

The Christmas Truce's Moment of Hope

A century ago, a remarkable moment for humanity occurred amid the killing fields of World War I as soldiers from both sides put down their guns and exchanged Christmas greetings, an unauthorized truce that was soon suppressed so the slaughter could continue and in some ways never stop as Gary G. Kohls explains.

By Gary G. Kohls

It was exactly 100 years ago when the Christmas Truce of 1914 occurred, when Christian soldiers on both sides of the infamous No Man's Land of the Western Front, recognized their common humanity, dropped their guns and fraternized with the so-called enemies that they had been ordered to kill without mercy the day before.

The truth of that remarkable event was effectively covered up by state and military authorities (and the embedded journalists at the time) because the authorities were angered (and embarrassed) by the breakdown of military discipline.

In the annals of war, such "mutinies" are now unheard of. The generals and (as well as the saber-rattling, chest-thumping politicians and war profiteers back home) rapidly developed strategies to prevent such behavior from happening again.

Christmas Eve of 1914 was only five months into World War I, and the cold, weary, homesick soldiers found themselves not heroes, as expected, but rather miserable, frightened and disillusioned wretches living in rat- and louse-infested trenches. Most of them had dreamed heroic dreams when they had signed up to kill and die for King and Country a few months earlier, and they had fully expected to be home for the holidays.

Lower-echelon officers on both sides of No Man's Land, who were suffering right along with the troops, allowed a lull in the war – just for Christmas Eve. Then they allowed the troops to sing Christmas hymns, and many of the not-yet-hardened soldiers started to recognize the humanity of the demonized "other" that had been fingered as sub-humans deserving of death.

And so the merciful spirit of the season came upon them; and they disobeyed orders that forbade fraternizing with the enemy by laying down their weapons and mingling with them in the area between the trenches. The truce occurred at various places up and down the triple parallel lines of trenches that stretched through France for 600 miles from Belgium to Switzerland.

Unknown to the higher-echelon commanding officers – who were enjoying good food and drink in their warm bunkers out of the range of the artillery barrages and machine gun bursts – the grunts on either side of the battle line suddenly sensed the stupidity of killing someone who was just like them and who had never done them any harm.

Many of the soldiers had just experienced a bloody battle that had killed tens of thousands of troops on either side, with essentially no territory being gained by either side, and they now knew that they were in for a long war of attrition. They would not be home for Christmas.

Many of the men who experienced the Christmas Truce knew that something deeply profound had happened: a spiritual experience of mutual respect and love that epitomized their mutual Christian upbringing and they initially refused to fight and kill when the war was ordered to re-start.

Some soldiers were punished for their disobedience and many of them had to be replaced with fresh troops who had been in the reserve trenches the day before (Corporal Adolf Hitler was among the ones who did not experience the front line fraternization.)

The Christmas Truce of 1914 came close to ending the futile and ultimately suicidal war that destroyed four empires and an entire generation of young men who had been bamboozled into joining up. But it didn't. The vast majority of the soldiers who experienced the unauthorized truce did not survive the war.

The Prelude to 'The War to End All Wars'

World War I was referred to in the pre-World War II history books as "The Great War" or, naively and rather laughably, "The War to End All Wars." For centuries, warfare as a means of settling disputes between nations had often been regarded as a noble undertaking that only involved professional soldiers. Wars in those days were just larger examples of the common (and equally barbaric) practice of engaging in "honorable" duels (sometimes to the death) when a rival disrespected another with something as simple as an offhand insult.

European military officers came from the landed aristocracy. The careers of the officer class were so familial that they almost seemed hereditary. Part of the attraction of being a military officer in Europe was the unquestioning respect that military officers demanded, not to mention the impressive uniforms and the medals and ribbons that were worn on them.

Military veterans in Europe were universally honored as heroes, whether dead or alive, no matter if they had participated in war crimes or acts of torture, rape, murder or pillage. Military shrines, statues, cemeteries and holidays for

“the fallen” were regarded as normal all over the Continent. The military service of European veterans seems to have been regarded as worthy of praise no questions asked even if the veteran himself felt unworthy.

What most prospective enlistees or conscripts knew about war was what their fathers and the uber-patriotic war literature had selectively told them and what they had learned from the censored, palatable version of war that they read in their school history books.

Most of the enlistees were looking forward to escaping the boredom of their day-to-day existence and experiencing up close the exhilaration of playing real war games. These unaware, wet-behind-the-ears young men hadn't been told about the dehumanizing verbal and physical abuse that was to be meted out by their drill sergeants in basic training or the beatings they would suffer later for disobedience or disrespect.

Unbeknownst to the naive grunts on the front line, the ruling elites had ulterior motives. (The kings, queens, emperors, princes, nobles, kibitzers, veterans, the bankers that financed the wars, the weapons makers and assorted other captains of industry all felt that they would somehow profit from the war.) These war profiteers, too old or influential to go to war themselves, knew how much money could be made in wars, and, in addition, they had the assurance that they would be far from the killing fields.

French and British schoolchildren had been indoctrinated for years in the belief that the German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm, was evil incarnate and therefore, if war were to come, the German soldier who took orders from him was deserving of death. German schoolchildren were taught the same about the French and the English rulers and soldiers. And each of the leaders, sensing that their honor was at stake, seemed to be spoiling for a fight.

The Powder Keg: Alsace-Lorraine

Most of the civilians living in Europe had very few direct memories of war because the last significant war in central Europe had been the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and that had been relatively short, ending in 1871. Thus, the horrors of war mostly had been erased from their memories but, to the professional warrior class, war was a game that could advance their careers and pay grade. Times were relatively good for many Europeans, but the military class was more than willing to get into a good war.

A general peace in Europe had actually existed since Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo a century earlier and that mostly peaceful reality returned in 1871 with the Treaty of Frankfurt ending the brief Franco-Prussian War with France

losing to the Germans and transferring the disputed territory of French-occupied Alsace-Lorraine back to Germany. Alsace-Lorraine was a rich industrial region located between France and Germany that had alternately been claimed over the centuries by either Germany or France – depending on which nation had lost the last war.

Before World War I erupted, Alsace-Lorraine was again a powder keg ready to be ignited. The two historical enemies “knew” that Alsace-Lorraine was rightfully theirs, and they were willing to kill for it or die trying not to mention earning the right to spell its largest city either Strassburg or Strasbourg.

A century ago, most European governments were not democracies. They were authoritarian, paternalistic and anti-democratic, and there were enormous and often widening gaps between the haves, their 1 percent, and the have-nots of the lower 99 percent. Attempts at instituting socialism or representative democracy had been brutally put down by the conservative ruling elite’s obedient police and security forces.

Cruelty in child-rearing (as well as in military basic training) was the norm in Europe, which contributed heavily to the generational obedience to authority figures, whether parents, school teachers, clergypersons, drill sergeants, generals, corporations or political leaders. Most Europeans therefore accepted the rule of the hereditary kings, emperors, princes, nobles and military generals.

And, as is also true of non-democratic institutions, everybody was expected to be obedient to those above them in the chain of command and to demand obedience from those below. Unconditional obedience to authority makes it easy to develop efficient killing soldiers for war departments and dictators.

Divine Right of Kings

For centuries, most European leaders felt that it was their divine right to colonize other nations and enslave the inhabitants by any means necessary especially if those inhabitants were of another color or religion. Any territory with valuable natural resources to steal or workers to exploit, no matter where in the world it was, was considered a legitimate target especially if it was militarily weaker than the invader and as long as the citizens of their home nation were uninformed, self-satisfied, arrogant, uber-patriotic, distracted and/or apathetic.

The method of choice for the subjugation of a people targeted for colonization a la Christopher Columbus and the Spanish conquistadors in the Western Hemisphere was always the use of overwhelming military force followed by years of brutal

occupation and the aforementioned systematic looting of natural resources or labor.

Killing, torturing, intimidating, imprisoning, silencing, exiling or otherwise “disappearing” the ethical opposition is the norm for empires. The intellectuals, altruists, prophets, poets, artists, singers, songwriters, investigative journalists and other truth-tellers or resistance movement activists had to be silenced.

In the century prior to 1914, all European empires had standing armies and military bases both at home and abroad. Nations often negotiated treaties with potential allies promising that, if one of them were attacked, the other would join the fray. This reality resulted in a very complex web of treaties that was instrumental in starting World War I when Archduke Ferdinand, the heir-apparent to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian empire, was assassinated in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, on June 28, 1914.

The century of relative European peace rapidly unraveled in a series of errors of judgment, bureaucratic snafus, failures of communication and refusals to risk dishonor by “turning the other cheek” or even negotiating in good faith. Within days of the assassination, the saber-rattling heads of European states began mobilizing for war.

Within a month the dominos fell, with each nation “honorably” living up to their treaty obligations by declaring war on one another. On Aug. 4, 1914, World War I began in earnest when Austria tipped over the first domino by shelling innocent civilian populations in little Serbia, an action that prompted the declarations of war by Russia, Germany, Britain and France.

The chest-pounding of the deluded, arrogant, out-of-touch leadership on all sides resulted in a war fever that had unstoppable momentum. Their indoctrinated testosterone-laden rookie soldiers soon found themselves, as always, to be the elite’s dutiful trigger-pullers as the slaughter on the Western Front commenced. Some nine million combatants died and many of those who survived bodily were rendered insane, criminally psychopathic or otherwise psychologically and/or spiritually disabled for the rest of their lives.

No one, including the glory- and power-seeking militarists at the top, had foreseen the coming holocaust or the intolerable stalemates from this new kind of warfare which relied on shovels, machine guns, artillery and poison gas. Heroic cavalry charges with swords drawn were suddenly obsolete. Everyone, especially the out-of-touch generals and the clergymen who were supposed to be in charge of the nation’s souls, had been blinded by the propaganda lie that war was something other than satanic.

As tantalizing as is the story of the Christmas Truce, it is also a reminder of what could have happened if there had been less obedience to authority and more organized opposition to senseless war in the families, schools and churches.

If the well-meaning Christian boys from England, France, Germany, Russia, Austria, et al had been, in their childhoods, thoroughly exposed to the ethical teachings of their Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, they might have had the capacity to refuse the invitation to kill their co-religionists on the other side of the battle lines. In fact, if they had really absorbed the message of their all-merciful God, they wouldn't have been able to slaughter anybody at all.

If the Christmas Truce had not been suppressed but rather extended the futile and suicidal war could have ended before the worst of the slaughter occurred. The deaths of many of the nine million soldiers as well as seven million civilians could have been averted. The unresolved issues of World War I also set in motion political forces that precipitated an even more horrendous conflagration in World War II.

But that would have required the Christmas Truce to become more widespread, better organized, better publicized and more supported by the chaplains at the front and the civilians back home. And that would have required the press to have shaken off its propaganda role and engaged in good investigative reporting. Instead, the press accepted the censorship and continued sanitizing the horrors of the war.

Instead, Europe experienced a mass slaughter to a degree never before seen in the history of warfare. The boys were not home by Christmas 1914, nor 1915, nor 1916, nor 1917. Indeed, millions of them never made it home for Christmas at all.

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

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

Check out the video of McCutcheon singing his song at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJi41RWaTCs> and, for a good pictorial history of the reality of WWI's trench warfare, see:

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

The official trailer of "Joyeux Noel," a movie about the Christmas Truce, is

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

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