

The Christmas Truce of 1914

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## **Introduction**

One of the greatest conflicts and compromises in human history was the Christmas Truce of WWI. In December of 1914 in Ypres, Belgium, on the western front, the Christmas Truce took place. The Christmas Truce was a very important part of World War I. It was long thought that chivalry was lost. An idea of humanity and respect for your enemy that was thought to be old fashioned and outdated. New weapons like the machine gun, the tank, the airplane, and new battle ideas like trench warfare made chivalry seem impossible. There was no time or desire in the minds of the military leaders around the world for compromise. Even though the western front stopped fighting, there was still war going on around them. Against what their leaders wanted, the common soldiers on both the German and British armies without permission made their own unofficial truce on Christmas Day. It showed that soldiers were still human beings and they needed to take a break from war for their religious beliefs. The truce was a way for the men to disregard their differences and show their enemies respect and celebrate together the fact they were still alive. It was the ultimate compromise during a time of war when all hope seemed lost.

## **How World War I Started**

The start of World War I was caused in part by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Austria-Hungary's government made harsh demands on the Serbians, which the Serbians rejected. Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated because he was a "federalist" who supported giving more autonomy to Slavic lands. "Bosnian Serbs dreamt of joining in a Greater Serbia. While Franz Ferdinand had no personal liking for the Serbs, he was not hostile to them" (Preston). This alarmed the Serbs. If this were to happen, the chances of creating Greater Serbia separate from Germany would vanish (Preston). There were other reasons why World War I became such a big conflict. It involved so many nations because there were

several defense alliances made between empires before the war began. What this meant is that if one country was attacked by another, then war would be declared between the defending country and its allies (How Did World War I Start). “Britain, France, Ireland, and Russia were part of an alliance called the Triple-Entente” (How Did World War I Start). Germany was part of an alliance with Austria-Hungary, and they were known as the Central Powers. World War I began soon after the assassination of the Archduke when Austria-Hungary threatened war on Serbia. The Germans then sided with the Austria-Hungarians, and the Russians sided with the Serbians. One month after the assassination, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, backed by the Germans. The Germans then declared war on Russia, and then on France shortly after (How Did World War I Start).

### **War Before the Christmas Truce**

On July 28, 1914, World War I started. On August 3, 1914, the Germans started marching into Belgium and Luxembourg. In Belgium, the forts called Liège and Namur had remarkable artillery positions on the Germans. However, Liège and Namur stood no chance against the Skoda howitzers (a type of cannon) and the heavy Krupp (a railway gun) the German forces used to take down the forts. This resulted in the Germans being able to advance and invade France (Krause). Britain, had made an agreement to help maintain the neutrality of Belgium. When Germany invaded Belgium, this brought Britain and Ireland into the war. On September sixth through September tenth there was a battle called the First Battle of the Marne. “Germany hoped to avoid fighting on two fronts by knocking out France before turning on Russia, France’s ally” (10 Significant Battles of the First World War). “German offensive had some early success, but there were not enough reinforcements immediately available to sustain momentum” (10 Significant Battles of the First World War). After a few days of fighting the

Germans ended up retreating. (10 Significant Battles of the First World War). “The Battle of Marne also marked the end of mobile warfare on the western front” (10 Significant Battles of the First World War). The war then became a war of trenches. During combat, the killing and destruction was at an extremely high pace. Many of the men felt that the war would go on forever (Dvorsky). As the holiday season grew closer, there were still some German and British forces in Belgium where the Christmas Truce was soon to take place.

### **The Christmas Truce**

On December 24, 1914, men of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) heard German troops singing carols late on Christmas Eve. They saw the Germans with lanterns and small fir trees in their trenches (Mason). Captain C.I. Stockwell intended on obeying orders and ignored the German’s good cheer. However, later that day his sergeant reported Germans were standing on their parapet, unarmed and in full view. The sergeant asked for permission to shoot (DeGroot). “Stockwell was troubled: ‘The Saxons were shouting, ‘Don’t shoot. We don’t want to fight today’” (DeGroot). “Stockwell shouted that he wanted a chat with his German opposite number. Stockwell met him halfway. He told the German that he was not allowed to fraternise and warned him that his men might open fire at any time” (DeGroot). “The German captain’s orders were the same as the British captain’s. After much discussion, the two agreed not to fight until the following morning” (DeGroot). Men came out of the trenches and started singing songs and sharing cigars together (Congreve). “British and German forces came together in No-Man’s Land and exchanged gifts and took photographs together. They also buried casualties, repaired trenches, and dugouts” (Mason). On Christmas day, the German and British forces came together and had a football match. The German forces provided beer and the singing, while the British forces gave the Germans plum pudding in return for the beer. “An Englishman coincidentally

met his German barber, who provided a shave and a haircut” (DeGroot). Corporal John Ferguson said, “We were laughing and chatting to men whom only a few hours before we were trying to kill” (DeGroot). “Officers from both sides were trying to prevent the troops from fraternising, but they were having troubles accomplishing this” (DeGroot).

### **Counterclaim**

Some people may believe the Christmas Truce was not important because the truce was ultimately broken by two German snipers (Christmas Truce Broken by Two German Snipers). It destroyed the truce and the war kept on going; the idea of peace was broken. However, it shows that the soldiers were humans before they were soldiers. The soldiers disobeyed orders from the government to have a holiday that meant so much to them (DeGroot).

### **Significance in History**

The Christmas Truce was broken and war continued. By the end of the war, many soldiers had been injured and many soldiers had also lost their lives. Eight-and-a-half million soldiers died and 21 million were wounded in the war (World War I Christmas Truce). There was a young German corporal who was partially blinded in a mustard gas attack near Ypres, Belgium. He was in the hospital on November 11, 1918. While there he had heard about the armistice that officially ended World War I. This young corporal was named Adolf Hitler. He was very troubled by the news of the armistice. It was said that it troubled him that the war was over, and that he would have to leave the only thing he felt like he belonged, the military (Adolf Hitler and World War I). After World War I, Hitler started to gain popularity and power. This occurred because Germany was trying to find and gain a strong leader. Hitler became Chancellor of Germany on May 30, 1933, and he started taking over the government. From there, he started to take over Germany. He invaded Austria in 1938. He also invaded Czechoslovakia on March

15, 1939. After Hitler invaded Poland and Britain, France declared war on Germany. Hitler had goals to take over the whole world (Knighton). During all the years of WWII from 1939-1945, that involved the Axis, and Allied Powers, there was never another event like the Christmas Truce of WWI. This showed how truly significant, and important an event it was. It seems that by WWII, chivalry really was dead.

### **Conclusion**

As the fighting and destruction of World War I continued during 1914, British and German soldiers were able to share a happy and non-violent time together during the Christmas Truce. The soldiers participated in a game of football (soccer), carol singing, and many laughs. Cigars were passed around as well as food, beer, and other drinks. The Christmas Truce was a depiction of compromise during a time when war was being fiercely fought. If this was to show anything, it would prove that under any circumstance people can find a way of putting their differences aside to celebrate something so important to them. It showed that everyone who was present during that time could have a mutual respect for each other and celebrate being humans.

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