening to have rather a special thing in trench dinners - not quite so much bully and Maconochie about as usual. A bottle of red wine and a medley of tinned things from home deputized in their absence.

'Bully' needs no explanation; the troops were already becoming tired of it and it would have passed their comprehension that in the Britain of the 1970s corned beef would become something of a luxury. 'Maconochie's' was a great stand-by: tinned sliced vegetables, chiefly potatoes, turnips and carrots, in a meat gravy. One old soldier wrote: 'Warmed in the tin, Maconochie was edible; cold, it was a man-killer'. Another, however, added: 'we could always rely on having a tasty dinner when we opened one of their tins'. Often this confection was referred to as 'M. and V.' ('meat and veg.') and became the subject of a song which seems to contain a certain degree of affection:

Oh, a little bit of everthing got in a tin one day, And they packed it up and sealed it in a most mysterious way;
And some Brass Hat came and tasted it,
And 'Pon me, Sam' says he,
We shall feed it to the soldiers,
And we'll call it M. and V.

Such distinctly unluxurious dishes were improved by local shopping where that was possible, and by parcels from home. In the latter case certain anomalies were perceived: middle-class Territorial units were now being brigaded with Regulars both for training and as reinforcements. The London Rifle Brigade was with the 11th Infantry Brigade in the 4th Division. It was 'noticed that the Christmas parcels mail for the four other regiments required less transport than the mail for the L.R.B., and in consequence we were able to provide a worthwhile contribution to each of the four battalions forming the 11th Brigade'. Some units - 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers was one of them - even managed to issue plum pudding.

In one respect Christmas at the Front was definitely joyful: the wet misery of a Flanders winter suddenly changed. Bruce Bairnsfather tells us, 'Christmas Eve was, in the way of weather, everything that Christmas Eve should be'. Christmas Day itself 'was a perfect day. A beautiful, cloudless blue sky. The ground hard and white ... It was such a day as is invariably depicted by artists on Christmas cards - the ideal Christmas Day of fiction'. And indeed, the curious manifestations taking place along considerable stretches of the British front that day had a look of the most surprising fiction. These began on Christmas Eve, and all British accounts affirm that they started on the German side of No Man's Land. From the London Rifle Brigade came the report:

... we settled down to our normal watch-keeping without relaxation and without any idea of what the immediate future was to bring. It soon became clear, however, by the sounds of activity coming from the opposite trenches that the Germans were celebrating Christmas Eve in their customary manner. They had brought up a band into their front-line trenches, and, as we listened to hymns and tunes common to both nations, quite understandably a

wave of nostalgia passed over us. When it became quite dark the light of an electric pocket-lamp appeared on the German parapet. Normally this would have drawn a hail of bullets, but soon these lights were outlining the trenches as far as the eye could see and no sound of hostile activity could be heard.

Henry Williamson tells of a British working party surprised to see a strange, steady white light in the German lines: 'What sort of lantern was it? ... Then they saw dim figures on the German parapet, about more lights; and with amazement saw that it was a Christmas tree being set there, and around it were Germans talking and laughing together'. Soon a rich baritone was tinging 'Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht! in the frosty mist; 'it was like being in another world', Bruce Bairnsfather, returning from his convival dinner, found his men in a cheerful mood, and one of them pointed out to him that the Germans seemed to be equally merry. A band could be heard, there was a good deal of singing and some confused shouting across No Man's Land, with invitations to 'come over'. After a time a British sergeant accepted and disappeared into the darkness:

Presently, the sergeant returned. He had with him a few German cigars and cigarettes which he had exchanged for a couple of Maconochie's and a tin of Capstan which he had taken with him. The séance was over, but it had given just the requisite touch to our Christmas Eve ... But, as a curious episode, this was nothing in comparison to our experience on the following day.

As dawn broke on a fine, frosty December 25th, British troops 'standing to' were amazed to see unarmed Germans climbing over their parapets and coming across No Man's Land, 'shouting to us, in good English, telling us not to fire', according to a sergeant of the Border Regiment. One of his officers went out to meet the Germans 'and they had a conversation which brought about a truce'. Elsewhere this came about quite spontaneously; the Royal Welch Fusiliers climbed out of their trench *en masse* to meet the Germans who had done the same thing:

Buffalo Bill the company commander, so named because of his distressing habit of pulling out his revolver and threatening 'to blow the man's ruddy brains out... for the least trifling thing we done' rushed into the trench and endeavoured to prevent it, but he was too late: the whole of the Company were out now, and so were the Germans. He had to accept the situation, so soon he and the other company officers climbed out too. We and the Germans met in the middle of no man's land. Their officers was also now out. Our officers exchanged greetings with them ... We mucked in all day with one another.

Drinking the King's health back in their billets', c. 1916-18. National Library of Scotland. Public Domain.

Similar extraordinary scenes were taking place along most of the British front. A soldier of the Hampshire Regiment described No Man's Land as far as he could see as 'just a mass of grey and khaki'. In the sector of the London Rifle Brigade:

It became clear that the same extraordinary situation extended towards Armentières on our right and Hill 60 on our left, as a battalion of the 10th Division (this is a misapprehension; the 10th Division never served in France)

on our left arranged a football match against a German team - one of their number having found in the opposing unit a fellow member of his local Liverpool football club who was also his hairdresser.

Another football match is recorded by the Bedfordshire Regiment, where a keen sportsman produced a ball, and teams of about fifty a side played until this was unfortunately punctured. The 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were believed to have tried to arrange a similar match, 'but shelling prevented the fixture'!

A discordant but necessary task for both sides during the Christmas truce was to bury the dead lying out between the trenches, the Germans displaying greater proficiency with long-handled Belgian shovels. That done, fraternization continued in various manners. There was an unspoken convention that neither party would attempt to enter the other's trenches, but as Frank Richards says, it was easy to see that 'by the look of them their trenches were in as bad a state as ours'. Souvenir-hunting and barter were the chief amusements. Bruce Bairnsfather exchanged buttons with a German officer and then posed in a mixed group for photographs - he regretted evermore that he had made no arrangements for obtaining prints. From the London Rifle Brigade we hear of buttons and badges being exchanged, and even of a piece of cloth being cut from a German overcoat:

The prize souvenir, however, was a German Regular's dress helmet, the celebrated 'Pickelhaube'. Our currency in this piece of bargaining was bully beef and Tickler's plum and apple, so called jam. They asked for marmalade, but we had not seen any ourselves since we left England. This helmet achieved fame as, on the following day, a voice called out, 'Want to speak to officer', and being met in No Man's Land continued, 'Yesterday I give my hat for the bullybif. I have grand inspection tomorrow. You lend me and I bring back after'. The loan was made and the pact kept, sealed with some extra bully!

Such are the curiosities of war.
Mr Tickler, 'jam-maker to the Army', provided it not only with another of its staple (though not widely admired) food-stuffs, but also with songs in different versions; this is typical:

Tickler's jam, Tickler's jam, how I long for Tickler's jam;
Sent from England in ten-ton lots,
Issued to Tommy in one-pound pots;
Every evening when I'm asleep I'm dreaming that I am
Rubbing me poor old frozen feet with Tommy Tickler's jam.

This inspiring ditty would be repeated (in the favoured Army manner) several times, only varying the last line of the stanza, as:

Stuffing the Huns with hot cross buns and Tommy Tickler's jam,
Giving the poor old Kaiser hell with Tommy Tickler's jam,

Sent up the line with the best of luck and Tommy Tickler's jam,
even, in 1915, in a far-distant theatre:
Forcing my way up the Dardanelles with Tommy Tickler's jam.
As with 'bully' and Maconochie's, the Germans seemed to enjoy it, rather to the surprise of the British soldiers.

There was another commodity, too, that both enjoyed, but might have enjoyed more in other circumstances:
The German Company-Commander asked Buffalo Bill if he would accept a couple of barrels of beer and assured him that they would not make his men drunk ... He accepted the offer with thanks and a couple of their men rolled the barrels over and we took them into our trench ... The two barrels of beer were drunk, and the German officer was right: if it was possible for a man to have drunk the two barrels himself he would have bursted before he had got drunk. French beer was rotten stuff.

In more formal fashion the German commander caused an orderly to produce a tray with bottles and glasses, and healths were drunk by the officers with due clinking of the glasses. Patriotic songs and cries - 'Hoch! Hoch! Hoch!' or 'Hoch der Kaiser!' (provoking an assonant rejoinder) - though widely heard the night before, were absent for obvious reasons during the fraternization. In a scene so bizarre, incongruities and curiosities naturally abounded. Bruce Bairnsfather recorded one such as the day drew to an end: 'The last I saw of this little affair was

a vision of one of my machine gunners, who was a bit of an amateur hairdresser in civil life, cutting the unnaturally long hair of a docile Boche, who was patiently kneeling on the ground whilst the automatic clippers crept up the back of his neck.

The final and overwhelming incongruity, however, was the mere fact of standing up in close proximity to each other. The war on the Western Front had already gone underground - or at least under cover - and actually seeing the enemy had become a rare event, Movement and activity were for night-time; by day the battlefields were empty (though never altogether silent) with only the wire, the parapet, and perhaps "the haze of a charcoal brazier to indicate the hostile position. And now here they were, the enemy themselves, hundreds of them, even thousands, standing upright, walking about, talking, shaking hands. As Bruce Bairnsfather observed:

It all felt most curious: here were these sausage-eating wretches, who had elected to start this infernal European fracas, and in so doing had brought us all into the same muddy pickle as themselves. This was my first real sight of them at close quarters. Here they were - the actual, practical soldiers of the German army. There was not an atom of hate on either side that day; and yet, on our side, not for a moment was the will to war and the will to beat them relaxed. It was just like the interval between the rounds in a friendly boxing match.

Bairnsfather did not, on the whole, like the look of the Germans. Opinions about them varied, but it is significant that virtually every account of a truce insists that the enemy opposite were Saxons or possibly Bavarians; from the London Rifle Brigade we hear the typical finale of it all: 'the end came when the word came over: "Prussians coming in here tomorrow".' It is an interesting fact that one does not read of truces with Prussians - yet there must have been many Prussian units spaced along the British front. It is also a fact, of course, that a number of British units were quite unaware of any truce. Captain J. L. Jack of the 1st Cameronians recorded in his diary:

Notwithstanding the Day, the ordinary round of duties, sniping and shelling is carried out.

British soldiers share a Christmas meal in the trenches. National Library of Scotland. Public Domain.

On Christmas *night*, says Jack, there were 'sounds of revelry' in the German lines, with some badinage shouted across No Man's Land, 'but "C" Company, physically cold and mentally dour, maintains a stiff reserve except when, as with the Imperial Toast, particularly irritating remarks are made by the Huns. So passes the first Christmas of the War, far away from the original "Peace and Goodwill to all men" - or is the true message "I come not to bring peace, but a sword"?' It is with some shock that, considerably later (January 13th), Jack records:

There are extraordinary stories of unofficial Christmas truces with the enemy ... There was no truce on the front of my battalion.

The day's surprising events, interesting though they were to those taking part, certainly did not win universal approbation. As Bruce Bairnsfather said, 'a sort of feeling that the authorities on both sides were not very enthusiastic about this fraternizing seemed to creep across the gathering'. Frank Richards' battalion was relieved with what he considered suspicious celerity on Boxing Day evening. The relieving battalion said they had heard that virtually the whole British front line 'had mucked in with the enemy'. One reads of no official interference or rebuke, but the British High Command certainly issued strict orders against any repetition, and presumably so did the German. They were not the only ones to be displeased; the Royal Welch Fusiliers also heard 'that the French people had heard how we spent Christmas Day and were saying all manner of nasty things about the British Army. Going through Armentières that night some of the French women were standing in the doors spitting and shouting at us: "You no bon, you English soldiers, you boko kamerade Allemenge". We cursed them back until we were blue in the nose, and the Old Soldier, who had a wonderful command of bad language in many tongues, excelled himself.'

So for that battalion the truce ended fairly quickly and in a decidedly uncomplimentary and unseasonable manner. Other witnesses suggest that it continued a long time - in the London Rifle Brigade area 'for about ten days'. The Riflemen extricated 'a very drunken German' from their wire on New Year's Eve; the Cameronians, to whom Hogmanay was traditionally an uproarious occasion, were 'petrified' to see 'Private McN.', who had been unwisely left in charge of a company rum jar, 'minus his equipment, lurching along in No Man's Land to the cheers and laughter of the Germans who sportingly did not fire. The entreaties and orders of friends passed unheeded, the delinquent merely pausing occasionally to take a mouthful of rum from the jar he was carrying. Pursuing his unsteady way, McN. came opposite the trenches of the adjacent battalion, where he received a peremptory warning to come in, or *he would be arrested* ... he took another "swig" and coolly remarked "Come oot and fetch us" - an offer which was, needless to say, declined'. Finally, writes Captain Jack, Private McN. collapsed into the British lines to sleep it off - and that was the last of the truce of 1914.

Such scenes never recurred. At Christmas 1915, Jack recorded:
I have not heard of any repetition of the 'unofficial truces' that took place ... at Christmas 1914 ... The frowns of High Command and increased bitterness must have stopped them.

Philip Gibbs, war correspondent, visited the front that Christmas Eve:
There was no spirit of Christmas in the traigic desolation of the scenery ... Most of the men with whom I spoke treated the idea of Christmas with contemptuous irony ...
'No truce this year?' I asked.
'A truce? We're not going to allow any monkey tricks on the parapets. To Hell with Christmas charity and all that tosh. We've got to get on with the war. That's my motto.'
... Through the night our men in the trenches stood in their waders, and the dawn of Christmas Day was greeted, not by angelic songs, but by the splutter of rifle bullets all along the line.

Captain Rudolf Binding's squadron had a Christmas party in 1915, drawing forth the comment: 'to give Christmas parties for soldiers is to murder the whole beautiful idea. So one is satisfied if one can say: "It was quite nice" And that, for most soldiers of all armies, was the utmost that Christmas at war could henceforth mean: with luck, some better food than the usual rations, some drink, a party or a concert if you were behind the lines, perhaps a little diminution of martial activity at the Front, though this would never again entirely cease. But no more goodwill demonstrations; those belonged to an old world that had vanished, not to the new world fashioned by the war.

By Christmas 1916, the German Army was 'fought to a standstill and utterly worn out' on the admission of its own leaders; the British Army was licking the terrible wounds of the Somme. In the grip of one of Europe's worst winters, the best that either could hope for was a bit of rest and a bit of quiet, just for one day:

My Dear Mother,
There is very little here to remind us of Christmas. Just a handful of us remembering that it is December 25th, and that back at home your thoughts are, no doubt, more than ever with us. We are not dispirited, nor do we feel downcast at the fact that we should be spending such a great day like this ... It is not a truce but just some sort of strange understanding between us and the Jerries on the other side that Christmas Day should be like this ... Perhaps next Christmas the war will be over and I shall be back with you all again. How we long for that time when we shall be able to look back on these days and regard them as a dream ...