

Crosses Marking Chicago Death Toll

Gang violence has fueled a staggering death toll in Chicago, much as military violence has spread death and chaos over large swaths of the world, reminding Kathy Kelly of the need for an “eternal hostility” toward killing.

By Kathy Kelly

This New Year’s Eve, 750 heavy wooden crosses were distributed to a gathering of Chicagoans commemorating the victims of gun violence killed in 2016.

Rev. Michael Pflieger and the Faith Community of St. Sabina Parish had issued a call to carry crosses constructed by Greg Zanis. The crosses, uniform in size, presented the name and age and, in many cases, a facial photo of the person killed. Some who carried the crosses were relatives of the people killed. As the group assembled, several sobbed upon finding the crosses that bore the names and photos of their loved ones.

Those carrying the heavy crosses along Chicago’s “Magnificent Mile” of high-end shops and restaurants knew that other arms than theirs were aching ... aching with longing for loved ones who would never return.

In 2016, more people were killed in Chicago by gun violence than in New York City and Los Angeles combined. The number killed represented a 58 percent increase over the number killed in 2015.

“How could this happen?” – was the question asked on the front page of the Chicago Tribune.

It was a year of social service program shutdowns driven by the Governor’s office in Springfield. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s description of a triplet of giant evils, each insoluble in isolation from the others, helps us identify an answer to the Tribune’s question. King spoke of the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism.

Training for, and the diversion of money to, wars overseas was a crisis inextricable from the race crisis at home, as were policies promoting radical wealth inequality. Representative Danny Davis, of Chicago, whose grandson was killed by gun violence in 2016, insists that “poverty was fueling the city’s bloodshed, and that Chicago needed to make investments ‘to revamp whole communities.’”

Poverty and racism clearly interact: Blacks and Latinos comprise 56 percent of the incarcerated population, yet only 30 percent of the U.S. population. A

report documenting the rates of incarceration for whites, African-Americans, and Hispanics in the Illinois state prison system notes that over half of this prison population is black. For every 100,000 people in the state, 1,533 black people are imprisoned as compared to 174 white people and 282 Hispanic people.

The consequences of incarceration affect entire communities: former prisoners are restricted in terms of employment, their families are disrupted, housing becomes unstable, they become disenfranchised, and stigmas persist.

Global Slaughters

We must also consider gun violence in relation to U.S. militarism. Gun violence in Chicago is condemned, as it should be, and yet a message to every one of the 9,000 Chicago Public School children participating in U.S. military junior ROTC programs is that killing is acceptable if you are following orders. Killing of civilians by the U.S. military is considered regrettable but acceptable “collateral damage.” These killings eliminate “high value targets.”

The mere suspicion of harboring a targeted person in a home, restaurant, or mosque becomes an excuse for an airborne drone attack to execute whole families or communities. Ironically, this policy enacts an airborne version of a drive-by shooting.

Soldiers who have seen combat are less likely to praise the virtues of military life. “The myth is that the military teaches discipline,” say the Chicago area Veterans for Peace, in their “education not militarization” campaign. “The reality is that the military teaches children to follow orders without question and to use the military solution to conflict resolution – that is, death and destruction.”

President Obama had tears in his eyes in January 2016, calling for relief from record-breaking shootings and killings in the U.S. Yet 2016 became a record-breaking year for U.S. export of weapons to other countries. The U.S. is responsible for nearly 33 percent of worldwide weapon exports – by far the top arms exporter on the planet.

“Arms deals are a way of life in Washington,” writes William Hartung. “From the president on down, significant parts of the government are intent on ensuring that American arms will flood the global market and companies like Lockheed and Boeing will live the good life. ... American officials regularly act as salespeople for the arms firms. And the Pentagon is their enabler. ... In its first six years, team Obama entered into agreements to sell more weaponry than any administration since World War II.”

Carrying a cross along Michigan Avenue, I thought of the terrible slaughter in

World War I that killed 38 million people. Elites, weapon-makers, and war profiteers drove millions of men into the trenches to fight and die in the war that was to end all wars.

Christmas Truce

In 1914, mired in mud, war-weary and miserable, troops on both sides took matters into their own hands. For a brief, yet magnificent time, they enabled the "Christmas truce." One account relates how some German troops began singing one of their carols, and British and other troops then sang a carol from their side. As voices wafted across the no-man's land, troops began calling out to one another.

"Time and again during the course of that day, the Eve of Christmas, there were wafted towards us from the trenches opposite the sounds of singing and merry-making, and occasionally the guttural tones of a German were to be heard shouting out lustily, 'A happy Christmas to you Englishmen!' Only too glad to show that the sentiments were reciprocated, back would go the response from a thick-set Clydesider, 'Same to you, Fritz, but dinna o'er eat yourself wi' they sausages!'"

"The high command on both sides took a dim view of the activities and orders were issued to stop the fraternizing with varying results. In some areas, the truce ended Christmas Day in others the following day and in others it extended into January."

Dr. King said, "Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit, and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring *eternal* hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism."

The soldiers in those trenches went out into their no-man's land and showed the world one way to end wars. They should never have had to. It was left to them to venture into the no-man's land, risking exposure to the others' fire and their generals' punishment for disobeying orders.

No matter what gang is issuing the orders to kill, whether a massive military power or a smaller group that has acquired weapons, we can all claim our right not to develop, store, sell or use weapons. We can claim our right not to kill and not to live with the memory of having killed. "Declaring eternal hostility" to the fear, greed and hate which are our real enemies seems to be our true hope. We can lay aside forever the futility of killing. We can be hopeful and determined that our resources and ingenuity are directed toward meeting human needs.

Kathy Kelly (kathy@vcnv.org) co-coordinates Voices for Creative Nonviolence

A Christmas Message of Peace

Despite the commercialism of Christmas, some positive messages break through, often in movie classics, such as Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life" and Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol." But another entry should be "Joyeux Noel," a movie about the soldiers' Christmas truce in 1914, writes Gary G. Kohls.

By Gary G. Kohls

On Christmas Eve, 101 years ago, one of the most unusual aberrations in the bloody history of the organized mass slaughter that we call war occurred. It was so profound and so disturbing to the professional war-makers that it was never to be repeated again.

"Christian" Europe was in the fifth month of the so-called Great War that would grind on for another four years of what amounted to mutual suicide, ending with all the original participants financially, spiritually and morally bankrupted.



British, Scottish, French, Belgian, Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, German, Austrian, Hungarian, Serbian and Russian clergymen from church pulpits in those overwhelmingly Christian nations were doing their part in fomenting the un-Christ-like patriotic fervor that would result in a holocaust that destroyed four empires, killed upwards of 20 million soldiers and civilians, and resulted in the psychological and physical decimation of an entire generation of young men in France, Britain, Germany and Russia.

Christianity, it needs to be noted, began as a highly ethical religion because of the teachings and actions of the nonviolent Jesus of Nazareth (and his pacifist apostles and followers). Tragically, the nations that profess Christianity as their state religion have, for the past 1,700 years, never

nurtured their churches to be truly peacemaking churches.

And, contrary to the ethical teachings of Jesus, modern Christian churches have not been, by and large, actively resisting their particular nation's imperial aspirations, their aggressive wars or their country's war-makers and war profiteers. Instead, the churches have become a bloody instrument for whatever warmongers and corporations that have achieved political and economic power.

So, it wasn't much of a surprise to see that the religious leaders that were involved in World War I were convinced that God was on their particular side and therefore not on the side of those followers of Jesus that had been fingered as enemies on the other side. The obvious contradiction (that both sides were worshipping and praying to the same god) escaped the vast majority of combatants and their spiritual counselors.

Pulpits and pews all over Europe with few exceptions reverberated with flag-waving fervor, sending clear messages to their doomed warrior-sons that it was their Christian duty to march off to kill the equally doomed Christian soldiers on the other side of the line. And for the civilians back home, it was their Christian duty to "support the boots on the ground" who were destined to return home dead or among many of the survivors wounded, psychologically and spiritually broken, disillusioned and faithless.

A mere five months into this frustratingly stalemated war (newly featuring trench warfare, artillery, machine guns, tanks, aerial bombardment and poison gas), the first Christmas of the war on the Western Front seemed to offer a respite to the exhausted, freezing and demoralized troops.

Christmas was the holiest of Christian holidays for all sides, and in this time of death, hunger, thirst, frostbitten limbs, sleep deprivation, shell shock, suicidality, traumatic brain injuries, mortal wounds and homesickness, Christmas 1914 had a very special meaning.

Christmas reminded the soldiers of the good food, safety, warm homes and beloved families that they had left behind and which – they now suspected – they might never see again. They did not yet know that even if they survived physically, they would never be the same again.

The soldiers in the trenches desperately sought some respite from the misery of the water-logged, putrid, rat- and lice-infested, corpse-ridden and increasingly frozen trenches.

Trench Warfare in 1914

By this time, the frontline soldiers on both sides were wondering how they could

possibly have fallen for the propaganda campaigns that had convinced them that their side was pre-destined to be victorious and that they would be “home before Christmas” where they would be celebrated as conquering heroes.

Instead, each frontline soldier was at the end of his emotional rope because of the unrelenting artillery barrages against which they were defenseless. If they weren't killed or physically maimed by the artillery shells and bombs, they would eventually be emotionally destroyed by “shell-shock” (now known as posttraumatic stress disorder – PTSD), suffering horrifying nightmares, flashbacks (usually misdiagnosed as a sign of mental illness), blindness, sleep deprivation, suicidality, depression, hyper-alertness and any number of other mental and neurological abnormalities, including traumatic brain injury.

Among the other common “killers of the soul” were the perpetual hunger, malnutrition, infections (such as typhus and dysentery), louse infestations, trench foot, frostbite and gangrenous toes and fingers. None of these survivors would truly appreciate being lauded as a military hero in future parades staged in their honor.

Poison gas attacks from both sides, albeit begun by scientifically-superior Germany, began early in 1915, and Allied tank warfare which was a humiliating disaster for the British innovators of the tank – wouldn't be operational until the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

One of the most stressful realities for the frontline soldiers was the suicidal, misbegotten, “over the top” infantry assaults against the opposition's machine gun nests. Such assaults were complicated by the shell holes and the rows of coiled barbed wire that sometimes made them sitting ducks. Artillery barrages from both sides commonly resulted in tens of thousands of casualties in a single day.

The over-the-top infantry assaults that sacrificed hundreds of thousands of obedient soldiers were stupidly (and repeatedly) ordered by senior officers such as Sir John French and his replacement as British Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig. Most of the old-time generals of a century ago had trouble admitting that their out-dated horse and saber cavalry charges across the muck of No-Man's Land were both hopeless and suicidal).

The general staff planners of their disastrous attempts to end the war quickly (or at least end the stalemate) were safely out of the range of enemy artillery barrages. The general staff war planners were always comfortably back at their warm and dry headquarters, eating well, being dressed by their orderlies, and drinking their tea – none of them at any risk of suffering the lethality of war.

The continuous digging with their entrenching tools in order to improve the safety of the trenches was frequently interrupted by preparations for attack. Screams of pain often came from the wounded soldiers who were helplessly hanging on the barbed wire or trapped and/or bleeding to death in the bomb craters. Often their deaths would linger for days, and the effect on the troops in the trenches, who had to listen to the desperate, unanswerable cries for help was psychologically devastating.

By the time Christmas came and winter hit, troop morale on both sides of No Man's Land had hit rock bottom.

Christmas in the Trenches

So on Dec. 24, 1914, the exhausted troops settled down to Christmas with gifts from home, special food, special liquor, chocolate bars and the hope for peace, even for only one night.

A magnanimous (and deluded) Kaiser Wilhelm had ordered 100,000 Christmas trees with millions of ornamental candles to be sent up to the front, expecting that such an act would boost German troop morale. Using the supply lines for such militarily unnecessary items was ridiculed by the most hardened officers, but nobody suspected that the Kaiser's Christmas tree idea would backfire and instead be a catalyst for an unplanned-for cease-fire, a singular event previously unheard of in the history of warfare and one that was ultimately censored out of mainstream history books for most of the next century.

The Christmas Truce of 1914 was a spontaneous event that happened at a multitude of locations all along the 600 miles of trenches that stretched across Belgium and France, and it was an event that would never again be duplicated. An attempt at a Christmas Truce in 1915, orchestrated by the boots on the ground, was quickly put down by senior officers.

Ten years ago, the movie "Joyeux Noel" (French for "Merry Christmas") received an Academy Award nomination for best foreign film of 2005. It tells the moving tale that was adapted from the many surviving stories that had been told in letters from soldiers who had participated in the truce.

As told in the movie, some young German started singing "Stille Nacht." Soon the British, French and Scots on the other side of No Man's Land joined in with their versions of "Silent Night." Before long, the spirit of the Prince of Peace and "goodwill towards men" prevailed over the demonic spirit of war, and the troops on both sides began to sense their common humanity.

The natural human aversion to killing other humans broke through to consciousness and overcame the fear, patriotic fervor and pro-war brainwashing

to which they had all been indoctrinated.

Soldiers on both sides gradually dropped their weapons and came out of their trenches to meet their former foes face-to-face. They had to step around shell holes and over frozen corpses (which were later to be given respectful burials during an extension of the truce, with soldiers from both sides helping one another with the gruesome task).

The spirit of retaliation had been replaced by a spirit of reconciliation – and the desire for peace on earth. New friends shared chocolate bars, cigarettes, wine, schnapps, soccer games and pictures from home. Addresses were exchanged, photos were taken and every soldier who genuinely experienced the emotional drama was forever changed.

And the generals and the politicians were appalled.

An Act of Treason

Fraternization with the enemy (as well as refusing to obey orders in time of war) is regarded by military commanders as an act of treason and is severely punishable. In the “Great War,” such crimes were dealt with by firing squad.

In the case of the Christmas Truce of 1914, most officers feared mutiny and did not want to draw public attention to the potentially contagious incidents by using such penalties. War correspondents were forbidden to report the unauthorized truce to their papers. Some commanding officers threatened courts martial if fraternization persisted (getting to know your supposed enemy was obviously bad for the killing spirit).

There were still lighter punishments to be invoked. Many of the Allied troops were re-assigned to different and less desirable regiments. Many German troops were sent to the Eastern Front under much harsher conditions, to fight and die in the equally suicidal battles against their Russian Orthodox Christian co-religionists.

If humanity is truly concerned with the barbaric nature of militarism, and if our modern-era wars of empire are to be effectively derailed, the story of the Christmas Truce needs to be retold again and again. These futile, unaffordable and very contagious modern wars are being fought by vulnerable, thoroughly indoctrinated Call of Duty or Halo first-person shooter gamers who, unbeknownst to them, are at high risk of having their lives negatively and permanently altered by the physical, mental and spiritual damage that always comes from participating in actual violence.

Combat war can easily doom its participants to a life overwhelmed by the wounds

of war (PTSD, sociopathic personality disorder, suicidality, homicidality, loss of religious faith, traumatic brain injury, neurotoxic, addictive drug use, either legal or illegal) all of which, it must be pointed out, are totally preventable.

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

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

Military chaplains seem to just be another cog in the apparatus of making war maximally effective for their military, economic, political and corporate overlords. Christian chaplains, who are very well paid, seem to not pay much attention to the Ten Commandments either, especially the one that says "thou shalt not kill."

In their defense, I suppose, military chaplains, similar to their colleagues from divinity school, may have never been schooled adequately (beginning in their Sunday School upbringings) in the profoundly important gospel truths about humility, mercy, non-violence, non-domination, non-retaliation, unconditional love and the rejection of enmity.

Theological Blind Spots of War

These theological blind spots are nicely illustrated near the end of the "Joyeux Noel" movie in a powerful scene depicting a confrontation between the Christ-like, altruistic, antiwar Scottish chaplain and his Calvinist bishop.

As the chaplain was mercifully administering the "last rites" to a dying soldier, he was approached by the bishop, who had come to chastise the chaplain for fraternizing with the enemy during the Christmas Truce. The bishop summarily relieved the simple pastor of his chaplaincy duties because of his "treasonous and shameful" behavior on the battlefield.

The authoritarian bishop refused to listen to the chaplain's story about his having performed "the most important mass of my life" (with German troops

participating in the celebration) or the fact that he wished to stay with the soldiers that needed him because they were losing their faith in God. The bishop angrily denied the chaplain's request to remain with his men.

The bishop then delivered a rousing pro-war, jingoistic sermon (which was taken word-for-word from a homily that had actually been delivered by an Anglican bishop later in the war). The sermon was addressed to the fresh troops who had to be brought in to replace the veteran soldiers who, because their consciences had been awakened, had suddenly become averse to killing and were refusing to fire their rifles.

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

"Joyeux Noel" is an important film that deserves to be annual holiday fare. It has ethical lessons even more powerful than "It's A Wonderful Life" or "A Christmas Carol."

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

"My name is Francis Tolliver, in Liverpool I dwell.

Each Christmas come since World War One, 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."

A critical scene from the movie is at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPk9-AD7h3M>

Additional scenes from the movie, with the narration of a letter from one of the soldiers involved can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehFjkS7UBUU>

Dr Kohls is a retired physician from Duluth, Minnesota. He writes a weekly column for the Reader, Duluth's alternative newsweekly magazine. Many of his columns are archived at

http://duluthreader.com/articles/categories/200_Duty_to_Warn

A Brief Moment of Christmas Peace

The impromptu Christmas truce of 1914 was a rare moment when human solidarity overrode the demands of hatred and war, when the guns fell silent over the Western Front of World War I and enemies became briefly friends, as Michael Winship recalls.

By Michael Winship

Last Friday night, I went to a small off-Broadway theater to see an engaging, poignant one-man show about the Christmas Truce of 1914. The title was *Our Friends, the Enemy*, written and performed by a young British actor named Alex Gwyther.

I felt bad for him; the theater was only about a third full that evening, probably because of the approaching holiday, but perhaps also because we Americans simply are too often indifferent to a century-old fight that scorched the European continent.

You would scarcely know it here in the United States, but since last year, the British, French, Germans and others of our Western allies have been commemorating the 100th anniversary of World War I, a conflict of extreme foolishness and colossal consequences, like almost every other.

Maybe our interest in this centennial has seemed lacking so far because we didn't enter The Great War until 1917. Or maybe it's because others' losses were so much more devastating than our own we lost more than 53,000 lives but half of all Frenchmen who were between the ages of 20 and 32 died, and more than 35 percent of German men ages 19 to 22.

Some 723,000 British were killed, more than would die during World War II. No wonder, as Benjamin Schwarz wrote in *The Atlantic* back in 1999, "The war is Britain's national trauma, and British and Commonwealth historians compulsively revisit it in the way that American historians revisit the Civil War."

So I felt bad for the actor and sad that more people weren't in the theater to hear an important story ingrained in British memory so profoundly that last Christmas a UK supermarket chain even used a highly romanticized version of the events as the basis of a wildly popular and sentimental TV commercial.

In December 1914, World War I had been raging in Europe for some five months; British, French and Belgian troops fighting against Germany and Austria. Along the western front, trench warfare rapidly became the norm, soldiers on both sides deeply dug in, stuck in mud, filth and pestilence with a no-man's land

sometimes just a few dozen yards wide running between the lines. This stalemate was steadily punctuated with rifle and cannon fire, death and anguished cries from the wounded.

On Dec. 7 that year, Pope Benedict XV called for a Christmas Eve truce, “that the guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang.” His plea was rejected.

Few if any of the foot soldiers may have known about that papal imploration, but many of them took it upon themselves to make their own peace, however brief. On Christmas Eve, German troops along the line raised across the trench tops small Christmas trees lit by candles. The two sides sang carols to one another, their voices drifting warily across no man’s land.

With daylight on Christmas morning, on each side, men cautiously peered from their trenches and a few ventured out to shake hands with their foes and exchange holiday greetings, followed by more and more. Artillery fire stopped.

James Boyce, the soldier played by Alex Gwyther in *Our Friends, the Enemy*, tells the tale:

“Grey and khaki begin to blend into one. Order of military rank and the barriers of language vanish, as they shake hands and introduce themselves in a mix of broken English and silent gestures. They offer small gifts of friendship, drinks, cigarettes, buttons, badges, sketches they’ve drawn and in the warm absurdity of their Christmas morning, some exchange addresses to meet up after the war.”

There are stories of impromptu soccer games or simple kick rounds with an actual ball or something vaguely spherical improvised from tin cans or straw-stuffed sandbags, nothing as organized as the match that supermarket ad suggests. More organized were burial details that the momentary peace allowed to retrieve the dead.

“We worked with the enemy,” the character James Boyce recalls, “collecting the men whom we had killed together and attempted to clean up the mess of this war. It slowly dawned on us all war was still upon us. A strange orange slithered over the dead, and two armies placed their heads in their hands.”

That Christmas of 1914, the peace lasted in some places longer than others; and in still others it never happened at all. Afterwards, word came from on high that such behavior, insubordination!, would never again be permitted. One German infantryman in the trenches also thought it was a disgrace.

“Such a thing should not happen in wartime,” he declared. His name was Adolf

Hitler.

In *Our Friends, the Enemy*, James Boyce recalls, “Tucked away from the war in a quiet corner of France, sheltered by trees and covered in frost, thick twigs tied together to form small crucifixes lunge out from the fluffy snow. A worn helmet rests under each cross.

“An old tree, built with a thick body stands over the small cemetery, its long branches watching over the small bumps in the snow. In its trunk, words have been carved using the bayonet of a rifle:

“*Death unites us all, and we all rest on the same side.*”

They called it “the war to end all wars.” Pause for sardonic laughter, fast forward to today. Once again, politicians and others run around ferociously beating the war drums, pandering to our fears and baser instincts. In the end, while there are really very few differences among us, there will always be those who seek to turn those small differences into monsters. Do not let that happen.

We all rest on the same side. See you next year.

Michael Winship is the Emmy Award-winning senior writer of *Moyers & Company* and BillMoyers.com, and a former senior writing fellow at the policy and advocacy group Demos. Follow him on Twitter at [@MichaelWinship](https://twitter.com/MichaelWinship). [This story first appeared at <http://billmoyers.com/story/the-christmas-day-that-peace-broke-out/>]

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 propagandist 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>

Dr. Gary G. Kohls is a retired family physician from Duluth, Minnesota, who practiced holistic (non-drug) mental health care for the last decade of his career. He often dealt with the horrific psychological consequences of veterans (and civilians) who had suffered psychological, neurological and/or spiritual trauma. He is involved in peace, nonviolence and justice issues.
