"A REMARKABLE INSTANCE": THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE AND ITS ROLE IN THE CONTEMPORANEOUS NARRATIVE OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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“A REMARKABLE INSTANCE”:
THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE AND ITS ROLE IN THE
CONTEMPORANEOUS NARRATIVE OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Art in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By
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Lexington, Kentucky

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

“A REMARKABLE INSTANCE”:
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CONTEMPORANEOUS NARRATIVE OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The orthodox narrative of the First World War, which maintains that the conflict was futile, unnecessary and wasteful, continues to dominate historical representations of the war. Attempts by revisionist historians to dispute this interpretation have made little impact on Britain’s collective memory of the conflict. The Christmas truce has come to represent the frustration and anger that soldiers felt towards the meaningless war they had been trapped into fighting. However, the Christmas truce, which at the time it occurred was seen as an event of minimal importance, was not an act of defiance, but one which arose from the unprecedented conditions of static trench warfare and the adaptation of the soldiers to that environment. An examination of contemporaneous accounts of the truce demonstrates that it was viewed by the soldiers involved as merely a brief holiday, and that British army commanders generally ignored or tolerated the truce, eventually releasing orders preventing its continuation or reoccurrence but taking no steps to punish any of the men who took part in it. A review of the letters and diaries of truce participants sheds light on the event itself, while simultaneously challenging the orthodox narrative of the First World War.

KEYWORDS: Christmas Truce, First World War, Memory, Narrative Construction, Trench Warfare

Theresa Blom Crocker
April 24 2012
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Chapter One
“Stupidity plus tragedy equals futility”: The Modern Narrative of the First World War

It is wishful thinking to suppose that an historical memory can be transmitted without being simplified. The memory is already simplified before people decide that it needs to be transmitted.

- Clive James, The Crystal Bucket

Colonel Melchett: Field Marshall Haig has formulated a brilliant new tactical plan to ensure final victory in the field.

Captain Blackadder: Would this brilliant plan involve us climbing out of our trenches and walking very slowly towards the enemy, sir?

Captain Darling: How could you possibly know that, Blackadder? It’s classified information.

Captain Blackadder: It’s the same plan that we used last time and the seventeen times before that.

Colonel Melchett: Exactly, and that is what is so brilliant about it. It will catch the watchful Hun totally off guard. Doing precisely what we’ve done eighteen times before is exactly the last thing they’ll expect us to do this time. There is, however, one small problem.

Captain Blackadder: That everyone always gets slaughtered in the first ten seconds?

- Blackadder Goes Forth

The famous Christmas truce, which has recently been granted a starring role in the narrative of the First World War, consisted of numerous unofficial cease-fires which took place between British and German troops in the trenches of Flanders on the Western Front, although there were instances of French and Belgian troops participating as well. Ranging from simple agreements not to fire upon the opposing side, to pre-arranged armistices for the sole purpose of burying previously unclaimed bodies, to all-out fraternization with exchanges of food, tobacco and alcohol, the Christmas truce is an intriguing episode in an
otherwise long, bloody and bitter war.\textsuperscript{1} The event, which holds a privileged position in orthodox First World War mythology, is interpreted as a manifestation of the frustration and anger that soldiers felt towards the meaningless war they had been trapped into fighting.

The truce, which seemed to spring out of nowhere and ended just as quickly, has left behind the legend of a “candle lit in the darkness of Flanders,”\textsuperscript{2} and a lingering collective memory of football matches, shared cigars and camaraderie. As the standard accounts of the truce maintain, the soldiers in the trenches, fed up with the war, the politicians who had deceived them into enlisting, and the incompetent military tactics of the generals who commanded them, were eager to show their opposition to them all by defying their officers and consorting with their enemies. The generals, outraged by the willingness of their men to fraternize with the enemy, issued harsh orders prohibiting continuation of the truce, and the soldiers, now reluctant to fire upon opposing troops, had to be coerced into resuming the war, and in some cases were even punished for their participation in the cease-fire. In addition, the dominant narrative of the truce maintains that, due to the government’s commitment to keeping the propaganda machine that bolstered the war effort rolling, the public was largely kept in the dark about the event and would have been horrified had it learned that soldiers from the Allied and Central powers were hobnobbing in No-Man’s-Land. Moreover, because government-imposed press censorship deliberately kept civilians ignorant about the war, it would have been impossible for the newspapers to print anything remotely truthful about the truce, the war, or even the conditions under which the soldiers were fighting.

As a recent \textit{Manchester Guardian} article contended, the story of the Christmas truce is a tale “that seems to gain in resonance and potency as the years go by.”\textsuperscript{3} It is certainly true that a great deal of effort has been expended, in

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{1}] Although, as the various cease-fires and fraternizations were, for the most part, entirely unconnected, they should more accurately be described as “the Christmas truces” rather than “the Christmas truce,” they will be referred to throughout this paper by their singular appellation, for the purposes of discussing the phenomena collectively.
\end{itemize}
the form of documentaries, films, fiction and popular history, on establishing the cease-fire’s overall significance as a form of dissent against a senseless war and an incompetent military establishment. However, the Christmas truce, which at the time it occurred was largely seen as an event of minimal importance, was not an act of defiance, but one which arose from the unprecedented conditions of static trench warfare and the adaptation of the soldiers to that environment. An examination of contemporaneous accounts of the truce demonstrates that, far from being a protest against the war, it was viewed by the soldiers involved as a brief, and completely temporary, holiday. British army commanders generally ignored or tolerated the truce; while they eventually released orders preventing its continuation or reoccurrence, they took no steps to punish any of the men who took part in it.

As the correspondence of British soldiers who participated in the event and the reports of it that appeared in the British press show, it is clear that the public was very well informed not only about the details of the truce but also about the nature of life at the front. Indeed, far from being an object of repression or censorship, the truce was featured prominently in the mainstream press, even if the newspapers involved were unsure about how to fit it into the contemporaneous war narrative. In addition, the various accounts written by Christmas truce participants show that fear and distrust of the Germans were as frequent a feature of the event as the fabled football matches, and that British soldiers, while marvelling at the spirit that inspired the fraternization in No Man’s Land, never lost sight of the reasons for which they fought and for which they remained motivated to fight after the truce was over. The interpretations of this event that are currently available through works of history and fiction portray it as an act of hope and optimism in the face of brutal slaughter, with a generous helping of ‘peace and good-will to all’ thrown in for good measure, but the contemporaneous reaction to the truce was much more nuanced, and therefore contradicts much of the orthodox First World War discourse.
The current dominant narrative of the First World War insists that it was, in short, “a brutal and inhuman conflict.” Adrian Gregory has described the “verdict of popular culture” on the war as “more or less unanimous. The First World War was stupid, tragic and futile.” Many historians characterize the war, first and foremost, in terms of the number of people it killed; Gerald De Groot, for example, opens his history of the war with the observation that “nine million combatants and twelve million civilians died during the Great War.” Martin Gilbert begins his work with the same figures, adding the “mass murder of Armenians in 1915, and the influenza epidemic that began while the war was still being fought” to the butcher’s bill.

Of course, horrific as these totals are, the number of people killed by the war is not necessarily sufficient grounds on which to render a judgment upon it; as John Terraine has noted, “(c)asualties – even very great casualties – can be made bearable if they are accompanied by striking achievements, best of all if they lead to swift and decisive results.” The orthodox verdict of history, however, is that the First World War achieved nothing. “The First World War,” John Keegan states unequivocally, “was a tragic and unnecessary conflict.” According to Paul Fussell, the war was undertaken for the most trivial of reasons: “eight million people were destroyed,” he argues, “because two persons, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Consort, had been shot.” In short, the nations of Europe had blundered, with lack of foresight and insufficient justification, into a war that they did not want, understand or know how to fight. As Adam Gopnik sums up the attitudes of the countries involved, they went to war because

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The catalyzing events that prompted the British to get involved in the war, the violation of Belgian neutrality with the attendant atrocities committed against that country by the Germans, are similarly perceived as excuses rather than reasons. Niall Ferguson argues that, in Britain, “the most commonly aired justification for the war was that it was necessary to defeat Prussian militarism and ‘frightfulness’, exemplified by the atrocities perpetrated by the German army against Belgian civilians.”¹² A corollary to this contention is the theory that the British press deliberately published a number of outright lies about the behavior of the German army in Belgium and France in order sway British public opinion in favor of the war and therefore assist with recruiting. “For British propaganda,” Ferguson maintains, “the violation of Belgian neutrality was the ace in the pack and it was played _ad nauseam._”¹³ John Simpson agrees, noting that based on the “memory of 1870…there was an expectation that when the Germans invaded Belgium and France they would behave savagely. It was this expectation which the British wartime propaganda services took advantage of.”¹⁴

As the dominant narrative asserts, the series of miscalculations and errors that embroiled Europe in the First World War pales in comparison to its sheer incompetence in fighting it: the army commanders, expecting a war of movement, proved unable to cope with the conditions of defensive industrialized warfare. As a result, soldiers were slaughtered in the millions on the battlefields of the war simply because of the stupidity and callousness of the generals leading them; those generals, the orthodox narrative contends, were willing to endure enormous casualties rather than admit to incompetence. On the Western front, Fussell asserts, “even in the quietest times, some 7000 British men and officers

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¹³ Ferguson, *Pity of War*, pg. 231.
¹⁴ John Simpson, *Unreliable Sources: How the Twentieth Century was Reported* (London: MacMillan, 2010), pg. 115.
were killed and wounded daily, just as a matter of course. ‘Wastage,’ the Staff called it.”\textsuperscript{15} Unfortunately, as Gregory notes, the British public now believes those soldiers gave their lives for nothing: while the deaths of those killed in combat in the Second World War have meaning, “the dead of the First World War died in vain.”\textsuperscript{16}

The battles of the First World War – of which the Battle of the Somme, in 1916, is by far the most infamous in British remembrance – are thought of today chiefly in terms of incompetent generals causing the gratuitous death and destruction, with no gains realized, of the men involved. “The Somme set the picture,” A.J.P. Taylor observed, “by which future generations saw the First World War: brave helpless soldiers; blundering obstinate generals; nothing achieved.”\textsuperscript{17}

The combat on the Western front, with its characteristically static nature, came to embody the typical soldier’s experience in the war: endless spells of duty in horrific conditions, broken only by orders to ‘go over the top’ and take part in yet another fruitless, and generally fatal, assault. As Hew Strachan contends, trench warfare, originally adopted as a means to an end – that of protecting soldiers and decreasing the numbers needed to man the front – “became an end in itself. It conditioned the soldiers’ lives, and became so much the embodiment of the First World War that it also acted as a metaphor for perceptions of its futility.”\textsuperscript{18}

The conventional modern attitudes toward the Western front can be inferred from the titles of the books written about it: two recent works on the subject, for example, are entitled \textit{Eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I} and \textit{The Killing Grounds: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare, 1900-1918}. The time spent in the hell of the trenches took its toll on those involved, even if they survived; Keegan notes that the war not only “ended

\textsuperscript{15} Fussell, \textit{The Great War}, pg. 41. Of course, these figures are bogus; as Cruttwell notes, the total number of British men who enlisted was, in total, 6,211,427, of which 744,702 died and 1,693,262 were wounded throughout the course of the war. Fussell’s figures of 7,000 dead and wounded daily would amount to, for the entire war, 10,500,000 total, or 150% of Britain’s total army during the war. In addition, it should be noted that this comment is not attributed to any general or report, and has not been seconded by any historian.

\textsuperscript{16} Gregory, \textit{The Last Great War}, pg. 4.

\textsuperscript{17} A.J.P. Taylor, \textit{A History of the First World War} (New York: Berkeley Medallion Books, 1963), pg. 86.

the lives of ten million beings,” but also “tortured the emotional lives of millions more.”

One factor that contributed to the willingness of the countries involved to allow the slaughter and mental torture of the soldiers to continue unabated was the ignorance of their civilians about the conditions of the war. “What actually happened,” Cate Haste observes, “was that so little information was released that the home front was left in a state of bewilderment about the nature of the war.” The public, however, had been made to believe in the war and therefore required its continuance; as Taylor argued, “(i)t was necessary to rouse public opinion in order to fight the war; and this opinion then made it essential to keep the war going.” Because civilians for the most part did not come under attack, De Groot maintains that “a chasm of experience developed between the home front and the fighting front. Soldiers felt deep antagonism towards civilians who, they felt, could never understand the horrors of the trenches.”

During the war, British society was divided, in Arthur Marwick’s view, between “on the one side, the civilian...aware of and almost inured to colossal slaughter, but oblivious to the real tortures, physical and mental, of trench warfare, and on the other the soldier who was enduring them.” According to Simpson, however, this division was both necessary and deliberate: “(t)he horrors of front-line warfare were so great that if the newspapers had been free to describe them honestly, it would certainly have been harder to persuade men to come forward and join up in sufficient numbers,” he claims. It was, therefore, “(b)etter, the politicians and the generals believed, to hide the truth from the British public, so that they would continue to support the war and encourage their sons to join the forces.” Keith Robbins further contends that, because the truth about the war was hidden from the public, many soldiers were unable to talk about their experiences and were therefore prevented from coming to terms

19 Keegan, An Illustrated History, pg. 3.
21 Taylor, First World War, pg. 103.
22 De Groot, First World War, pg. 147.
24 Simpson, Unreliable Sources, pg. 133.
with what they had been through. He maintains that “(n)o man who took part in
the First World War ever completely shook off the experience... For some, the
only solution was silence. There was no way in which it was possible to
communicate with those who had not been through it themselves.”

Beyond the boundaries of the war itself, and the damage it caused to the
lives and psyches of those who were involved in it, lay the aftereffects of the
conflict. Gilbert asserts that it “changed the map and destiny of Europe as much
as it seared its skin and scarred its soul.” One of the axioms of the history of
modern Europe is that the First World War, particularly the treaty imposed upon
Germany after that war, was the proximate cause of the Second World War.
“One of the tragedies of the Great War,” Winter and Baggett write, “is that,
despite all the suffering it had entailed, war simply begat another war.” Keegan
agrees, observing that the First World War “destroyed the benevolent and
optimistic culture of the European continent and left... a legacy of political rancor
and racial hatred so intense that no explanation of the causes of the Second
World War can stand without reference to these roots.” Gilbert blames the
Treaty of Versailles, and particularly the clause in that treaty attributing the fault
for the war to Germany, for the renewed world conflict only twenty years later,
maintaining that “(t)he link between the two world wars... was this ‘war guilt’
clause as perceived by Germany, aggravated by her extremist politicians, and set
up as a target to be shot down in flames and fury by Hitler.” The final entry in
the ledger against the First World War, therefore, is the way it led inevitably, and
inexorably, to the Second World War.

The view of the Christmas truce as a soldiers’ rebellion against the tragic
waste of the war and the stupidity of its politicians and generals fits perfectly into
this interpretation of the war; in fact, it underlines the moral of the war’s
orthodox narrative. The truce therefore appeals to many of the historians who
believe that the First World War was a futile and senseless conflict, and they

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26 Gilbert, The First World War, pg. xv.
27 Jay Winter and Blaine Baggett, The Great War and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century (New
28 Keegan, An Illustrated History, pg. 3.
29 Gilbert, The First World War, pg. 511.
include it in their works on the war as a demonstration of the true feelings of the soldiers involved. Gilbert, for example, writes that on Christmas “a spontaneous outburst of pacific feeling took place in the war zones, as the troops of every European army celebrated their Saviour’s birth. For nearly five months the war had been fought with mounting severity. Suddenly, as darkness fell on Christmas Eve, there was, in sections of the front line, a moment of peaceable behavior.”

De Groot, when discussing the truce, speaks wonderingly about how “(a)midst the brutality, civility occasionally sprouted like a flower in the desert. Enemies spoke to each other across No Man’s Land.”

Robbins notes that on Christmas Day, “British and German soldiers took the opportunity to have a game of football, but the season of goodwill proved short-lived. Firing began again on the following day.” Fussell believes that the army leadership was furious at the insubordination of the men participating in the truce, claiming that “British and German soldiers observed an informal, ad hoc Christmas Day truce, meeting in No Man’s Land to exchange cigarettes and to take snapshots. Outraged, the Staff forbad this ever to happen again.” Taylor took the same view, adding an element of irony by including the reaction of the home front to the event, when he wrote that

(о)n Christmas Day in France firing stopped in the front line. British and German soldiers met in No Man’s Land, gossiped, exchanged cigarettes. In some places they played football. They met again the next day. Then, after strong rebuke from headquarters, firing gradually started again. In the churches at home, prayers were offered for victory and for the slaughter of the men who were exchanging cigarettes.

Winter and Baggett share the theory that the truce was viewed as threatening by the army command, claiming that “British generals were appalled at the news of the Christmas truce. Explicit orders threatened serious punishment should any similar incident ever happen again.”

30 Gilbert, The First World War, pg. 117.
31 De Groot, First World War, pg. 166.
32 Robbins, First World War, pg. 38.
33 Fussell, The Great War, pg. 10.
34 Taylor, First World War, pg. 39.
35 Winter and Baggett, The Great War, pg. 99.
Other works endow the episode with both lasting and overarching meaning. Brown and Seaton, in *Christmas Truce*, a popular rather than academic history, maintain that the truce is an event of continuing significance, and “can be now seen as a small but significant gesture against the tide of international and nationalist rivalry and hatred which was flowing strongly in 1914 and flows strongly – and no less dangerously – as the century moves towards its close.”

Stanley Weintraub believes that the importance of the truce as a symbolic event goes far beyond its temporal boundaries, observing that “the end of the war and the failure of the peace would validate the Christmas cease-fire as the only meaningful episode in the apocalypse.”

To recapitulate the conventional historical interpretation of the episode, the Christmas truce was a moment of sanity in the midst of the brutal and senseless lunacy of the First World War. Keegan sums up the entire event in a short paragraph:

Early on the morning of Christmas Day, the Germans in the line opposite the British, between Ypres and Messines, began to sing Christmas carols and display Christmas trees on their parapet. Germans then came forward into no-man’s-land and proposed a break in the fighting. Parties from both sides began to mingle, to exchange tobacco and drinks, to sing together, and, in one place, to organize a football match. They also agreed to allow burial of the dead in no-man’s-land. The truce persisted the following day and in places for some days afterwards but the high command on both sides disapproved and took measures to stop the fraternization. There was none on the French front.

Unfortunately, this account, in common with so many of those cited, is riddled with inaccuracies. The truce narrative that Keegan recounts presents a

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37 Weintraub, *Silent Night*, pg. xvi.
38 Keegan, *An Illustrated History*, pg. 119.
39 Those errors are, in order: (1) In most cases the singing and Christmas-tree-lighting took place on Christmas Eve, and in some cases the suggestion of a truce came on Christmas Eve as well; (2) Belgian and French troops participated as well, although not in the same numbers or proportion as British and German troops; (3) As can be seen on the detailed map provided in the Brown/Seaton book, there were no recorded instances of truces from Ypres to Messines; the area covered was in fact Messines to (almost) La Bassee – a distance at least four times as long; (4) Not all Germans sang, although a number did. Some also displayed Christmas trees, but this was mainly on Christmas Eve, when they could be lit and seen; (5) Part of the time, the Germans came forward. Mostly, troops arranged the truce orally before advancing en masse into No Man's Land, or sent out a lone man, obviously unarmed, to start negotiations for the truce; (6) In some cases, a break in the fighting was proposed. In some cases, soldiers only asked for a brief ceasefire for the
simplistic portrayal of an event that underscores the established ‘futile waste’
theme of the First World War, and, as demonstrated, the truce has been similarly
used by many historians, popular and academic, to advance this narrative of the
war.

The conventional narrative of the First World War, which characterizes it as
a futile and senseless conflict, has a number of components. It has been argued,
in support of this view, that the war killed enormous numbers of people but
achieved nothing; that it was caused by an irrelevant assassination in the Balkans;
that the violation of Belgian neutrality merely provided British politicians with a
convenient excuse to get involved in the war; that the stories about German
atrocities in Belgium were invented to incite hatred against the enemy; that the
war was incompetently fought; that the sheer hell of the Western front destroyed
the lives of even those soldiers who survived it;\(^4\) that the civilians of the nations
involved blindly supported the war, with no idea of its realities; that the soldiers
involved were forever haunted by the horrors of the war that festered in their
repressed memories; and that the First World War was the proximate cause of the
Second World War. In recent years, however, other historians have argued for a
more nuanced view of the war, challenging many of these orthodoxies.

\(^4\) According to the modern narrative, there would be no survivors to have their lives destroyed in
any case: in spite of the fact that, of the 6,211,427 British soldiers who served in the war, 5,466,725
survived it, the modern view is that service in the First World War meant death in the First World
War. As Simon Schama noted in his critique of Downton Abbey, if the series had been a realistic
portrayal of life during the war, the character of Matthew Crawley “would have been,” but ‘would have been.’
John Simpson similarly argues that Lloyd George’s son Gwilym “managed, against the odds, to survive the war” without noting that
the odds of being killed in the war were approximately 1 in 10: not optimal, but hardly a certain
death sentence either. (Simon Schama, “No Downers in ‘Downton’”, The Daily Beast, Jan. 16, 2012;
figures on serving and fatalities, C.R.M.F. Cruttwell, The Great War 1914-1918 (Oxford: Clarendon
Press, 1934), pg. 650; Simpson, Unreliable Sources, pg. 134)
Daniel Todman, in his work *The Great War: Myth and Memory*, addresses many of what he describes as “current myths” about the war, noting that their roots “lie in events and opinions held during it.” As Todman argues, the dominant narrative of the war is “a point on a continuum. The modern myth of the war has its origins in events and emotions at the time.” However, the idea that the modern discourse on the war contains elements from its contemporaneous narrative does not mean that current attitudes towards the war have continued unchanged since its end. Liddle Hart, for example, writing in 1928, characterized Armistice Day as having “become more a commemoration than a celebration,” which emphasizes the fact that, at least initially, November 11th was viewed in part as a celebration. Cruttwell, writing in 1934, discussed the attitudes of the troops who are, in the conventional modern narrative, viewed only as exploited cannon-fodder, noting that “nothing in history is more astonishing than the endurance, patience, and good humour so generally shown by the great masses of hastily trained civilians from all the great countries engaged.” By recognizing the thankfulness that the British public felt upon achieving victory in the war and the good humor shown by the troops involved, both points of view absent from the modern orthodox narrative of the war, Liddle Hart and Cruttwell demonstrate the way that narrative has evolved over time. Recent historians have noted the ways in which an examination of contemporaneous views, unadulterated by hindsight, can help illuminate the attitudes of those who participated in what they believed was a necessary and meaningful war.

Gregory believes, for example, that the view that the First World War was meaningless is one that developed as a contrast to the motives for fighting the Second World War. “Both morality and long-term self-interest,” he notes, “appear to argue that Britain was right to go to war against Nazism in 1939.” However, he asserts, it is important to remember that the British public “believed

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42 Todman, *The Great War*, pg. 222.
44 Gregory, *The Last Great War*, pg. 5.
precisely the same thing about the Kaiser’s Germany.” While current conventional wisdom may maintain that this was a delusion, the war “was not fought in retrospect and to understand it we must stop re-fighting it that way.”45 John Horne, similarly, claims that the expectations raised by the magnitude of the war influenced the characterization of it as futile, observing that “(t)he scale of the effort and the size of the sacrifice inclined many who fought in the war to believe while it lasted that such an experience must have a decisive result, a closure that would be worthy of the conflict.”46 However, owing to “to the gulf between cause and effect, and to the ways in which it set in motion more than it resolved...(p)opular perceptions and official memory have likewise reflected the divisive legacies of the conflict.”47 Terraine advances a more sanguine view of the war, believing that, for Britain, “the victory lay in what had been averted, not in what had been achieved.”48 Todman maintains that the passage of time since the war has conditioned the responses to it, observing that as it “has receded into history and personal contact with it has been lost, it has become increasingly easy to judge the war futile.”49

Equally, many scoff at the notion that the war was sparked by the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand and his wife. Gopnik notes that the only person who seemed genuinely concerned about the deaths of the Austrian royals, whom he describes as “notably unmourned,” was the Kaiser, “who had a class interest in protecting Germanic royalty from Slavic terrorists.”50 While the assassination may have provided an excuse for the war, Horne notes, the reality was that the leaders “who led their states into the conflict were often conservatives who sought to shore up a dynasty and social system...with the aim of preserving the world as they knew it.”51 In Britain, the war was perceived as the only alternative to “the German domination of Europe,” and in 1914, Gregory argues, the majority of the British believed “that such domination by Germany

45 Gregory, The Last Great War, pg. 5.
46 Horne, A Companion, pg. xx.
47 Horne, A Companion, pg. xxii.
48 Terraine, The Western Front, pg. 20.
49 Todman, The Great War, pg. 121.
50 Gopnik, “The Big One”, pg. 79.
51 Horne, A Companion, pg. xvi-xvii.
would be a disaster.”52 What is significant, he notes, is that “(m)ost still believed it in 1918 and many would continue to believe it for the rest of their lives.”53 Among the reasons for the British involvement in the war, Marwick lists “the growing awareness in Britain that her world economic power was steadily being challenged by Germany (and) the conviction that any German aggrandizement on the European continent would fatally upset the balance of power.”54 Todman agrees, observing that “British ministers in 1914 went to war to maintain the balance of power in Europe,” and arguing that it “was in Britain’s best interests then, as it had been for centuries, to prevent a single hegemonic power dominating the whole mainland of Europe.”55

Additionally, the outrage over purported German atrocities in Belgium, many historians have argued, was prompted by the existence of real atrocities. Although some of the more inflammatory stories about German soldiers chopping off the hands of children, raping nuns and tying priests to bell clappers were discredited almost as soon as the war was over, it has been noted lately that a number of the press reports written about German behavior in Belgium were accurate in their descriptions of how German soldiers killed non-combatants, including women and children, on flimsy military pretexts, and behaved savagely towards the civilian population generally. Horne, for example, observes that the stories of atrocities in Belgium were “rarely deliberate fabrications.”56 Gregory, while providing some examples of murders of Belgian civilians that included women and children, notes that the German soldiers in Belgium engaged in both “cold-blooded executions of large numbers of hostages and more spontaneous massacres carried out by units that went on the rampage.”57 Todman also refers to German crimes in Belgium, contending that “(a)lthough they often arose from the terror and inexperience of men new to battle, these were not just the actions

52 Gregory, The Last Great War, pg. 2.
53 Gregory, The Last Great War, pg. 2.
54 Marwick, The Deluge, pg. 10.
55 Todman, The Great War, pg. 122.
56 Horne, A Companion, pg. 281.
57 Gregory, The Last Great War, pg. 44.
of soldiers out of control of their officers: German atrocities were a matter of policy, not just panic."

The idea that the war was incompetently fought is one that has also come under attack in recent evaluations of the war. Terraine, for example, protests that too many people think about Douglas Haig in terms of the “grim casualty list” for the battles of the Somme, Ypres and Passchendaele. Instead, he argues, “(w)hat is exceptional about Haig is the hundred days of uninterrupted victory by which he did so much to bring the War to an end.” In fact, Terraine claims, “no general in any country at that time was able to avoid similar slaughter under certain conditions.”

Gopnik agrees, observing that recent histories of the war “conclude that the generals did the best they could” and maintaining that if “a steering committee of Grant, Montgomery, Napoleon and Agamemnon had been convened to lead the allies, the result would have been about the same.”

Horne notes that, although the current understanding of the war has “moved decisively” in the direction of a narrative of horror and disproportionate suffering, military historians have emphasized “the ‘learning curve’ of the British army which, they suggest, achieved one of the finest performances ever on the western front in the last three months of the war.”

The attitude that service on the Western front consisted of nothing but suffering and death combined with mental torture is one that is, to a certain extent, a creation of modern attitudes. While no one would deny the horrific death toll, as well as the physical and mental anguish caused by the conditions of trench warfare, it is also important to remember that this was not the overall experience of every man involved. Todman, for example, believes that, to a certain extent, these attitudes were shaped by the post-war writings of a certain class of soldier. “It is possible to argue,” he contends, “that it was in the early

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58 Todman, The Great War, pg. 124.
59 Terraine, The Western Front, pg. 180. This argument, however, can be recognized as a piece of special pleading, as Terraine seems to have devoted a large portion of his life’s work to rehabilitating Haig’s reputation.
60 Terraine, The Western Front, pg. 184.
61 Gopnik, “The Big One”, pg. 83. This theory might have been more convincing had Gopnik chosen four figures less well known for their willingness to ignore the ‘butcher’s bill’ in pursuit of victory.
1930’s, as a result of the ‘war books boom’, that the memory of the war was monopolised by a small group of highly literate participants, primarily established writers who had served as junior officers, who created the version of the war still dominant today.”

In fact, Todman notes, what made the First World War different from the wars that preceded it was not that it was more stupidly fought or badly managed, but that the war “was participated in and witnessed, not by a tiny professional army, but by a huge army of citizen soldiers, including numerous well-educated and well-connected men who could record what they saw.”

Other works on the war, besides those written by the participants, have also influenced the way it is viewed. Lyn MacDonald’s books, which have contributed so much to the orthodox discourse on the war, combine “the recollections of veterans and the author’s own indignation” and therefore, according to Niall Ferguson, tend “to endorse the idea that the war was sheer hell and the soldiers its victims.”

Notwithstanding this view, Gregory believes that “it is reasonable to suggest that many working-class men in the armed forces found their experiences less unusual and shocking than might be expected.”

Todman agrees, noting that “(l)augher, drunkenness and camaraderie were as much a part of war, for many men, as terror, violence and obedience” and further claiming that the “tribal nature of the British regimental system... gave men an immediate source of group identity.”

Terraine contends that, while “(i)t is largely hypocrisy to discover ‘virtues’ in war,” at the same time “it is hypocrisy too to pretend there are none. The terribly simple satisfactions which enabled men to endure trench warfare indicate at least the virtues of constancy and resolution.”

The ignorance of civilians about the horrors of the war, which strongly features the belief that press reports during the war consisted of nothing but propaganda and lies, is another axiom that has been lately revisited. Niall Ferguson, for example, notes that censorship was never as overarching as is currently assumed, maintaining that “(i)n no country was the press completely

64 Todman, The Great War, pg. 7.
65 Ferguson, Niall, Pity of War, pg. xxxiii.
66 Gregory, The Last Great War, pg. 283.
67 Todman, The Great War, pg. 5.
68 Terraine, The Western Front, pg. 115.
restricted, nor was uniformity ever imposed. In every case, institutions for censoring and managing news had to be improvised and did not work efficiently.”

Horne agrees, observing that neither censorship nor propaganda “was as powerful as was made out by... (an) interwar myth, according to which governments and the press deliberately manipulated opinion with mendacious tales.”

Gregory contends that the current fixation on fabricated atrocity stories obscures “the reality of atrocities.” He argues that “the press did not initiate the process of dehumanizing the enemy; the German military and naval commanders did” and that “it was real atrocities, or military acts that would be perceived as atrocities, that stoked up popular fury.”

To demonstrate that the public received more information about the war and its associated terrors than is currently credited, Ferguson includes in his work a photograph of a German corpse on barbed wire, which he notes was taken by an accredited press photographer and “reproduced for use in stereoscopic viewers. The horror of war,” Ferguson concludes, “was concealed less from the public than is sometimes thought.” Similarly, Gregory argues that soldiers and civilians were “linked in countless ways. The constant flow of letters to and from the armies and leave, increasingly regularized... maintained the links.”

Gregory does believe that soldiers had trouble expressing the truth about their experiences at the front, but nevertheless concludes that “they tried to recount conditions far more than is sometimes realized, and were listened to by their friends and relatives, much more so than is usually acknowledged.”

Finally, the contention that the First World War was the proximate cause of the Second World War has lately received considerable attention from revisionist historians. Ferguson, for example, argues that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles did not cripple the German economy, thereby leaving its population open to the appeal of fascism: “(t)he reality,” he maintains, “was that the

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69 Ferguson, Pity of War, pg. 215.
70 Horne, A Companion, pg. 280.
71 Gregory, The Last Great War, pg. 40.
72 Gregory, The Last Great War, pg. 69.
73 Ferguson, Pity of War, photo 13, between pages 180 and 181.
74 Gregory, The Last Great War, pg. 133.
75 Gregory, The Last Great War, pg. 133.
economic consequences of the Versailles Treaty were far less severe for Germany than the Germans and Keynes claimed." Ferguson believes, the German economy was wrecked by bad economic policies, not reparations. Todman concedes that there were issues with post-war settlements and the Treaty of Versailles, but believes that these issues should not retroactively deny the war its meaning. The fact that the treaty was flawed, he observes, does not mean "that the war that preceded it was futile. The First World War stopped the German threat that had erupted in 1914. Perhaps that was enough. The Britons who had gone to war in 1914-18 had achieved their objective." Gregory, returning to his argument that the meaning ascribed to the First World War was influenced by the fact that another world war followed it only two decades later, believes that it was the outbreak of the Second World War that stripped the victory in the First World War of its significance. "The two meanings of the war, victory and warning, were both dependent on peace," he argues. "No peace meant no meaning." Without meaning, the First World War was doomed to be condemned as simply the precursor for, and cause of, the second and even deadlier conflict.

These recent views on the overall meaning of the First World War, the reasons the war was supported, the experiences of the soldiers involved, the attitudes of the civilians of the combatant nations and the war’s legacy call into question many of the orthodoxies of the war’s dominant narrative. However, as Todman points out, "(n)one of this has made the slightest difference to what most people actually believe.” A commitment to the conventional narrative of the First World War “still pervades British culture,” leading to the popular collective conclusion that the war was fought for nothing and achieved nothing. Gregory also notes that the conventional view of the war, “(s)tupidity plus tragedy equals futility,” which he describes as “a theme of growing strength since the 1920s,” has continued to prevail over all other interpretations of the war, and that, as a result, “(f)or the British, the war is, at worst, an apocalyptic fall from

76 Ferguson, Pity of War, pg. 412.
77 Todman, The Great War, pg. 127.
78 Gregory, The Last Great War, pg. 275.
79 Todman, The Great War, pg. xii.
grace, at best, the definitive bad war.” While the orthodox narrative of the war, therefore, has been continuously challenged by revisionist dissension about the accuracy of its various elements, British memory overall continues to believe in the dominant First World War narrative of waste and futility.

As a result, historians still portray elements of the war’s narrative in terms of these orthodox views, arguing, for example, that the soldiers who died in that war were idealistic youths deceived by their leaders, as in the contention that “(t)he history of the Generation of 1914 is a story of decency betrayed, of the gap which separated the narrow vision of the men in power and the open hearts of the millions who followed.” Even John Simpson, the noted BBC reporter, feels confident in asserting that every tragic event of both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be ascribed not only to the First World War but even to the purported cause of the conflict. The murders of the Archduke and his consort led, he contends, not just to the start of the First World War five weeks later, but directly or indirectly to many of the most important events of the twentieth century: the Russian revolution, the rise of Stalin’s Communism and Hitler’s Nazism, the Second World War, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, the decline of Europe and its colonial empires, the Cold War, the seemingly endless conflict in the Middle East, the growth of militant Islam. If the Archduke’s car had not taken a wrong turn and stalled, would any of these things have happened? Perhaps, but they would have happened differently. The balance of Europe could well have been maintained indefinitely, had it not been for one particular chain of events.

The orthodox narrative of the First World War, therefore, remains resistant to all attempts by revisionist historians to weaken its hold on the British collective memory.

The presence of these questions about the conventional narrative of the First World War does, however, challenge the role of the Christmas truce in the history of that war. If the revisionist arguments prevent it from being used to underline the moral of the war, does it continue to have any significance? Removed from the orthodox discourse, the event appears to lose its meaning.

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80 Gregory, The Last Great War, pp. 3-4
81 Winter and Baggett, The Great War, pg. 57.
82 Simpson, Unreliable Sources, pg. 89.
becoming instead merely a day off for the soldiers involved and a journalistic curiosity for the British public. Even within a more revisionist history of the war, however, the truce can still maintain an important role: as an episode that reveals the attitudes of the soldiers involved towards the war, including their beliefs that the conflict had meaning and purpose, as well as their willingness to share information about their experiences with those at home. In addition, the way the news of the Christmas truce was received demonstrates that the British public was not, as is often argued today, protected from the truth about the war, and, indeed, was aware of the conditions at the front and what its soldiers had to endure. The truce, therefore, while losing its position as ‘Exhibit A’ in the orthodox discourse, becomes a means of challenging that narrative and demonstrating that some of the conventional views of the war are grounded in myth rather than fact.

The Christmas truce, an episode which would at first glance appear to confirm the dominant narrative of the First World War, demonstrates instead that many of the orthodoxies of that narrative can be disputed. Rather than reacting to the truce in the monolithic manner embraced by historians that ascribe to the conventional view of the war, the soldiers who participated in it brought a gamut of feelings, from elation to suspicion, to the event. There were officers who joined in the truce, and others who condemned it. The truce did include spontaneous games of football and shared cigars, but also featured solemn burial parties and moments of treachery. Furthermore, the manner in which the details of the truce were accepted by the British public contests orthodox views about civilians’ ignorance of the war, the Western front and trench life. The Christmas truce, therefore, acts as a portal for a fuller understanding of the experiences and attitudes of soldiers on the Western front as well as the views of the British public towards the war, and by illuminating those subjects, challenges the dominant discourse of the war.
Chapter Two
“There is nothing like the truth”: The Western Front and Trench Warfare

Because there was no code of words which would convey the picture of that wild agony of peoples, that smashing of all civilized lands, to men and women who still thought of war in terms of heroic pageantry.

– Philip Gibbs, war correspondent

Then a bombardment with enormous shells for a couple or more days, until trenches and men’s nerves are smashed to ribbons, and a surprise rush in the middle of the night. Then more digging. Each side is left therefore with row upon row of trenches behind them at short intervals, and a successful attack only means that the enemy are pushed back to their next line, not very far.

- John Aiden Liddle, Argyll and Sunderland Volunteers, extract from a letter to his father, November 26, 1914

The Christmas truce can only be understood in the context of the nature of the First World War and the soldiers who fought it. The event was, as is currently believed, a reaction by the soldiers to the war and the way it was fought; however, that reaction diverges sharply from the conventional view that the men involved perceived the war as futile and senseless. Instead, the truce was both a consequence of the adaptation of the troops to a new type of warfare, which promoted an altered relationship with the enemy based upon proximity and shared experiences, and a result of the professional attitudes of the troops involved. Soldiers, faced with a static military situation, learned how to cope with the uncomfortable and dangerous conditions they found on the Western front. Contrary to dominant beliefs about the war, soldiers also freely shared information about these experiences, as well as their attitudes towards the war and their enemies, with their friends and relations at home. Often using humor as a defense mechanism, they were forthright about life in the trenches. Because of the flow of information from the battlefields of France to the home front, civilians were also better informed about the conditions of the war than the orthodox narrative allows. In addition to these sources of information, the British public was also able to attain a certain level of understanding about the Western front.
through the newspapers, which were not always as deceptive about the reality of
war as is now believed.

By the time the truce occurred, the war was nearly five months old. One of
the many tropes of the conventional narrative of the First World War is that
everyone expected it to be over quickly.\textsuperscript{83} While this assertion is not altogether
correct, what no one involved predicted was that it would be a war of stalemate
rather than mobility; the stationary trenches of the Western Front were a new
development in modern warfare and one that the generals on both sides
struggled to overcome. For four years, every new offensive, whether undertaken
by the Entente or the Central Powers, was supposed to produce the
breakthrough that would decide the conflict; for four years, those offensives
failed, at the cost of millions of lives over the course of the war. Generals were
trained in, and trained their troops for, wars of movement, and the concept of
trench warfare was something to which both military leaders and common
soldiers had to adapt. “It’s a war with no glamour or glory such as one expects in
a huge world-wide show like this,” John Liddle, who served on the Western Front
with the Argyll and Sunderland Highlanders, wrote home to his father. “Modern
weapons are too deadly, and the whole art of war, and all tactics as laid down in
our books, and in the German dittoes, has been quite altered. No advancing
across the open by short rushes.”\textsuperscript{84} Liddle, like many other soldiers, found his
expectations of war confounded by the enforced shift from standard offensive
campaigns to tactics that favored the defense. While no one knew in 1914 that
the stalemate on the Western Front would continue for four long years, soldiers
nevertheless quickly became aware that war, as everyone previously understood
it, had changed.

\textsuperscript{83} The first recruiting appeal offered terms of service for a period of three years or “until the war is
concluded,” from which Marwick deduces that “Kitchener at least did not share the widely held
belief that the war would be over within six months.” Marwick, The Deluge, pg. 35.
\textsuperscript{84} Liddle, John Aiden, November 26 1914 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 11126. All
letters and diary entries are reproduced with original spelling and grammar intact. The letters
cited in this work, aside from those published in the British press, came from the extensive
Imperial War Museum collections of soldiers’ letters and diaries. The collections were chose by a
key word search for the phrase “Christmas truce,” which returned 49 groups of documents,
although not all were ultimately relevant.
In addition to the restrictions imposed by a static war, men also had to adjust to the conditions they found at the front. Unfortunately, as Cruttwell pointed out, the trenches “had not been deliberately sited; they were more often an elaboration of the holes into which the combatants had dug themselves when unable to advance.”\textsuperscript{85} As a result of their haphazard placement, the trenches were generally badly constructed, situated in muddy and flat areas, prone to flooding, and always uncomfortable. While the German trenches were noted to be both deeper and better built than the British and French ones, even the Germans could not entirely overcome the hurdles of trying to stay dry and warm in the notoriously marsh-like ground of Flanders, and the British and French soldiers fared much worse. Fussell, in fact, contends that “there were ‘national styles’ in trenches as in other things. The French trenches were nasty, cynical, efficient, and temporary….The English were amateur, vague, \textit{ad hoc}, and temporary. The German were efficient, clean, pedantic, and permanent.”\textsuperscript{86} Whichever nationality trench a soldier found himself in, comfort would hardly have been readily obtainable.

The trenches and, as noted, the entire area of Flanders, were generally awash in mud. “Without mud, it wouldn't be the First World War,” Todman remarks, and the mud and its attendant discomforts featuredlargely in writings by soldiers. Percy Jones, who served with the Queen’s Westminster Rifles, noted in his diary that the mud in England could not compare to that which he now found in France. The mud of the battlefields was something altogether more horrible, he claimed, describing the “firm, stodgy mud, where every pace means a violent effort to withdraw a leg immersed to the knee; pools of water in shell holes for the unwary, (and) nice, twisty, slippery, greasy tracks round buildings and trees, where one slides and slithers to dampness and misery.”\textsuperscript{87} Arthur Pelham-Burns, who also served on the Western Front, echoed that assessment, remarking in a letter to England that “I used to think I knew what mud was before I came out here but I was quite mistaken. The mud here varies from 6 in. to 3 and

\textsuperscript{85} Cruttwell, \textit{The Great War}, pg. 107.
\textsuperscript{86} Fussell, \textit{The Great War}, pg. 45.
\textsuperscript{87} Percy Jones, November 18 1914 diary entry, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 12253.
4 ft. even 5 ft. and it is so sticky that until we were all issued with boots, half my men used to arrive in the trenches with bare feet.”

A.D. Chater, who was with the Gordon Highlanders, ruefully agreed, writing home that “I have come to the conclusion that this damned place must be a sort of second Venice. When you find a piece of dry land you think there must be some sort of mistake – I was up to my waist in water two or three days ago.”

Soldiers, even in the early parts of the war, became used to their places in the line; as Terraine observes, they “manned the same trenches for months – sometimes years – on end: took their spells out of the line, and returned to the same dug-outs, the same saps, the same corpses, the same smells and dirt.”

As both armies on the Western Front dug in for what must have seemed like eternity, they could not avoid growing familiar with the troops opposite them. In spite of the fact that British troops were, as Cruttwell noted, “enjoined to harass the enemy by every possible pinprick, such as fighting patrols, and burst of fire on his nightly working parties,” they were often less bellicose when coping with daily life in the trenches.

Marwick describes participation in trench warfare as days spent “in a new dimension of foulness, a tunnel life lived in a troll kingdom in which immobility never brought peace, and activity scarcely ever brought mobility.” Under these conditions, whatever the men in the front lines felt about the enemy as a political entity, they were able, at the same time, to recognize that the soldiers whose trenches they were facing, and whose daily activities not only mirrored theirs but could also be observed, were enduring the same discomforts and fears as they were. Winter and Baggett note that soldiers in the line were irritated by press reports of the heroism of their own troops and the cowardice of the enemy; they knew “the men opposite them were as brave and determined as they were, and, like them, suffered from hunger, cold, lice and mean-spirited officers.”

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88 Arthur Pelham-Burns, undated letter, probably late Dec, 1914, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 8632.
89 A.D. Chater, January 13 1915 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 1697.
90 Terraine, The Western Front, pg. 17
91 Cruttwell, The Great War, pg. 108
92 Marwick, The Deluge, pg. 80
93 Winter and Baggett, The Great War, pg. 96
been claimed that the soldiers in the opposing armies on the Western front had more in common with each other than they did with the civilians of their respective nations; certainly, the discomforts and dangers of the trenches were a shared experience.

In many cases, soldiers knew so much about the troops opposite because the trenches of the opposing sides were surprisingly close. Liddle, for example, wrote that life on the Western front appeared to be “all digging new lines of trenches by night until one is within a couple of hundred yards of the enemy.”

W.B.P. Spencer, who served with the Wiltshire Regiment in France, noted that in his place in the line, the German trenches were about 400 yards away, but “in some places it is only 30-50 yds.” The fiancée of Maurice Mascall of the Royal Garrison Artillery must have been alarmed to receive a letter from him stating matter-of-factly that he was “in trenches at the edge of a large wood, with the German trenches only about 70 yards distant.”

Because of the proximity of the two lines of trenches, soldiers on both sides shared not only common miseries, but were able to appreciate mutual jokes and entertainment. Chater, for example, reported in a letter home that because in his “part of the line the trenches are only 50 or 60 yards apart in some places, you can hear the Germans talking they often shout to us in English and we respond with cries of ‘waiter!’” He further recounted how the British troops used a German’s tin chimney as a target for rifle practice; “(a)fter each shot the German waved a stick or rang a bell according to whether we hit the chimney or not! There are lots of amusing incidents up there,” he continued, “and altogether we have quite a cheery time our worst trouble is the wet and mud which is knee-deep in some places.”

Liddle had a similar tale to tell his mother, writing that he had heard about some British officers who “were reported to have made a

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94 Liddle, November 26 1914 letter
95 W.B.P. Spencer, December 22 1914 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 1684.
96 Maurice Mascall, December 1, 1914 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 11163. She was probably not at all comforted, either, to read a description of his regiment’s first visit to the trenches, with “bullets singing over our heads, and a more or less continuous fire from snipers on both sides.”
97 Chater, December 13 1914 letter. The ‘waiter’ remark appears to refer to the fact that many Germans, before the war, worked in British hotels.
98 Chater, December 13 1914 letter
practice of going over to the Germans’ lines by day for a chat with the men, the latter warning them when one of their officers was approaching, and helping them over the parapet so that they could get back.”

As Winter and Bagget observe, “there were always, somewhere in the front lines, places where troops facing one another adopted unofficial ‘live and let live’ policies to reduce the lethal nature of trench life.”

Liddle Hart, who was himself a soldier on the Western Front, acknowledged these attitudes while describing a phase of tolerance that developed among the front line soldiers in late autumn and early winter 1914. Gerald De Groot has remarked upon the same phenomenon, writing that “(s)oldiers often felt a martyr’s bond with the enemy in the trench opposite. Shared sufferings encouraged a common humanity.” As noted, the two armies had the miseries of mud and danger in common, but simple pleasures and soldiers’ jokes were shared as well.

Contributing to this atmosphere of mutual tolerance was the fact that almost all the soldiers in the trenches in winter 1914, on both sides of the line, were either professional soldiers or from reserve units who had enlisted in the army before the war. As a result, their service was generally motivated by reasons other than hatred of the opposing side, as opposed to the attitudes of at least some of the men who enlisted in the early part of the war. As Gregory notes, without conscription, Britain was able to initially send only a small number of men to France, in the form of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). “Composed of career soldiers and reservists,” he observes, the BEF “played a significant but junior role in the retreat to the Marne and subsequent stabilization of the western front.” While both the Germans and French were subject to conscription, their soldiers who were present on the front during the early winter of 1914 were mainly comprised of men who served before the war, as it took time to train and equip those who joined at the beginning of the conflict. While the British forces did receive supplements in the form of newly-enlisted men

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99 Liddle, December 21 1914 letter
100 Winter and Baggett, The Great War, pg. 99
101 Liddle Hart, The Real War, pg. 81
102 De Groot, First World War, pg. 166
103 Adrian Gregory, “Britain and Ireland” in A Companion, J. Horne, ed., pg. 405
throughout the late autumn and early winter, those recruits were absorbed into already-formed units, meaning that the men who joined up early in the war served with career officers and soldiers, and the presence of newly recruited soldiers in a particular unit, therefore, would have been diluted.\footnote{According to Gilbert, Kitchener’s new army, which consisted of units comprised solely of men who volunteered at the beginning of the war, did not begin to arrive in France until May 1915. (Gilbert, The First World War, pg. 159)}

The fact that so many of the men, and particularly the officers, in the front line during the winter of 1914-1915 were pre-war professionals contributed to the relative lack of partisan hatred between the trenches at that time. Liddle Hart, in particular, ascribed at least part of the tolerance that developed towards the enemy during the first winter of the war to the fact that the British army, because of its professional character, was “relatively immune” to what he describes as “the natural ferocity of war accentuated by a form of mob spirit which is developed by a ‘nation in arms.’”\footnote{Liddle Hart, The Real War, pg. 81.} As Robert Graves later noted in a story about the Christmas truce, “‘(r)egulars, you see, know the rules of war and don’t worry their heads about politics or propaganda.’”\footnote{Robert Graves, “Christmas Truce”, from The Shout and Other Stories (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1965), originally published as “Wave No Banners”, in the Saturday Evening Post, 1962, pg. 112} This resistance to partisan hatred by professional troops created more opportunities for the opposing sides to develop a respect for the professionalism of their enemies. An example of this was provided by E.W. Cox, an intelligence officer at GHQ, who noted in his diary in September 1914 that “(t)he Germans are making a splendid stand. They are wonderful soldiers.”\footnote{E.W. Cox, September 16 1914 diary entry, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 8548.} Such mutual respect, even among the fierce battles and debilitating conditions of the trenches, conditioned the attitudes of the soldiers on both sides of the trenches.

The fact that British soldiers were able to share their feelings about the trenches and the enemy in letters home contradicts one of the most stubborn orthodoxies of the First World War. De Groot, for example, argues that because civilians, for the most part, did not come under attack, “a chasm of experience developed between the home front and the fighting front. Soldiers felt deep antagonism towards civilians who, they felt, could never understand the horrors
of the trenches.”

Terraine believes that “the inexhaustible patience and cheerfulness of the troops... cut them off from communication with their relatives at home, whose views and sentiments, fed upon misleading communiques and absurd Press propaganda, swung from wild optimism to gloomy disillusionment as the years went by.”

Even Todman, who never met a First World War axiom he didn’t want to deflate, claims that, in addition to the restrictions imposed on the soldiers by army censorship, “more powerful was a self-censorship which was designed to protect those at home from the worries they might have experienced if they had known the dangers that their correspondents were facing.” All these assertions, however, are contradicted by the letters of the soldiers themselves.

F.H. Black, an officer with the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, wrote to a friend in early December 1914 that his unit was “having an easier time now, spending four days in the trenches and four days out.” This “easier” time, however, consisted of trying to hold “a very warm corner” where “shots are flying up the trenches, down the trenches and across them all day, and most of the night; and all of us except the sentries sit tight in our dug-outs all day, and only venture out when it is absolutely necessary.” Some of those shots found home, according to Black: “my servant was wounded last time we were up here, and a man was hit in the leg this morning on the road outside my dug-out.”

K.M. Gaunt, who served with the Queen’s Westminster Rifles, wrote to his uncle that although they were experiencing fine weather it was “a trifle warm for the trenches, and the flies mosquitos and rats are abominable, but worse of all are the objects one meets out on patrol or digs up in a trench, however I have got quite used to it now.”

Percy Jones described the trenches in a letter home as “a wet hell.” W.B.P. Spencer agreed, writing to his mother that he wondered “how many people realize what Hell the trenches can be. No shelter from rain or cold

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108 De Groot, First World War, pg. 147.
110 Todman, The Great War, pg. 10.
111 Frank Black, December 2 1914 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 4333.
112 K.M. Gaunt, August 26 1915 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 7490.
113 Percy Jones, December 20 1914 letter.
and in some places mud right over one’s knees nearly always over one’s ankles.”

Maurice Mascall, who doesn’t seem to have worried overmuch about sparing his fiancée’s feelings, let her know that “(t)he trenches themselves were quite different from anything I had imagined. They have been so often filled with water and rebuilt that nothing much was visible except seas of mud and holes full of water.” Pelham-Burns also noted in a letter home that the “hardships to be suffered in the trenches are really quite beyond anything I could have imagined while still in England. The cold, the wet, the mud, are awful, also the frequent lack of water means continual risking of life.”

Ralph Blewitt, who served in the R.F.A., found his experiences similarly disheartening, asking his fiancée if she knew anything “(a)bout this ‘Romance of War’ one hears such a lot about?...Can’t spot it here. One is usually too tired to think of anything except getting a few cornsheaves to doss down on.” John Liddle reported in a letter to his mother that the soldiers heard gruesome stories about “trenches where both sides have sapped forward until they are about 20 yards from each other.” Because, he explained, “the ground is full of dead bodies...when the walls of a dug-out or part of the trench falls in, there is generally a body exposed.” Liddle ended his macabre tale with the information that a soldier “wanted to cut some ends of roots that were sticking out of his dug-out wall, and discovered they were a corpse’s fingers!”

Besides descriptions of the horrors and dangers of the trenches, some soldiers recorded with surprising frankness the mental strains they suffered as a result of the conditions of war. H.J. Chappell, who served on the Western Front with the London Regiment, wrote to his parents in May 1915 that his “nerves are rather jumpy just now and for about 2 days after I could hear shells shrieking which weren’t there.”

Percy Jones, who suffered from insomnia after a few months at the front, admitted that such troubles were common among his unit.

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114 W.B.P. Spencer, December 1914 letter (no specific date given).
115 Maurice Mascall, December 5 1914 letter.
116 Arthur Pelham-Burns, undated letter, probably late December 1914.
117 Ralph Blewitt, September 5 1914 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 8469.
118 J.A. Liddle, December 21 1914 letter.
observing while spending a few days out of the line that “(i)t is great to have a night’s rest in peace in a dry place, but we all get nightmares and wake up yelling.”\textsuperscript{120} He confided in his brother a few days later that he was being sent to the doctor, “having developed insomnia, or some such nonsense. At all events, however tired I get, I can’t sleep,” but asked his brother not to let his mother know.\textsuperscript{121} Pelham-Burns also discussed the mental issues arising from service in the trenches, writing that “I can tell you its no light game this work out here. Regulars and others... are all cracking up.”\textsuperscript{122}

In addition to the details of life on the Western Front, some soldiers also wrote home about their perceptions of the rationale for war. Contrary to modern cynicism about atrocity stories, an examination of their writings show that many soldiers found the sufferings of Belgium sufficiently compelling, even without any propagandistic embellishments, to serve as a reason for fighting. As temporary residents of the country, the British troops were in a position to not only see the effects of the war on it, but also to tell their relations and friends about what they had observed. “What I hate is the things they have done to Belgium,” wrote one soldier. “The country is in a terrible state.”\textsuperscript{123} E.W. Cox, who, in his role as an intelligence officer, had more access to information than most soldiers, agreed. “I have always tried to feel that the Germans were brave gentlemen and time after time I have taken their part when there have been arguments,” he confided in his diary. “But since reading a German officer’s diary yesterday, I feel I only want to get into Germany and raze everything to the ground and let their people feel the effects of the war to the very utmost limit. They are incredibly brutal and should be treated as they have treated the Belgians.”\textsuperscript{124} Maurice Mascall also wrote to his

\textsuperscript{120} Percy Jones, December 29 1914 letter.
\textsuperscript{121} Percy Jones, January 3 1915 letter. Jones was more forthright in his diary, recording that “I notice also that everyone is pretty nery. If one wakes in the night one can always hear several men muttering or even shouting in their sleep. Nightmares are very common and it is curious to note that everyone has the same dream of the dug-out falling in and being buried alive. At times this dream is so vivid that a man wakes up yelling in a positive fever of anguish, and we all dread having the nightmare as badly as this.” (Jones, Diary entry, December 31 1914) Jones, who from his letters comes across as a kind and thoughtful man, seems to have been genuinely anxious to spare those at home, particularly his mother, from knowing too much about his troubles.
\textsuperscript{122} Arthur Pelham-Burns, undated letter, probably late December 1914.
\textsuperscript{123} Cuthbert (Last Name Unknown), January 1 1915 letter.
\textsuperscript{124} E.W. Cox, October 5 1914 diary entry.
fiancée about the “the poor, poor Belgians, who are called upon to suffer so terribly – it makes one’s heart ache!”

In some cases, of course, the soldiers were merely conduits for propaganda, as demonstrated by a story that one man got from a Belgian interpreter, who “was telling me about the German atrocities.” The interpreter recounted a pitiful tale of a Belgian who had been taken prisoner by the Germans. “His wife and their six or seven children went to the German Major and begged for the Father’s life, and the wife pointed to all her children,” the soldier wrote in his diary. “‘You have too many,’ said the Major, and then and there before the mother and father he had two or three of the kiddies shot.” As noted after the war, there were many cases where tales like this were invented to emphasize the suffering of the Belgians under German occupation, but the point is that the soldier, who solemnly recorded that such stories “were authenticated,” believed them, and found them a powerful motivation for fighting.

As can be seen from the letters that they wrote home from the Western front and the information they recorded in their diaries, soldiers found both the conditions of the trenches and the new type of defensive warfare they faced difficult, but were forthright about sharing with their correspondents the details of their lives, their attitudes towards the enemy and their feelings about the war. As a result, those on the home front were able to receive information about the war from unimpeachable informants: the soldiers themselves. At the same time, if letters from the trenches were its only source of such information, the British public as a whole would have found itself largely ignorant, especially those households who did not have a near relation at the front. An examination of the main newspapers in Britain during the first year of the war, however, shows that they in fact revealed more about the conditions in Flanders and attitudes of the soldiers fighting than the orthodox narrative customarily allows. While propaganda and glowing reports of successful battles against the Germans did dominate press coverage of the war, it was still possible to catch glimpses of a

125 Maurice Mascall, December 28 1914 letter.
126 G.A. Burgoyne, April 29 1915 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 12484.
more complex reality from the daily papers, and, with a certain amount of discernment, learn more about the conditions of war than is generally credited.

It must be remembered, when discussing the way the First World War was reported in the British press, that access to the Western front was strictly controlled by the military, and that before mid-1915, there were no journalists at the front at all.\textsuperscript{127} As a result, the accounts that the newspapers published during the first year of the war were based entirely on official sources, and tended to run along the now familiar lines of how splendidly the Allies were fighting, and how easily the treacherous and brutal Germans were being beaten. A report in the \textit{Daily Telegraph} on December 12 1914, for example, flatly insisted that no other outcome was either imaginable or achievable, except on a temporary basis. “A few days ago,” the article began, “there was suddenly a rumor that a repulse had been met with, and this was rather a shock, considering that a repulse anywhere along the Franco-British front is, according to a foregone conclusion, impossible, and it was received, therefore, with incredulity.” The report went on to state that this incredulity was “entirely justified, for the so-called repulse consisted simply of the loss of one advanced trench, which had been insufficiently guarded, and which the French immediately recaptured the following day, and to the success of which they added by capturing several other trenches in the same district from the enemy.” Lest the \textit{Telegraph}‘s readers worry that there was more to this than the French merely being caught temporarily off-guard, the paper went on to reassure them that this was just another example proving “that the Franco-British ascendancy is asserting itself more and more over the enemy, who may sometimes capture a trench, but is never able to hold it long, whereas the Allies thoroughly maintain themselves in every position conquered.”\textsuperscript{128} As Percy Jones ironically remarked about information from British headquarters in advance of the Battle of the Somme, “(t)here is nothing like the truth!”\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{127}Gibbs, Realities of War, pg. 7
\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Daily Telegraph}, “Guns and Airships/Allies’ Fine Work/Increasing Ascendency”, December 12 1914. As Percy Jones remarked in a letter home, “(t)he newspaper men simply drivel, but I don’t blame them. After all, there is not much ‘copy’ in mud!” (Jones, December 20 1914 letter) His tolerant attitude may have stemmed from the fact that he had been a journalist himself before the war.
\textsuperscript{129}Percy Jones, June 26 1916 diary entry.
If all the newspapers had to rely upon were official sources, it is unlikely that their war reporting would have gone beyond these types of clichéd accounts. However, in an effort that was probably aimed at providing ‘human interest’ for readers, while simultaneously filling column inches about the main subject of the day, all the daily newspapers regularly solicited and printed letters received from soldiers’ families. While The Times was, democratically, “glad to consider for publication letters received by relatives and friends from those serving with the Military and Naval Forces,” both the Morning Post and the Daily Mail preferred to solicit their material from “relatives and friends of officers.” All these newspapers assured their readers that the “utmost care will be exercised that no information which could possibly be of use to the enemy shall appear.”

Through soldiers’ letters, the British public was able to catch glimpses of the war beyond the military’s heavily censored, and often invented, accounts. The miseries of the trenches which were supposed to be so carefully kept from the British public were therefore shared with the readers of the Daily Mail, who learned via a letter from an officer that “(w)e do endure ghastly tortures in this war. The cold is perfectly appalling, however many clothes one wears, and I haven’t slept for nearly a fortnight, so I am awfully tired and done up.” Another letter from an officer talked about how “(r)ats are our latest joy. I think they are only water-rats.” The Daily Mail also printed a letter from a Sergeant in the Dragoon Guards who wrote feelingly about how “(i)t must be awful in the trenches just now. I saw a regiment of infantry marching back from them the other day, and they were simply caked in wet clay.”

The Times also published frank accounts of life in the trenches. A sampling from their “Letters from the Front” column demonstrates a remarkable freedom of information, given the newspaper’s need for self-censorship and the desire of the British press to keep accounts of the war positive.

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130 Daily Mail. Other newspapers printed similar assurances with their solicitations of soldiers’ letters.
134 As Haste notes, “Press articles were surveyed by the Censorship Department. Censorship was compulsory for cables, including press cables, but otherwise press censorship was voluntary, that
lieutenant motor-cycle dispatch rider in the Intelligence Corps,” for example, describes his impression of the front: “Hell’s own heat and dust, hell’s own rain, a constant stench of dead horses, a constant succession of deserted villages, and no food.”

An officer in a Highland regiment tried to joke about one of the troops’ main irritations, the omnipresent lice. “When we change our clothes they have to be boiled,” he recounted, commenting that “the subject is unpleasant, but, as the fellows say, ‘What can you expect on the banks of the River Lys?’”

A “General officer” described life in the trenches under fire, noting that his troops were “shot at all day and night by bullets and shells. The latter do far the most damage, but the bullets are particularly deadly, being all fired by picked marksmen, who lie in wait to pick off heads moving in the trenches.”

The letters from soldiers reprinted in The Times provided horrifying glimpses of warfare, and, in spite of propaganda about the always-victorious Allies, retreats under fire. “Battles in all ages must have been very trying,” one soldier wrote, “but the modern type is particularly so on account of its length, the constant noise, and the shrieking shells, which come from out of the blue without a moment’s warning.”

The Times printed one letter from a soldier involved in a battle in a Flanders town, who spoke about the shelling, the burning houses, and the attempts by his men to shelter from bullets. “It is impossible to describe the scene,” he wrote. “Sometimes it was pitch dark, and then the flames would shoot up from the house and show the men crouching in the doorways or lying behind the barricades we had built on the side roads. We hadn’t enough men to take the second barricade, and for some time one of our poor fellows, shot through the head, lay in the square.”

The troops, the soldier wrote, were then ordered to retreat, and three of the soldiers had to go out under gunfire to retrieve the wounded man.

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On November 19, 1914, The Times published a letter from an infantry officer who described a battle in which he led some troops. The German heavy guns were trained on their trenches, and “more than once” the shells “buried whole sections of men in the earth of the parapet. Some of these took no harm, and we dug them out and used them again. Others died, being torn to fragments. Shrapnel killed others, and then as the infantry crept nearer rifle bullets made their mark.” The letter goes on to describe the confusion of battle, when at one point the British soldiers stopped firing at advancing Germans, with catastrophic results, because they believed the soldiers were British; how multiple messengers were sent for reinforcements and killed in the attempt; and a final retreat after no support for the British troops was made available, due to the prevalence of enemy fire and overall muddle.\textsuperscript{140} It seems incredible, in the face of such readily available public information, that historians such as Marwick contend that “(w)hat people at home had heard of the fighting man’s war was only a confused murmur...Fighting men, appalled at the nature of the war in which they found themselves, were unable to convey the unbelievable substance.”\textsuperscript{141}

The Times also freely reprinted letters which praised the abilities of German soldiers and directly contradicted the information routinely found in the British newspapers. One letter, published on November 19, 1914, came from a Major in a Highland Regiment. Bemoaning the slowness of recruiting, he blamed “the home papers tremendously for publishing articles saying the Germans cannot shoot straight, that they run away, that their armies are now composed of old men and boys, &c.,” noting that “such things are not true, or, if they are, their old men and boys fight wonderfully well.” He finished with the sobering prediction that the British were “up against a thundering good army, and it will take us all our time to break ‘em.”\textsuperscript{142} On the same day, the general who found life in the trenches so deadly remarked that he was “disgusted by the accounts I see in the papers of the inferiority of Germans as soldiers; don’t believe one word of it. They are quite splendid in every way. Their courage, efficiency, organization, equipment and

\textsuperscript{140} The Times, “Letters from the Front,” November 19 1914.
\textsuperscript{141} Marwick, The Deluge, pg. 135. And, as Marwick further notes, “any success in this line that they did achieve was doubtless frustrated by the censors.”
\textsuperscript{142} The Times, “Letters from the Front,” November 19 1914.
leading are all of the very best, and never were surpassed by any troops ever raised.” The reprinted letters from British soldiers were also forthright about the unreliability of the press reports of atrocities. As a corporal in the 3rd Signal Troop wrote, in a letter published on October 31, 1914, “(a) lot of those stories of German lootings are absurd.” He did not discount the German behavior in Belgium entirely, noting that “(t)he inexcusable things are the burning of villages and the shooting of civilians for no reason. It seems to be all done systematically.” He asserted, however, that “(l)ots of the cruelty yarns are all rot, but again I know for a fact some awful things they’ve done.”

In addition to accounts of the discomforts of the trenches, the horrors of battle, and the admiration for the professionalism of the German army, the British press also, rather astonishingly, printed some accounts of friendly relations between the British and German trenches, and even some tales of unofficial fraternizing. The short distances between the opposing armies may have not only increased the danger of exposure to rifle fire, but also the opportunities to eavesdrop on the enemy. The Daily Mail, for example, published a letter from Private Angus Royan of the Seaforth Highlanders, who wrote that his unit was in trenches so close to the Germans “that we can hear them talking and sometimes singing.” He also reported that they had a gramophone, which “must have broken down, for one of them shouted across to us in quite good English, ‘Hey, you chaps, can any of you mend a gramophone? This one has got broken.’” One of the British soldiers even volunteered to fix it. “So you see,” Private Rogan concluded, “we are on quite friendly terms with them.” The Daily Mail also reprinted a letter from a major serving on the Western Front, who recounted a story he had heard about two opposing regiments whose “trenches are only fifty yards part.” They “have established very friendly relations with one another,” he claimed, and “hardly ever snipe at one another now, although they attack each other vigorously when they are required to do so.”

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It may seem incredible, in the face of the orthodox narrative of the First World War, to read stories about the miseries of the trenches and troops engaging in friendly banter with the ‘evil Hun,’ but a review of the newspapers from 1914 shows them openly publishing letters that contradict the conventional narrative of the war. In addition, the *Illustrated London News*, in its December 26, 1914 edition, provided a fine demonstration of how the realities of war sometimes shone through the clouds of hate that accompanied the customary press reporting in wartime. That week, the paper was full of accounts, photographs and drawings of the German raids on Scarborough, Whitby and Hartlepool. In addition to stories about the “Willfull Murder of Women and Children,” the *Illustrated London News* also accused the Germans bombarding the town of appearing “to have deliberately aimed shells at places of Christian worship. The reader will remark,” the paper noted, “the holes in the roofs of certain of the churches shown above, which go to prove that shells must have been plumped into the buildings with malice aforethought, and not merely fired at random.”

Yet, in the same edition that contained the news and photographs of this attack, which was aimed primarily against British civilians and succeeded in killing 137 of them, the *Illustrated London News* published a cheerful piece entitled “An Anglo-German ‘Bisley’ at the Front: a Friendly Match between Rival Trenches,” which discussed some shooting contests between the German and British front lines. “When they are not out in action against one another, the men in the British trenches and those in the German trenches,” the account stated matter-of-factly, “fraternize to a certain extent.” Of course, the article noted, “this amiability is tempered by circumstances, is transient, varies in degree, and shows itself in many different forms. Our drawing illustrates one of those forms, which is closely akin to that described the other day by an officer writing home.” The account goes on to describe an informal shooting match that developed between the enemy trenches, where each side took it in turns to set up a bottle on their parapet for the purpose of target practice by the other side. This went on “until a

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148 Bisley is a town in Surrey where Britain’s National Rifle Association Championships are held.
shell from afar burst in the German trench and recalled both parties to a sense of
the stern realities of the situation.”

An examination of newspapers published in the latter part of 1914,
therefore, shows that the British public, instead of living in a cocoon composed of
ignorance and propaganda, had access to information about the horrors of the
trenches, including mud, rats, lice and dead bodies; the terrors of battle, with
soldiers shot and “being torn to fragments”; the spuriousness of tales about
German military ineptitude and Belgian atrocities; and the sometimes friendly
relations between the bitterest of enemies. It is, therefore, not altogether
surprising that the Manchester Guardian felt able to publish an editorial on the 24th
of December 1914 that reflected on the approach of Christmas and the fact that
the holiday, which “celebrates the coming into the world of the religion of
peace,” still “finds half the world at war.” The editorial argued that any
settlement of that war must include the defeated nations, and therefore blind
hostility, “however natural and even justified the strongest hostility may be,” will
not give “the results we seek, and is not in place any more during the continuance
of the struggle than it will be at the close. Nor is it necessary even as a condition
of the hardest fighting. For in this we may take example by the conduct of our
own troops.” These troops, the Guardian contended, fight with “no fury” but
rather professionalism, endurance, military pride and patriotism and “coupled
with this a great deal of good humour and respect for and even a kind of queer
sense of comradeship with the soldier on the other side of the trenches who is
enduring the same hardships and daring the same dangers with feelings and from
motives largely similar to his own.”

The Manchester Guardian, it appears, had no qualms about admitting that
British soldiers did not hate the dreaded Hun of newspaper clichés, but rather felt
respect for and kinship with the enemy. In addition, the paper felt able to set
before its readers an image of a peace that included the defeated powers. Of
course, the Guardian was assuming that the Allies would win the war, but to be

Rival Trenches,” December 26 1914.

150 Manchester Guardian, December 24 1914.
arguing against the atmosphere of hatred and propaganda that characterized much of the British reporting on the war shows that there were newspapers, and therefore members of the public, who were able to view the war in a more balanced way.

It is clear from the accounts the soldiers sent home, including those that found their way into the British newspapers, that the home front understood, at least to a certain extent, the conditions at the Western front and the attitudes of the soldiers who fought there. Although the conventional narrative of the First World War emphasizes that soldiers were deceived into fighting it through deliberate propaganda and programmed blind hatred of the enemy, an examination of the soldiers’ writings show a much more complex and nuanced view of the war and their German opponents. In addition, contrary to the orthodox view that the British public was kept entirely in the dark about the course of the war and the conditions under which their soldiers were fighting, even a cursory examination of the newspapers in 1914 and 1915 shows that information which provided a more accurate picture of the fighting conditions was readily available. In fact, papers such as the Daily Mail, The Times and the London Illustrated News had no compunctions about publishing letters and articles that discussed the false reports of atrocities, the respect the British troops felt for their German counterparts, and the “live and let live” attitudes taken by some soldiers towards the enemy. It is just as well, in light of the events of Christmas 1914, that the British press was at least partially forthright about these matters and the British public had some inkling of their existence, for they were about to be presented, through letters written home by soldiers, with one of the most spectacular demonstrations of tolerance and fraternization that has ever occurred in a major war.
Chapter 3

“It’s a funny show this”: Soldiers’ Representations of the Christmas Truce

We exchanged souvenirs, and they gave us some very fine cigars. A party of theirs met one of ours halfway between the trenches, they all linked arms, and had their photos taken by a German officer! It seems most weird, talking and laughing with them one moment and killing each other the next!

- K.M. Gaunt, letter December 25 1914

Spent a very quiet Xmas day. Troops fraternized with enemy on 6th Div. front and held a concert and football match. Pork for dinner.

- J. S. Fenton, diary entry, December 26 1914

The Christmas truce, which can be ascribed to a number of causes, including familiarity with the troops opposite, the short distances between the opposing trenches, the adaptation to a new type of warfare, the professionalism of the participating soldiers, and sheer exhaustion following the harrowing fall campaign, was an event not unprecedented in nature, but one which occurred on a much larger scale than any previous armistices. As Brown and Seaton point out in their work on the truce, cease-fires and local armistices in wartime were common enough occurrences, and they cite examples from the Peninsular War, the American Civil War, the Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War to prove their case.151 “So the Christmas truce of 1914,” they note, “does not stand alone; on the other hand it is undoubtedly the greatest example of its kind.”152

To a certain extent, this is true, at least in terms of the scale of the truce; however, even though many British troops did join in the cease-fire, it was neither universal nor uniformly received. As Robbins observes, “(t)here was no single war shared by all who took part in it”153; similarly, there was no single truce, and the experiences of those who were involved in the event varied widely. The attitudes taken towards the truce by the soldiers who participated in it reveal much about their views on the war and the enemy, and the way they wrote about the temporary cease-fire, both in their diaries and in letters home, shows that the episode left them with a variety of emotions, from amazement to resentment. In

151 Brown and Seaton, Christmas Truce, pp. xxii-xxiii.
152 Brown and Seaton, Christmas Truce, pg. xxiii.
153 Robbins, First World War, pg. 150.
addition, although the soldiers when writing home all described the truce as “weird” or “unbelievable,” they apparently felt no need to apologize for or explain away their participation in the event, obviously expecting their correspondents to situate the episode within the contemporaneous narrative of the war jointly assumed and endorsed by both the battle and home fronts.

As already noted, the Christmas truce was the result of the circumstances in which the soldiers on the Western front in 1914 found themselves. Even Brown and Seaton, who desperately want the truce to mean more than just a day off for the war-weary troops, acknowledge that “for such an episode to take place, certain special circumstances were required. These were soon to be provided by the dramatic revolution in the style of warfare which took place in 1914 within weeks of the onset of hostilities.”

Considering that the soldiers on both sides were experiencing a new type of war, with its attendant discomforts and dangers as well as unavoidably close contact with the enemy, their participation in the truce was, for the most part, a welcome day off from fighting and a breather before renewed combat. The absence of any major battles or ongoing engagements during the Christmas season provided an opportunity for the soldiers on both sides to take some time out to reinforce their trenches, appreciate the arrival of parcels and letters from home, and celebrate the first Christmas of the war by negotiating a brief cease-fire with their enemies.

As accounts published in British newspapers demonstrate, there were already instances before the Christmas holiday season where soldiers had established some friendly relations with the enemy opposite. In addition, Brown and Seaton have also located a few examples of pre-Christmas temporary armistices for the purpose of bringing in wounded or burying dead, often those from the other side. “In fact, these chivalrous acts were well within the rules of war,” they note. “Armistices, properly agreed, for the burials of the dead had

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154 Brown and Seaton, Christmas Truce, pg. 11.
155 Most soldiers in the army reported being inundated with mail and presents from home for the first holiday season of the war. Percy Jones probably summed up at least a minority view in a letter dated December 24 1914, when he wrote that “I am keeping well in spite of the large number of Christmas parcels received.” (Percy Jones, December 24 1914 letter).
long been part of the accepted military code.”\(^{156}\) Furthermore, they acknowledge the existence of what they refer to as “breakfast truces,” which they describe as a “virtually accepted ritual on many parts of the Western front throughout the war.”\(^{157}\)

In spite of being composed of unconnected individually-organized cease-fires, the Christmas truce was a much more wide-spread event than any previous friendly incidents between opposing troops. Although it varied in the form it took on different parts of the line, Brown and Seaton, whose research into the truce has been very thorough, estimate that two-thirds of the British sector of the Western Front, which at the time stretched from Ypres south to the town of La Bassee, participated in some type of Christmas-time cease-fire.\(^{158}\) In addition to the British and German participants, there were some French and Belgian troops that joined in as well, although not nearly as many as in the German/British lines.\(^{159}\)

In many places, the Christmas truce was foreshadowed by carol singing on both sides on Christmas Eve and the placing of lit Christmas trees on the German parapets. On the day itself, in some areas, firing still took place between opposing troops; for some soldiers, the truce consisted of nothing more than a general cease fire, with no interaction between opposing sides; some units arranged for a collection and burial of the dead in No Man’s Land before returning to their respective trenches; and some troops engaged in what is now thought of as the standard narrative of the truce, with full-scale fraternization between the lines.\(^{160}\)

When fraternization occurred, the soldiers on both sides would gather in No Man’s Land and exchange pleasantries, cigars, cigarettes, food, drink and souvenirs. Often, as soldiers reported in their letters home, the two sides discussed the war, although in the most simplistic terms; these communications were assisted by the presence, in the German lines, of soldiers who in civilian life

\(^{156}\) Brown and Seaton, Christmas Truce, pg. 45.
\(^{157}\) Brown and Seaton, Christmas Truce, pg. 28. They do not, however, offer much proof of these rituals, beyond a nod to Liddle-Hart’s history of the war.
\(^{158}\) Brown and Seaton, Christmas Truce, pp. xx and 56
\(^{159}\) At the time, the only Central Power troops on the Western Front were German.
\(^{160}\) These descriptions apply to the truces on the British/German lines – the ones that took place between the French or Belgians and Germans were noted to be less frequent and considerably less interactive, and mostly consisted of cease-fires, singing in the separate trenches, and occasional throwing across the lines of food and tobacco products.
had worked in England as waiters, cabdrivers, barbers and hotel attendants, and spoke the language well. There were even some football matches between the opposing sides, although not nearly so many as would be later believed. Photographs, which often became valued souvenirs, were taken. In some cases, the truce lasted for little more than an hour or two; in quieter parts of the line, a general cease-fire and noticeably friendly feeling between the opposing troops persisted until New Year’s Day. Although there were a few soldiers who wondered whether the temporary armistice would have a deeper meaning, most participants viewed the truce as a welcome holiday after a difficult and exhausting five months of war, and obviously expected the recipients of their letters to appreciate the event in the same spirit.

In their letters home, soldiers often introduced the story of the Christmas truce by warning their correspondents that they were about to receive surprising news. “We have just had the most extraordinary experience of our lives,” H.J. Chappell wrote. E.W. Squire, who served on the Western front with a London regiment, also attempted to preempt any incredulity on the part of his parents, telling them that “although you might not believe it, we had a truce for the day just along our bit of the line.” Alfred Chater tried to place the truce in context, noting that it was “really very extraordinary that this sort of thing should happen in a war in which there is so much bitterness and ill feeling.” Sam Lane, an NCO in the 2nd Battalion Wiltshire Regiment, felt the same, writing in his diary that it would seem “hardly believable but it is true.”

Having prepared their friends and relations for “a Christmas Day which I shall never forget in all my life,” the soldiers then recounted the details of their respective truces. The cease-fires were often arranged by meetings in No-Man’s-

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161 Even the accounts of football matches that do exist usually report them as happening in another unit.
162 Brown and Seaton have tried to argue that, in some places, particularly Ploegsteert Wood, the truce persisted through early spring, but this is a rather hopeful reading of events, and in line with their general argument; it is clear that the areas they discuss were places where there were simply no offensives taken during that three month period.
164 E.W. Squire, January 4 1915 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 369.
165 A. Chater, December 27 1914 letter.
166 Sam Lane, December 25 1914 diary entry, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 11686.
167 R. Lintott, diary entry December 25 1914, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 3394.
Land between representatives of both sides, although British participants mostly agree that the Germans initiated the negotiations. W.B.P. Spencer, for example, wrote home that on “Xmas Day we heard the words ‘Happy Christmas!’ being called out, wherefore we wrote up on a board ‘Glückliches Werhnnachten!’ and stuck it up. There was no firing, so by degrees each side began gradually showing more of themselves, and then two of their men came halfway over and called for an officer.”

J. Selby Grigg reported a similar experience, writing that, early on Christmas Day, “small parties on both sides ventured out in front of their trenches all unarmed and we heard that a German officer came over and promised that they would not fire if we didn’t.” F.H. Black’s truce began in a comparable fashion, when, on Christmas Eve, a British soldier met with two Germans in No-Man’s-Land: “the Germans promised not to fire till boxing-day unless we did, and if they received orders to fire they would fire high to warn us.”

Chater wrote to his mother that on Christmas morning “I was peeping over the parapet when I saw a German, waving his arms, and presently two of them got out of their trenches and came towards ours – we were just going to fire on them when we saw they had no rifles so one of our men went out to meet them.”

In many cases, the Christmas truce was preceded by German soldiers placing traditionally lit Christmas trees on the parapets of their trenches. Both German and British soldiers also indulged in some carol singing, sometimes in harmony with each other. R. Lintott, with the London Rifle Brigade, wrote that on “Christmas Eve there was any amount of singing in the trenches and the Germans had a cornet going.” E.W. Squire reported to his parents that “(o)n Christmas Eve they were singing away as hard as they could go and they had lights all along their trench in front of us.”

Ted Lack told his niece that, on the evening before Christmas Day, the British soldiers “listened to the nasty Germans singing carols on Xmas Eve night and we sung some to them.” Grigg’s unit experienced a

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168 Spencer, December 25 1914 letter.
169 J. Selby Grigg, December 26 1914 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 3881.
170 F. H. Black, December 31 1914 letter.
171 A. Chater, December 25 1914 letter.
172 R. Lintott, December 27 1914 letter.
173 Squire, January 4 1915 letter.
174 Ted Lack, undated letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 9646.
similar start to the festivities when “(s)oon after dusk on the 24th the Germans put up lanterns on the top of their trenches and started singing, and their shooting practically ceased.” The sound of the songs drifting across No-Man’s-Land often invited responses from the opposing trenches: as J. Wedderburn–Maxwell, a 2nd Lieutenant with a London regiment, wrote in a letter to his father, upon seeing the trees and hearing the songs on Christmas Eve “(o)f course we stopped firing and both sides sang carols.”

Many of the British soldiers felt the presence of Christmas trees and singing portended a peaceful holiday, and “(s)ure enough,” as M. Holroyd, an officer in the 1st Battalion Hampshire Regiment, noted in a letter to his parents, “the carols of Christmas Eve were followed by friendly exchange of greetings on Christmas morning. During the day both sides came out and fraternized in between the lines, buried stale corpses and reconnoitred the ground.” Holroyd’s experience was not unusual; on Christmas Day itself, many truce participants left their trenches and went out into No-Man’s-Land to fraternize with the enemy. Sam Lane recorded the event in his diary, noting that on Christmas Day, after an agreement with the troops opposite to cease firing for 12 hours, “some of our fellows went over and met the Germans who came out of their lines, and shook hands with each other this seems hardly believable but it is true.” Percy Jones similarly observed in his diary that for the entire day “the ground between the two lines was simply swarming with little knots of Saxons and English.” Grigg, coming up on Christmas afternoon to the front from the reserve line, found “a crowd of some 100 tommies of each nationality holding a regular mothers’ meeting between the trenches.” Ted Lack reported to his niece that “(o)n Christmas morning we came right out of our trenches and met in between to wish each other a happy one.” While not all cease-fire agreements involved fraternization with the enemy, many participants in those truces that featured

175 Grigg, December 26 1914 letter.
176 J. Wedderburn-Maxwell, December 26 1914 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 9362.
177 M. Holroyd, December 31 1914 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 7364.
178 Sam Lane, December 25 1914 diary entry.
179 Percy Jones, December 25 1914 diary entry.
180 J. Selby Grigg, December 26 1914 letter.
fraternization report the same lack of hesitation in venturing forth from the relative safety of the British trenches.

Many who took part in the truce did not go out into No-Man’s-Land empty-handed, and soldiers from both sides swapped food, tobacco and other items. E.W. Squire wrote home that, after the British left the trenches, the “Germans came out of theirs and we met halfway and talked and exchanged souvenirs our own bullets for theirs and they also gave some of our fellows cigars of which they said they had plenty and we gave them tins of bully beef as they said they had very little food.”182 An unidentified soldier from a London Regiment reported in his diary that, when visiting the front lines on Christmas Day, he “found about 200 English drawn up across it & 20 yds further down about 300 Germans looking at each other in the end they all mixed up & started exchanging fags & buttons. I got some fags a cap badge a button & some cigars.”183 H.J. Chappell also traded items, noting in a letter home that, after meeting up with some German soldiers in No-Man’s-Land, they all “shook hands, exchanged cigarettes and cigars and souvenirs and soon there was quite a big crowd between the trenches.”184 F.H. Black had a similar experience, as he wrote to a friend: while negotiating terms of the truce with some German officers, “crowds of Germans came out and more of my men, till we formed a group of about 100, all shaking hands, and trying to make each other understood and exchanging souvenirs.”185 Wedderburn-Maxwell reported in his letter home that in his part of the line, “parties of both sides came out and met in the middle, exchanging cigarettes, buttons, what not!”186

In addition to the exchange of food and souvenirs, another standard element of many individual truces was a football match. Although in most cases, a game was impractical for many reasons, including lack of a ball or a suitable patch of ground, it was apparently frequently proposed. Wedderburn-Maxwell, for example, wrote that the two sides “wanted to have a football match

182 E.W. Squire, January 4 1915 letter.
183 Unknown Soldier (1), December 15 1914 diary entry, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 1552.
185 F.H. Black, December 31 1914 letter.
186 J. Wedderburn-Maxwell, December 26 1914 letter.
yesterday afternoon but couldn’t get a ball.”187 Ralph Blewitt, who did not participate in a truce but heard stories from soldiers who did, reported to his fiancée that the Germans “gave our folk cake and cigars and they had a football match with a sack filled with straw.”188 Grigg, whose truce did not feature a football match, provided an account, which he admitted came from an “unreliable source,” of an episode where “in another part of the line the Germans played us at football between the trenches I don’t know which side won.”189 W.H. Diggle reported a similar rumor, noting more specifically that he heard “that there was a football match between the trenches on one part of the line against the Germans. The Germans got beaten again 1-0.”190 J.A. Liddle wrote his mother that the Germans “were awfully keen to get up a football match against us; whether it will come off or not I don’t know.”191 Although most of the stories of football matches were rumors rather than reality, the fact that so many soldiers contemporaneously either mentioned them being proposed or reported hearing that they took place gave the mostly mythical games the air of reality.

Thus far, the event these soldiers experienced conforms closely to the Christmas truce of the conventional war narrative: negotiated cease-fires, cheerful fraternizing, proposed football matches and sharing of food, drink, cigars and souvenirs. Further examination of accounts of the truce, however, reveals more nuanced interactions, many with mournful or ominous undertones. A number of units, for example, used the cease-fire as an opportunity to retrieve bodies from previous battles that had been lying in No-Man’s-Land; in some cases, those bodies were soldiers who had been killed long before Christmas. R. Lintott, for example, recorded in his diary the experience of walking up to the front line of trenches and finding the two sides “burying some dead which had been lying about since Oct. 21st.” After the burial, “(w)e all (Germans and English) stood bareheaded round the grave while a German officer read the service.”192 Grigg participated in a similar ceremony, which occurred after the British retrieved the

188 Ralph Blewitt, January 1 1915 letter.
189 J. Selby-Grigg, December 27 1914 letter.
190 W.H. Diggle, December 27 1914 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 854.
191 J.A. Liddle, December 25 1914 letter.
192 R. Lintott, December 25 1914 letter.
body of a dead German. At the burial a German officer provided a brief prayer service over the grave. After the ceremony, the Germans thanked “‘our English friends for bringing in our dead,’ and then said something in broken English about a merry Xmas and happy New Year. They stuck a bit of wood over the grave – no name on it only ‘Fur Vaterland and Freheit’ (for Fatherland and Freedom).”\textsuperscript{193} As he reported to his parents, Chappell’s truce ended with the burial of the dead from both sides “which they had been unable to get at before, after which the Germans were ordered back to their trenches.”\textsuperscript{194}

For some soldiers, the burial of the dead seems to have been the primary reason for, and the main feature of, the Christmas Day cease-fire. As D. Lloyd-Burch, who served in France with an ambulance corps, wrote in his diary, upon hearing of a truce he “went to the East-Lanc trenches and found the Germans and English troops burying the dead between the trenches cigarettes and cigars were exchanged.”\textsuperscript{195} L. Nicholson, a senior officer with the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion East Lancashire Regiment, also recorded in his diary that, when he went out into No-Man’s-Land, he discovered that the Germans “wanted leave to bury the dead of which there were a good many lying in No-Man’s land.” Nicholson offered the Germans “an hour and a half,” for both sides to “bury all the dead lying close to our line and they could do the same with theirs.” This offer was “subsequently extended for another hour in the course of which we buried all the dead and Sanders went out from the Adv. Post in the 3rd Sector and recovered the body of Dilworth Sher. For. who had been killed about a month before.”\textsuperscript{196} Pelham-Burn wrote that he found the joint burial service for the British and German dead, some of whom “had been there 6 weeks or more,” a very moving experience. “Our Padre who was up in the trenches for a few hours arranged the prayers and Psalms etc. and then our interpreter wrote them out in German,” he reported. The service was “then read first in English by our own Padre and then in German by a boy who was studying for the ministry. It was an extraordinary most wonderful sight. The

\textsuperscript{193} J. Selby-Grigg, December 26 1914 letter.
\textsuperscript{194} H.J. Chappell, December 27 1914 letter.
\textsuperscript{195} D. Lloyd-Burch, undated diary entry, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 1423.
\textsuperscript{196} L. Nicholson, December 25 1914 diary entry, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 9975.
Germans formed up on one side the English on the other the officers standing in front, every head bared.”

While some British soldiers found the improvised ceremonies consisting of men from both armies united in memorializing their fallen comrades a meaningful experience, others were more distressed, particularly by the sight of the dead. Percy Jones described in his diary how, in No-Man’s-Land, there was a “long ditch about four feet wide and four feet deep. It was simply packed with dead Germans. Their faces, brown and leather-like, with deep sunken cheeks, and eyebrows frozen stiff, stared up horribly through the clear water.” Some of the soldiers had been killed recently, and this seems to have affected the soldiers who had to bury them. A diary from an unidentified soldier in the 2nd Battalion Border Regiment records, on December 25, 1914, how an officer told his unit “that we were to Bury our Comrades that fell in the Charge on the 18th of Dec. so we all started digging and Burying them side by side and made them a Cross out of the wood of a Biscuit Box and layed them to rest on Xmas day.” When the soldiers had been buried, “we all kneled and offered up a Prayer to God above for our Comrades who fell in Honour.”

W.B.P. Spencer’s unhappy truce consisted of a four-hour armistice, during which the Germans carried “dead men back halfway for us to bury. A few days previous we had an attack with many losses.” Spencer noted bitterly in his letter that he did not want to describe “the sights I saw, and which I shall never forget.” After burying the dead “as they were,” Spencer wrote home, he went “back to the trenches with the feeling of hatred growing even stronger after what we had just seen.”

While the truce provided some soldiers with the welcome relief of being able to collect and bury the bodies of their comrades as well as honor their memories, the grisly remains reminded others of the horrors of the battle and the reasons they had to hate the enemy. Even Pelham-Burns, who found the joint burial party in which he participated “a

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197 A. Pelham-Burns, undated letter.
198 Percy Jones, December 27 1914 diary entry.
199 Unknown soldier (2), December 25 1914 diary entry, Imperial War Museum No. 8631.
200 W.B.P. Spencer, December 25 1914 letter.
201 In spite of the negative emotions aroused by the sight of so many dead bodies, the soldiers quoted here all wrote home about the burials and memorials services without hesitation; their unwillingness to communicate, in this case, appears to have extended mostly to descriptions of the decomposed bodies, rather than a desire to shield their correspondents from information about the truce itself.
wonderful sight”, described the collection of the dead for burial as “too awful to
describe so I won’t attempt it.”

In addition to the burial parties, however peaceably conducted, that
reminded the soldiers of the presence of the war, there were also signs of
continued fighting all throughout Christmas. Grigg, for instance, noted ironically
that, while Christmas Eve had been quiet in their trenches, “there has been a little
sniping on our right where the Germans are evidently not quite such good friends
with their enemies.” Liddle also remarked on the spasmodic nature of the
truce, writing home that in spite of the cease-fire in his area there “was a
continual boom a long way off on our left, where some battle was going on.” To
the right of his company’s trenches, “snipers were quite busy, but along our
battalion and the next on our left, (i.e. as far as we could see,) the whole place
was crowded with groups of Germans, English and Highlanders bucking away to
each other.” C.G.V. Wellesley, who served with 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Lincolnshire
Regiment, similarly noted that “on our right and left they have been going on
fighting as usual” and H.J. Chappell also reported that, during the truce, “we
could hear firing on both flanks and the artillery were bombarding each other
over our heads.” In spite of the temporary armistice, therefore, the soldiers
were unable to forget the war and were aware that, while they were fraternizing
with the Germans, others were still fighting them and perhaps being wounded or
killed on Christmas Day.

Even without the reminders of dead bodies or adjacent fighting, however,
there were soldiers who were still not able to overlook their distrust of the
Germans during the cease-fires. Although the orthodox narrative of the truce has
all soldiers participating happily in the event, many could not forget the war and
their feelings towards the enemy. Spencer’s sight of the dead British soldiers, as
already noted, upset him badly; he was not the only soldier who found the truce
aroused negative emotions. W.H. Diggle, a staff officer in France, who reported in

202 A. Pelham-Burns, undated letter.
203 J. Selby Grigg, December 26 1914 letter.
204 J.A. Liddle, December 25 1914 letter.
205 C.G.V. Wellesley, December 25 1914 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 15579.
206 H.J. Chappell, December 27 1914 letter.
a letter home that the Germans in his area had asked for a truce on Christmas Day, remarked on the treachery of the enemy, who shot “one of our officers dead who was doing his half of the truce.” Diggle concluded angrily that the Germans “are dirty dogs and you can’t trust them.” One soldier recorded in his diary that, while “we all had a good sing song that night in our trenches,” the British soldiers “did not forget to have our look out as I do not think we became friends.” Sam Lane, who likewise participated in a holiday armistice, still noted that an alarm was raised on Christmas Day at “about 12 o’clock midnight when we thought the Germans were going to attack us.” F.H. Black was similarly nervous during his truce: in spite of fraternization occurring in his area of the line between “crowds of Germans” and his men, during which they shook hands, tried to converse and exchanged souvenirs, he noticed that “(t)he Germans outnumbered us by 4 or 5 to 1.” With understandable caution, Black “told the Captain I thought we had better get back to our trenches, which we did after a great deal of bowing.” Percy Jones was also vigilant, noting that the Germans, after lighting trees on Christmas Eve, offered the following proposal: “‘Englishmen, Englishmen, Don’t shoot. You don’t shoot, we don’t shoot.’” “This was all very well,” Jones commented skeptically in his diary, “but we had heard so many yarns about German treachery that we kept a very sharp look-out.” B.J. Brookes, who served in France with the Queen’s Westminster Rifles, recorded a similar caution among his unit, observing that, when an officer went out to meet a German emissary, we “stood at our posts with rifles loaded in case of treachery.”

Along with very understandable suspicions of the Germans, many British also found them sadly misinformed. Apparently the two groups discussed the war during fraternization, or, rather, the British listened to the Germans’ asserted belief in their country’s eventual victory. Liddle provided an example of this when he wrote his parents that the Germans he met “were quite convinced that the Russians were absolutely beaten, and also the Servians. Also that they would win,

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207 W.H. Diggle, December 27 1914 letter.
208 Unknown soldier (2), December 25 1914 diary entry.
209 Sam Lane, December 26 1914 diary entry.
210 F.H. Black, December 31 1914 letter.
211 Percy Jones, December 27 1914 diary entry.
212 B.J. Brookes, December 25 1914 diary entry, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 10825.
and the war would be over in about 6 months at most.”213 E.G. Morley, who served with the Queen’s Westminster Rifles, said that one German asked “how the sentries were posted around Buckingham Palace,”214 as he was under the impression that German troops had reached England. An unidentified soldier recorded in his diary that, during fraternization, the first thing the enemy asked “was when are you going to give in you are beat.” The Germans further claimed that their newspapers reported “they had troops reviewing in Hyde Park and also troops in Calais.” The soldier responded that “well I must admit that you have got troops in London But they are Prisoners of War”; however, the Germans “would not take that so my Chum gave them the News of the World.”215 Ralph Blewitt similarly relayed an anecdote about a German soldier who “had great tales of Russia and naval victories which I suppose they stuff them up with.”216 Wedderburn-Maxwell also observed how, during the mingling of the two sides, he heard that the Germans believed “they have an enormous victory in Poland and that the war would be over in 3 weeks.”217

In spite of the confidence with which the Germans asserted these tales of conquest and impending victory, none of the British soldiers recorded any doubt about the progress of the war and the possibility of Allied defeat. Perhaps the generally outlandish nature of the German claims made them too ridiculous to contemplate seriously, but at the same time, for the orthodox narrative of the First World War and the Christmas truce to retain credibility, the soldiers should at this point in the war have begun to question its progress and the futile nature of the conflict. After all, instead of the war ending as quickly as anticipated, at the time of the truce the conflict was already five months old and the Germans still occupied Belgium and all of northern France. Instead of harboring doubts, however, British soldiers appear to have cheerfully bantered with the Germans over war news, including one soldier who, as Blewitt reported, refused to

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213 J.A. Liddle, December 25 1914 diary entry.
214 E.G. Morley, December 29 1914 letter, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 2450.
215 Unknown soldier (2), December 25 1914 diary entry. Apparently this British soldier had faith that, whatever lies the German press might be reporting, the British newspapers could still be relied upon.
216 Ralph Blewitt, January 1 1915 letter.
217 J. Wedderburn-Maxwell, December 26 1914 letter.
contradict a German who had great faith in his country’s victories, “as he didn’t like to hurt his feelings!!”\textsuperscript{218} It seems incredible that, after the retreat of the Allied forces before the German onslaught in the autumn, and experience with the miseries of trench warfare, British soldiers continued to feel confidence and optimism about the course of the war, but contact with similar confidence and optimism on the part of the Germans does not seem to have shaken their belief that the Allies would eventually prevail.

Even more astonishing, many British reported that the Germans with whom they fraternized confessed that, side by side with their optimism about the war’s progress, they felt tired of the conflict. Brookes, for example, recorded in his diary that the enemy “wanted to continue a partial truce until the New Year, for as some of them said, they were heartily sick of the War, and did not want to fight.”\textsuperscript{219} Blewitt similarly wrote to his fiancée that the Germans “were all fed up with the war and wanted to know when we were going to give in!\textsuperscript{220} In some cases, the weariness with war (without loss of faith in the eventual outcome) was shared by both sides; F.H. Black noted that the Germans “are just as tired of the war as we are, and said they should not fire again until we did.”\textsuperscript{221} Chater agreed, writing home that “(f)rom what I gathered most of them would be as glad to get home again as we should.”\textsuperscript{222} Grigg claimed that none of the Germans with whom he had fraternized “seemed to have any personal animosity against England and all said they would be jolly glad when the war was over.”\textsuperscript{223} Although these statements appear to track the conventional truce narrative, emphasizing the communal experiences of the opposing sides over the troops’ identification with their respective nationalities, closer examination of the letters and diaries of the soldiers involved show that these were standard soldiers’ complaints about army service, exacerbated by the holiday season, which would naturally be the occasion for additional homesickness.

\textsuperscript{218} Ralph Blewitt, January 1 1915 letter.
\textsuperscript{219} Bernard Brookes, December 25 1914 diary entry.
\textsuperscript{220} Ralph Blewitt, January 1, 1915 letter.
\textsuperscript{221} F.H. Black, December 31 1914 letter.
\textsuperscript{222} A. Chater, December 25 1914 letter.
\textsuperscript{223} J. Selby Grigg, December 26 1914 letter.
Another axiom of the Christmas truce is that it was an event in which the common soldiers joined in eagerly, but was opposed by officers, who feared the loss of morale that would result from mixing with the enemy on a friendly basis. On the contrary, as the evidence shows, the officers in the front line did not forbid the truce, nor did they refuse to participate in it themselves. F.H. Black, Ralph Blewitt, H.J. Chappell, J.A. Liddle, L. Nicholson and Wedderburn-Maxwell, all extensively quoted in this chapter, were front-line officers who had no objection to the negotiated cease-fires. There are a few recorded instances of officers putting an end to the armistices; however, they were not preventing the truces themselves, but rather bringing specific episodes of fraternization to a close. Chater’s letter home provides an example of this, reporting that fraternization with the opposing troops “continued for about half an hour,” after which “most of the men were ordered back to the trenches.” Liddle similarly reported that the German officers put an end to the cease-fire, whistling the men “back after about an hour.” However, this action does not appear to have been prompted by any animosity, as Liddle wrote that, while the Germans were leaving, “there was a lot of handshaking and ‘Auf wiedersehen’” which would hardly have been the case if the officers had been trying to prevent the truce from occurring.

In fact, many of the cease-fires ended with firing that had been pre-arranged, indicating that both sides, including officers and men, understood that the truce was a temporary measure and that the war would resume at a set point. J. Fenton, who served on the Western front in the Royal Engineers, provides a case in point, recording in his diary that the Germans “threw a message over to say they are going to start firing at midnight and that they take it as an honour to inform us of the fact.” The British were similarly considerate, as Wedderburn-Maxwell wrote home; what he referred to as the “soldiers truce” ended “at midnight when one of our officers fired a Very Pistol as signal that time was up,

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224 While Black, as already noted, did confess to being slightly apprehensive about being surrounded by the Germans on a 4 to 1 ratio with British troops, he still had no compunctions about shaking hands and exchanging souvenirs with the enemy. (F.H. Black, December 31 1915 letter)
225 A. Chater, December 25 1914 letter.
226 J.A. Liddle, December 25 1914 letter.
227 J. Fenton, December 27 1915 diary entry, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 12033.
and a volley over their heads.”  

Brookes also reported warning the opposing side of the cease-fire’s end, even though the Germans requested that the two sides “continue a partial truce until the New Year.” Unfortunately, as Brooks recorded in his diary, his company was “leaving the trenches early next morning.” Not wanting the Germans to be aware of this, the British “insisted on the truce ending at Midnight, at which time our artillery sent over to them four shells of small calibre to let them know that the truce...was ended.”  

The troops opposite F.H. Black also negotiated for a slightly longer truce, promising “not to fire till boxing-day unless we did,” and further undertaking that, “if they received orders to fire” they would first aim over the heads of the British in warning.  

Another interesting aspect of the truce was observation by the British of the local origins of the soldiers opposite them. While the phrase ‘the enemy’ in modern British discussions of the war now refers to all Germans, the men on the front line at that time clearly drew a distinction between Saxon and Bavarian soldiers and Prussians. As Brown and Seaton noted, the onus of dislike towards the enemy mostly fell on one sub-group, as “in particular the Saxons were assumed to have had no hand in excesses blamed either on the Prussian soldiery or on the German leadership.”  

The writings of the men involved in the truce bear out this observation. D. Lloyd-Burch recorded in his diary the belief that the cease-fire was due entirely to the identity of the troops opposite: “(t)he Saxon’s were in front of my brigade at this time had the Prussians been there no truce would have been held.”  

Holroyd agreed, noting that he would be “greatly surprised if they or we fire a shot tomorrow; whatever Prussian war-lords may do, Bavarian troops are pretty sure not to desecrate Christmas Day.” When he discovered that the troops opposite were in fact Saxons rather than Bavarians, he even emphasized their communal heritage across the lines, referring to the British and German troops collectively as “(w)e and the other Saxons.”  

During fraternization, Liddle asked a German soldier “if he hated the English like the...
Prussians did. He denied the imputation most emphatically.” E.W. Cox also reported, in a letter home, that all soldiers “except the Prussians” were fraternizing. He even noted that the non-Prussian troops provided a friendly warning to the British, telling them “not to go south of a certain line as there were Prussians there.” In fact, Cox claimed, “(t)wo of our fellows who disregarded the warning were shot dead.” As these examples demonstrate, it is apparent that the British soldiers did believe that the impetus for war originated with the Prussian influence in Germany, and that the Bavarian and Saxon regiments were less responsible for the situation in which the soldiers now found themselves, making it easier for them to respond to the overtures of friendship offered by these regiments during the Christmas truce.

The British soldiers generally closed their accounts of the truce with relatively brief summings-up of the event. “It was indeed an ideal Christmas,” Brookes noted in his diary, observing that “the spirit of Peace and Goodwill was very striking in comparison with the hatred and death-dealing of the past few months.” E.G. Morley light-heartedly characterized his Christmas turn in the trenches as “not so bad as regards weather, it being chiefly frosty and as regards the war was a perfect scream.” Pelham-Burn accurately predicted that the enthusiastic fraternization between the soldiers of the opposing sides “was a sight one will never see again,” and Wedderburn-Maxwell called it “the most wonderful thing of the war.” Percy Jones summed up the event by noting in his diary that “(a)together we had a great day with our enemies, and parted with much hand-shaking and mutual good wishes.” J. Selby Grigg unconsciously adopted the majority view towards the truce when he wrote that “(o)n the whole, apart from the wet, cold and lack of sleep which one has to get used to, I have quite enjoyed our three days up and wouldn’t have missed it for

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234 J. Liddle, December 25 1914 letter.
235 E.W. Cox, December 27 1914 letter.
236 Bernard Brookes, December 25 1914 diary entry.
237 E.G. Morley, December 29 1914 letter.
238 A. Pelham-Burn, undated letter.
239 J. Wedderburn-Maxwell, December 26 1914 letter.
240 Percy Jones, December 27 1914 diary entry.
It is clear from the words of the soldiers who were there that the truce was a memorable episode, but at the same time a temporary and likely unrepeatable one.

As can be seen from the writings of the soldiers involved, what emerges from an examination of the letters and diaries of those that participated in the Christmas truce is remarkable more for what was not recorded than what was. While soldiers wrote cheerfully about the opportunities to fraternize with the Germans and move about freely in the trenches without fear of snipers, and less happily about being able to bury the dead lying in No-Man’s-Land, they did not voice any belief that the existence of the truce meant the end of the war, or that contact with the Germans removed their rationale for continued fighting. So at the same time that the men were marveling at what they described as “a very weird Xmas Day” or “an extraordinary state of affairs,” they still clearly expected that the war would resume unchanged after the brief interlude. Claims by British soldiers that the Germans would have prolonged the truce if the British had agreed did occur but were infrequent; similarly, observations by soldiers who believed that the truce had any significance beyond that of a brief holiday were also rare. The argument made by Brown and Seaton that ongoing diminished activity in certain areas of the line amounted to de facto truce continuation is not borne out by the letters and diaries of the men involved, who all cheerfully discussed at what point the shooting would resume.

As can be seen by the accounts written by the soldiers involved, the Christmas truce was not the monolithic event that the current orthodox First World War narrative claims. In spite of one soldier who noted that “(I)t seemed the weirdest thing in the world that you should be talking to the men you were

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241 J. Selby Grigg, December 27 1914 letter.
242 W.B.P. Spencer, December 25 1914 letter.
243 M. Mascall, December 29 1914 letter.
244 Brown and Seaton contend that “in certain sectors the mood inspired by the events of Christmas lingered on with incredible stubbornness”, citing Ploegsteert Wood and an area south of Armentieres as two places that remained quiet long after Christmas, and possibly into February and March. (Brown and Seaton, Christmas Truce, pg. 157). However, it is much more likely that, with the shortage of ammunition that plagued the Allied armies through mid-1915, and other parts of the line experiencing more volatility during this time, these were just not particularly busy areas. No soldier’s letters or diaries examined reported any truce extending past the end of the year, and most were over by December 27th.
trying to shoot the day before” and Ralph Blewitt writing that he believed that “if it wasn’t stopped jolly quick I suppose it would spread all down the line and the armies would cease to fight at all,” most participants merely noted that “this funny unofficial truce” with “our friends the enemy” was a temporary episode. Although many men approached the contact with the Germans with unreserved enjoyment, there were other soldiers, such as W.B.P. Spencer, who were unable to completely subsume their resentment of the enemy during a short cease-fire. In addition, except for the occasional comment that “(i)t does seem silly fighting men you have no quarrel with personally,” most of those involved in the truce accepted that they would go back to killing the opposing side as soon as the “extraordinary” event ended. “(I)t really is a funny war isn’t it,” Wellesley rhetorically wrote home, without any indication that the truce had caused him to rethink his attitude towards the conflict. In spite of claiming that the truce could have spread and caused the armies to cease fighting, Ralph Blewitt noted without surprise that the armistice only lasted on Boxing Day “till some officer came down and said they’d had enough now” at which point “both sides retired to their trenches and started off sniping with increased vigour.”

Contrary to the orthodox narrative of the war, the British soldiers involved appeared to have no constraints in writing home to their friends and relations about singing songs in harmony with the Germans, meeting them in No-Man’s-Land, exchanging food and souvenirs with the enemy, and joining with the soldiers from the opposing sides in joint burial parties. The ease with which these soldiers related stories about their experiences in the truce belies the conventional war narrative which insists civilians had no idea of what life in the trenches was like. Having generally kept their correspondents informed, since they had joined up, about their attitudes towards the war, the conditions of life in the front lines, their feelings of comradeship with their enemies, their respect for

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245 Unknown soldier (1), December 25 1914 diary entry.
246 Ralph Blewitt, January 1 1915 letter.
247 A. Pelham-Burn, undated letter.
248 Bernard Brookes, December 26 1914 diary entry.
249 Cuthbert (Last Name Unknown), January 1 1914 letter.
251 Ralph Blewitt, January 1 1915 letter.
the professionalism of the German soldiers and the horrors of the war, the soldiers obviously expected that their friends and relations would view the truce as they did: as a temporary break from fighting, but not as a reason to cease doing so, or an event that removed the justification for the continuance of the war. The absence of attempts to reassure their correspondents about their attitudes towards the war or their continued desire to fight proves that the soldiers believed their letters’ recipients would enjoy the story of a peaceful Christmas and fraternization between the two armies as much as they did. Indeed, the popularity of accounts of the Christmas truce, as demonstrated by the number of reports of it that appeared in the British press, shows that the soldiers’ assumptions were correct: those on the home front did very much enjoy the story of the brief armistice, and took the cease-fire in the same spirit as those who participated in the event.
Chapter 4 – “Strange it all seems”:
The Christmas Truce and the Reaction of the British Press

NO CHRISTMAS TRUCE
FIGHTING IN FRANCE AS FIERCE AS EVER
A DETERMINED ADVANCE
(PRESS ASSOCIATION WAR SPECIAL)
Boulogne, Saturday

At the front Christmas had to be postponed. The materials of good cheer were there in abundance, but the army was too engaged with the Germans to be able to enjoy them.

-Manchester Guardian, December 28 1914

A CHRISTMAS TRUCE AT THE FRONT
ENEMIES AT FOOTBALL
GERMAN GETS A FRIENDLY HAIRCUT

That there was an unofficial truce along sections, at least, of the trenches in France on Christmas Day, and that advantage was taken of it for some remarkable fraternizing among enemies, is shown in convincing detail in the following extracts from letters just arrived from the front. The first was received in Manchester yesterday from a British officer.

-Manchester Guardian, December 31 1914

While British soldiers may have felt comfortable sharing the details of the Christmas truce with their correspondents, it can be safely predicated that the British press would take a more cautious approach to the event. Soldiers could expect those whom they knew to understand their attitudes towards the enemy troops, but the British public, which as a whole supported the war, would most likely be appalled at any cessation of hostilities, however temporary. Although forthright accounts about life on the Western front may have been readily available to the public, demonstrating that the civilians in Britain knew more about the war than previously believed, those reports came from soldiers who assumed that British involvement in the war was necessary, even if they were willing to be candid about its horrors and discomforts. News of the Christmas truce, involving letters from soldiers talking about what “good sports” the Germans were and how eagerly fighting was abandoned on the holiday, would presumably be another matter altogether. In addition, the self-censorship
undertaken by the British newspapers during the war would probably guarantee that any reporting of the unofficial armistice would, by necessity, be not only brief, but also accompanied by attempts to explain away or situate the truce within the larger pro-war narrative.

Some of these assumptions were in fact borne out by the approach the British press took towards the truce; others proved to be baseless. While, surprisingly, many accounts of the event did appear in the newspapers, and were even featured prominently, the news of the temporary holiday cease-fire was confined almost entirely to letters reprinted from soldiers. The Christmas truce, therefore, was dealt with by the press in the same way as accurate information about the real conditions at the front and the feelings of the British soldiers towards the war: these controversial truths could only be safely expressed by the soldiers themselves. Obviously ambivalent about how to handle an event that so clearly contradicted the contemporaneous narrative of the war, yet at the same time aroused an enormous amount of public interest, British newspapers mostly confined themselves to presenting the truce through the soldiers’ own words and did not report on it in any conventional sense. However, the length of time the newspapers continued to print letters about the truce – three weeks, which in press terms is an eon – provides some clues to the public reaction to the cease-fire. If the public response had not been positive, the major British newspapers would not have continued to run the stories of the truce for such a long period. Although accounts of the temporary cease-fire appeared almost daily in the British press from the end of December 1914 through the middle of January 1915, the only articles on the subject that could be characterized as conventional journalism consisted of stories about how the French and German military authorities responded to the truce. In a three week period, from December 31 1914 through January 20 1915, the Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph, Morning Post, Manchester Guardian and The Times combined published over sixty letters referencing the truce, but only a few accounts about official responses to the event.252

252 These five papers were chosen to represent the British press as a whole, as they all had national exposure, were all widely read (the Daily Mail was the paper with the largest circulation at the time),
Additionally, after numerous truce accounts had appeared in their respective papers, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Manchester Guardian* each offered editorials that attempted to situate the Christmas truce within the accepted discourse of the war. Aside from those two efforts to reconcile the unofficial armistice with the overarching narrative of the war, coverage of the truce otherwise remained the province of the “Letters from the Front” columns, and ceased altogether by the end of the third week of January 1915. It should be noted, however, that while the letters from the front discussing the truce contained ample contradictions to the usual war reporting, both through the details of life at the front they provided and the story of the truce itself, this had no effect on other war news published during that time. In fact, the standard journalistic efforts representing the conflict, which simplistically portrayed the Germans as evil and the Allies as continuously triumphant, continued unabated throughout the other pages of the British newspapers during the same period that the unofficial armistice was being covered.

The Christmas truce was not mentioned in the British press until nearly a week after it occurred. There were no press representatives at the front in the early part of the war, and with no official communiques on the subject, the newspapers probably did not even hear of the existence of the truce until a few days after Christmas. In the meantime, the reporting of the conflict in the newspapers between Christmas and New Year’s Eve consisted of stories that fit comfortably into the contemporaneous narrative of the war. *The Times*, for example, published an article on December 26th entitled “Carols in the Trenches/How the Army Celebrated Christmas.” This account began with the observation that the correspondent had “always been struck, and never more so than during this Christmastide, with the large-hearted, tolerant attitude our men have unconsciously adopted towards the individual German soldier.” As the unnamed journalist declared, “(m)alice finds no place at all in the British military

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and represented varying viewpoints, from the conservative and mainstream through the more left-wing.

253 The truce was never officially acknowledged by the government in its briefings about the war, and with no correspondents at the front, it would have taken time for the rumors of the truce to reach England.
equipment, and that is why a season consecrated to goodwill and fellowship finds the hand and heart of the British soldier in sympathy with the Christmas spirit.” 

To demonstrate the goodness of the generic British soldier’s heart, the article noted that carols were sung in the British trenches on Christmas Eve, and that in one case Germans even joined in. Unfortunately, the harmonizing finished unhappily, as “no sooner had the hymn ended than the cynical Teutonic touch was introduced by a shower of bullets from the enemy’s trenches.”

Similarly, the Daily Mail’s post-Christmas pre-truce reporting also started with the expected accounts of the stereotypical Hun at his fiendish worst: “Troops Feast While Belgians Fast,” read the headline of a December 26th article that discussed how the Germans celebrated Christmas by “bleeding” the Belgian peasantry of wine and cigars, noting that “the Belgian people were even asked to make Christmas cakes for the German soldiers.” To further demonize the enemy, the Daily Mail’s readers were informed that such selfish celebrations were “in obedience to the military order, for notices were issued several days ago that the troops must do their best to enjoy Yuletide.” The paper capped the story off by alleging that the Germans were being hoodwinked by their own newspapers, who published drawings of “roseate pictures of the welfare of the German armies in the field, thus adding their share to thicken the great fog of deception under which the German public is still groping for the truth.”

On December 28th the Daily Mail published an account “From Our Special Correspondent Basil Clark” who was credited with reporting from Flanders. “Christmas Day, “he wrote “was a day of strife – in these northern regions at least. The Germans came down upon the countryside east of Nieuport in a fury of hate. Their fiercest onslaught of the week they reserved for Christmas Day.” The public, however, was not to worry, as for “the whole of the afternoon the Allies were busy beating them off. The guns thumped, the machine guns tapped, and rifles cracked. That was the music of Christmas about Nieuport.”

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254 The Times, “Carols in the Trenches/How the Army Celebrated Christmas”, December 26 1914
255 Daily Mail, “Christmas Trees in German Trenches/Troops Feast While Belgians Fast”, December 26 1914
256 Daily Mail, “Jangle of Bells and Guns”, December 28 1914. It should be noted that the troops fighting at Nieuport were French, not British.
Telegraph had similar news on December 26th, noting that the official communiqué issued in Paris on December 25th reported fighting, with progress made along the front and some slight advances against the enemy. “North of Roye at Lihu near Lihons,” the article went on to claim, “we also made some progress. These different attacks were carried out with much dash. Everywhere we retained the ground which we had won.” In contrast to that rather bland paragraph, the Telegraph, on the same day, also had a horrifying tale of German atrocities: “Christmas Barbarities by the Germans in Poland/Priests Bayoneted” read the headline, with a byline of “Petrograd/Friday.” Christmas Day, the article notes, “was marked with more than the usual crop of German and Austrian barbarities. One hears of German soldiers provided with small bottles of vitriol to be thrown in the faces of the enemy, of Austrians publically bayonetting Russophile priests, of peasants tied to the tails of galloping horses and kicked to death.” As demonstrated by these various accounts, the official reports of the war showed the situation unchanged over the Christmas holiday, with no mention of any cease-fires.

Amidst the reports of fierce fighting and German atrocities, the news of the Christmas truce, when it began trickling through, must certainly have perplexed the editors of these papers. There was no report of the event from any official source, yet the letters being passed on to the papers from soldiers’ friends and families confirmed the existence of the truce beyond any reasonable doubt. Absent any official reports, either the editors reached independent decisions about how to handle the matter or decided how to approach it collaboratively; either way, every newspaper took the same stance towards their coverage of the

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257 Daily Telegraph, “Guns and Airships/Allies’ Fine Work/Increasing Ascendency”, December 26 1914. Again, in this case “we” must refer collectively to Allied troops, as there were no BEF forces in the vicinity of Roye in December 1914.

258 Daily Telegraph, “Christmas Barbarities by the Germans in Poland/Priests Bayonetted”, December 26 1914. It seems incredible now that Telegraph readers would have believed that it was possible for these multiple horrendous events to have occurred on Christmas, for an account of them to be conveyed to a journalist that same day, and for that journalist to have transmitted it from Poland to England just in time for the report to appear in the Boxing Day edition of the paper, but the Telegraph produced this story with the journalistic equivalent of a straight face, and presumably expected its readers to swallow it whole.
truce, which was to provide accounts of the event rather than report upon it. In any case, whether through pre-arrangement or coincidence, the first reports of the truce began to appear in the British press on December 31st, when three newspapers simultaneously published letters referring to the event.

Letters in all the newspapers were almost identically introduced: the identity of the soldier writing was sometimes revealed, while his rank and regiment were almost always stated. A typical account in the Daily Telegraph that began “Christmastide in the Trenches/Greeting the Enemy/Unaccepted Challenges” was credited to a “rifleman in the Queen's Westminsters, writing home on Boxing Day to friends in London,” who “describes how certain members of the regiment and the German troops spent a merry Christmas together.” The rifleman, who remarked that “Christmas Day in the trenches was a sort of ragtime war affair, and I think about the funniest thing I have ever struck,” related how his unit was shelling the German trenches until it became dark on Christmas Eve, when the British began to sing carols, and the Germans joined in. The British carried on “a sort of ‘matey’ conversation with the enemy,” after which the two sides held “a concert and a dance,” followed by a meeting in No-Man’s-Land, with cigarettes exchanged. The letter’s author pronounced the Germans “jolly good sports” and was disappointed when a proposed football match on Christmas Day did not come off. He closed the letter by anticipating incredulity on the part of the recipient: “I expect you think this a bit of a yarn. In fact, the Regulars, who were in reserve here, would not believe it, and some of them came up to see for themselves.”

The Telegraph printed two other letters from soldiers in the same regiment: one reported that it was the Germans who initiated the carol-singing and fire-lighting, but the British troops who shouted “(w)on’t you come half-way and meet us and shake hands?” When the Germans agreed, “we downed all arms and I went over with ----- and met four of them (they weren’t taking any

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259 At the moment, what may have happened behind the scenes is pure surmise; it would be interesting, however, to know if the newspapers’ archives record any information about this subject. At the same time, whether it was an independent or collaborative decision, the effect of the overall coverage remained the same.

risks), and we had a chat, exchanged cigarettes for coffee and sweets, &c.”

Rifleman Windridge, also of the Queen’s Westminsters, described a similar experience, with firing dying down on Christmas Eve, carols sung in both lines of trenches, and “compliments of the season” shouted across. On Christmas Day itself, the soldier recounted how the Germans walked about “‘on top,’ and some of our fellows went out to meet them, and there, between the two firing lines, the English were shaking hands with the Germans, changing smokes, buttons and hats.” As the British troops discovered, many of the Germans spoke English, and a “great number of them had come from London. One man said he had lived in London for ten years, and he was going back. If the Kaiser did not take him he was going back on his own.” The day was concluded by an arrangement with the Germans “that they would not fire until we did,” which held good “until five o’clock, when we were relieved by Regulars.”

Another account came from an officer in the Oxford Light Infantry, who did not participate in the truce himself, but heard about it on Boxing Day when he went down the trenches that his regiment was soon to occupy. The officer reported that “most of the Germans, except the Prussians, are very tired of the fighting, and wished there was peace, not that they are done up or badly fed, but that they are tired of the war generally.” The final letter reprinted in the Telegraph noted, after the usual report of singing and meeting in No-Man’s-Land, that the truce was not universal. “Not a shot was fired all day in our quarter,” the soldier wrote, “but they were scrapping further up the line.”

The first accounts in the Manchester Guardian followed a similar pattern. A brief headline, “A Christmas Truce at the Front/Enemies at Football/German Gets a Friendly Haircut” appeared over the letters, and the introduction observed that “there was an unofficial truce along sections, at least, of the trenches in France on Christmas Day, and that advantage was taken of it for some remarkable fraternizing among enemies, is shown in convincing detail in the following

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261 Daily Telegraph, “Christmastide in the Trenches”, December 31 1914
262 Daily Telegraph, “Christmastide in the Trenches”, December 31 1914
263 Daily Telegraph, “Christmastide in the Trenches”, December 31 1914
extracts from letters just arrived from the front.” The newspaper quoted a letter from a British officer that narrated how “at 11 p.m. on December 24 there was absolute peace, bar a little sniping and a few rounds from a machine gun, and then no more. ‘The King’ was sung, then you heard ‘To-morrow is Christmas; if you don’t fight, we won’t’; and the answer came back ‘All right!’” This report contained an account of a football match “with a bully beef tin,” and, for a crowning touch of absurdity, “and one man went over and cut a German’s hair!”

The *Morning Post* also published two accounts of the truce on December 31; the first came from a British army captain who noted that the British trenches “in some cases are so near those of the enemy that communication is quite easy,” and reported that “an informal compact was arranged – at least at one point of our line, where our people were faced by a Saxon regiment – to the effect that no sniping was to take place for a day.” After coming out of their trenches, the English and Germans began, rather domestically, “to hang out their washing and mend their wire entanglements.” Unfortunately, the captain wrote, “this happy scene was suddenly upset by the bursting of a big shell, fired from a position many miles in the rear, and everyone scuttled back to his hole in double quick time.” The Captain reported singing on Christmas evening, courtesy of an “Irish captain with a turn for music,” and closed his account with the observation that it was “a pity the German Press vilify us so much, for here the British soldiers and their adversaries mutually respect each other. And our officers certainly admire the Germans for putting up such a great fight, and this is quite the common opinion.”

What the *Morning Post* characterized as a “remarkable instance of the effect of the Christmas spirit upon opposing forces in the trenches” was summarized on a post-card written by a soldier in the Queen’s Westminsters. The author, who spent Christmas in the trenches, reported that “on Christmas Day not a shot was fired,” and that “probably a good many people will not credit that we

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267 *Morning Post*, “Christmas at the Front/An Interrupted Truce”, December 31 1914.
left our trenches and went out and met the Germans half way, shook hands, and exchanged souvenirs.” In spite of the unlikelihood of the event, he noted, “(t)his is an absolute fact. We were singing to each other all Christmas Eve.”

As can be seen by the initial accounts published in these three papers, aside from choosing the letters published, the sole contribution that the newspapers made to the subject of the Christmas truce were headlines and very brief explanations prefacing the letters. Except for the short introductions, there was no commentary on the event and no official information provided. In addition, the extent to which these published letters reflect the type of information already shown to have been sent privately by soldiers to their friends and family demonstrates that the letters printed were probably not censored in any way, beyond the selection of the specific letters from the many that must have been received by the press. The unexpected overtures for a cease-fire, the mutual respect – aggravated by some suspicions – between the two lines, the attribution of enthusiasm for the war to the Prussian regiments and the pleasure in an unexpected holiday all echo the themes seen in soldiers’ letters about the truce that had been received privately.

While these three papers took the lead in acknowledging the existence of the truce, however, other newspapers continued their standard war coverage. On December 31st, The Times, for example, printed a letter under the headline “Artillerymen’s Christmas,” which reported how a soldier’s unit spent the holiday season, including travelling to the front on December 23rd and 24th, and relieving a battery on Christmas Eve. “In the evening,” the artilleryman observed, “the men insist on carol singing, though it is seasonably freezing hard, this concert soon turning into favourite sentimental songs and then ragtime.” In spite of the occasion and the impromptu concert, however, “(a)ll Christmas Eve, a steady ripple of sniping runs along the trenches, and every time I wake in the night I hear it.”

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268 Morning Post, “Christmas at the Front”, December 31 1914.
269 The Times, “Letters from the Front/Christmas Truce/Football with the Enemy”, December 31 1914.
The facts of the holiday cease-fire were starting to reach the British public, but since there were no articles or commentary provided with these accounts, it appears that the press as a whole was unwilling to extrapolate any conclusions from the truce, and certainly had no intention, as yet, of committing itself to any approval or interpretation of the event. In addition, the existence of the truce had no discernible impact on the normal reporting of the war. With the further accounts of the truce that appeared in the next few days, this pattern continued. On New Year’s Day, the British newspapers increased the column space they devoted to the Christmas truce, with The Times, the Daily Telegraph, the Manchester Guardian and the Daily Mail all publishing accounts of the event, while still refraining from commenting or reporting on it.

The Times published multiple accounts of the truce on that day, the first of which came from an officer in the R.F.A. who reported how, on Christmas Eve, “things went positively dead; there was not a sound. Even our own pet sniper went off duty.” After a quiet evening around a fire, at “about 11 o’clock a very excited Infantry officer came along and told us that all fighting was off, and the men were fraternizing in between the trenches.” The major then walked up to the front and discovered that “(i)t had been agreed between the soldiers on both sides that there should be no firing until midnight Christmas Day.” In fact, the two sides also arranged terms for the cease-fire, agreeing “that if by any mischance a single shot was fired it was not to be taken as an act of war, and an apology would be accepted; also that firing would not be opened without due warning on both sides.” The officer further reported that the German appetite for a truce seemed greater than that of the British; the Germans, he claimed, “were all for the truce lasting for 48 hours, but we stuck out for midnight on Christmas.”

The Times then offered two more accounts of the truce as “interesting corroborative evidence of the letter printed above.” One of those letters, from a major in the Leicestershire Regiment, discussed the impact of the event on soldiers’ attitudes towards the war. “Even out here,” the major wrote, “there is a

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270 The Times, “Letters from the Front”, January 1 1915
time of peace and good will. I’ve just spent an hour talking to German officers and men, who have drawn a line half-way between our left trenches and theirs and have met all our men and officers there. We exchanged cigars, cigarettes, and papers.” The major noted that the German soldiers “are jolly, cheery fellows for the most part,” and concluded that, at least for that moment, it seemed “so silly under the circumstances to be fighting them.” Another account from a major in the R.A.M.C. reported that a different regiment “actually had a football match with the Saxons, who beat them 3-2!!!” He then recounted the less cheery tale of another regiment who “went out of their trenches just as the others had done, but the enemy – now thought to be Prussians – told them to go back and fired on them before they regained their trenches.”

Additionally, *The Times* reprinted a letter from a member of the London Rifle Brigade, who wrote, with fine understatement, that his unit “had rather an interesting time in the trenches on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.” Because of the proximity of the front-line trenches, the British and Germans were able to converse easily, and agreed on Christmas Eve that “in our part of the firing line that there should be no firing and no thought of war on Christmas Day.” The two sides visited each other’s trenches on Christmas Day, and exchanged gifts and addresses. Everyone, the writer claimed, “friend and foe, were real good pals....and on Christmas Day a football match was played between them and us in front of the trench.” The letter told how the opposing troops “even allowed us to bury all our dead lying in front, and some of them, with hats in hand, brought in one of our dead officers from behind their trench, so that we could bury him decently.” Because of this, the author confided, “I now have a very different opinion of the Germans.” However, by the time the letter was written, “(b)oth sides have already started the firing, and are already enemies again. Strange it all seems, doesn’t it?”

With expanded coverage of the event, the letters the newspapers published from truce participants recounting their experiences and the themes

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271 *The Times*, “Letters from the Front”, January 1 1915
272 *The Times*, “Letters from the Front”, January 1 1915
273 *The Times*, “Letters from the Front”, January 1 1915
expressed in those letters continue to resemble those already presented as private correspondence. The proximity of the trenches, the individual arrangements for cease-fires, the meetings between trenches and exchange of gifts, the joint burial parties and the football matches were all common truce elements which continued to be presented alongside the more customary journalistic discourse of the war. The Daily Mail, for example, also published two accounts of the Christmas Truce on January 1st, but unwittingly demonstrated the dichotomy between the stories of the truce and the standard war narrative by choosing first to summarize, via an editorial entitled “The New Year,” the reasons Britain was at war. The editorial asserted Britain was fighting to maintain its liberty, restore Belgian sovereignty, preserve French independence, and prevent Germany from “plotting and preparing our destruction.” However, the Daily Mail declared, there was still more at stake: “(l)et Germany win, and the whole gospel of despotism, based on the anarchic doctrine that nothing counts in this world except the sheer mass of organized strength, receives a new and indefinite lease.” If the Allies dominated, on the other hand, “liberty steps into the sun once more, and there will at length be a chance not only of striking off the burden of armaments but also of redrawing the map along the lasting lines of race, nationality and justice.” It was therefore, the editorial concluded, Britain’s “glorious privilege to-day, as it has been many times in the past, to turn the scale against a jack-booted Colossus seeking to stamp out the liberties of Europe.”

After clearly stating Britain’s war aims, and pointing out the differences between the two sides, the Daily Mail may have felt more at ease about printing its first accounts of the truce. Under a banner headline, “One Day of Peace at the Front,” the Mail provided a version of the truce that omitted many of the more light-hearted touches of the narratives already published, focusing instead on a joint funeral service. The account began with the burial of a Scottish soldier, at which troops from both sides began venturing out of their respective trenches. The British chaplain went forward to meet with the German commander when a

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275 Presumably, the Daily Mail was not going to allow that any more than a single day of peace might be possible.
rabbit suddenly appeared. The Germans and British both ran out into No Man’s Land, “and a marvelous thing happened. It was like a football match, the hare being the football, and gray tunicked Germans the one side, and the kilted ‘Jocks’ the other. The game was won by the Germans, who captured the prize.”

As a result of the chase, the officer wrote, “a sudden friendship had been struck up, the truce of God had been called, and for the rest of Christmas Day not a shot was fired along our section.” The two sides proceeded to deal with the dead soldiers lying out in No Man’s Land:

Dotted over the sixty yards separating the trenches were scores and scores of dead soldiers, and soon spades were flung up by comrades on guard in both trenches, and by instinct each side set to to dig graves for their dead. Our padre had seized his chances and found the German commander very ready to agree that after the dead had been buried a short religious service should take place. He told us that the German commander and his officers were as anxious as the British could be to keep Christmas Day as a day of peace.

The officer noted that the “whole German staff showed a fine spirit of respect during the service for the dead.” Prayers were said by both sides, first by the Chaplain in English, then translated by a German divinity student, and the letter’s author observed that “(i)t was a memorable sight to see officers and men who had been fighting and as I write are fighting against one another as fiercely as ever, bareheaded, reverent, and keeping sacred truce as they did homage to the memory of the dead on Christmas Day, 1914.”

Whether the Daily Mail felt that an editorial reminding its readers of the reasons to fight the Germans nullified the surprising accounts of the apparent lack of enmity between the two sides, or whether it saw relatively little harm in recounting events that all the other papers were featuring, it is certain that the stories about the truce ran counter to its normal reports of the war. The Daily Telegraph and the Manchester Guardian also printed accounts of the truce on January 1st, although the letters that ran in those papers did introduce some elements that were new to the public truce narrative. The Telegraph, for example, printed an account from a rifleman in the Queen’s Westminsters, who

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noted the possible risks of the cease-fire when he reported that, while his unit was fraternizing in No-Man’s-Land, “(t)wo of our men went too far, and went into their trenches, and haven’t since returned, so I suppose they are prisoners.”\textsuperscript{277} Another letter discussed a twenty-four hour truce arranged by an infantryman who went into the German trenches to negotiate it, the first time a British soldier was reported to have been invited into a German trench. The soldier noted that the cease-fires “happened along most of the British front except where the Prussians opposed them.” On the following day, however, “all was changed, and where they had been at peace they were again at war, with the guns roaring and the rifles firing.”\textsuperscript{278}

Another letter published in the \textit{Telegraph} contained a report of the burial of ten dead Germans by the soldiers on both sides, written by a soldier who remarked regretfully that he had passed up his chance at a German helmet as a souvenir, as “I did not fancy taking one off a corpse.”\textsuperscript{279} The \textit{Telegraph}’s coverage of the event clearly underlined the expectation that the truce was to be for a specific time only and not indicative of any enduring cease-fire. This last point was borne out by the headlines in the \textit{Telegraph} on that same day reporting the ‘real’ news of the war: “German Atrocities in Belgium/Maltreatment of Wounded/Firing on the Red Cross.”

The \textit{Manchester Guardian} also continued to provide letters about the truce, including one from a Manchester soldier who wrote to his wife that the Germans had displayed lit Christmas trees on their parapets before beckoning the British out into No-Man’s-Land. Champagne was drunk by the officers, and they were then joined by the men. The Germans, “having occupied a brewery,” presented the British with two barrels of beer. The truce lasted only twenty-four hours, and “they are at it again this morning.” According to this soldier, the Germans told the British that “their officers fire on them if they don’t fire on us every time they see an English soldier.”\textsuperscript{280} Another letter, from Private Lydall of the London Rifle

\textsuperscript{277} \textit{Daily Telegraph}, “Christmas Truce/Mingling with the Enemy”, January 1 1915.
\textsuperscript{278} \textit{Daily Telegraph}, “Exchanging Cigars”, January 1 1915.
\textsuperscript{279} \textit{Daily Telegraph}, “Memorable Day”, January 1 1915.
\textsuperscript{280} \textit{Manchester Guardian}, “The Unofficial Christmas Truce/British and Germans Exchange Presents”, January 1 1915.
Brigade, noted that “some understanding was arrived at with the Germans and not a shot was fired,” after which the two sides met in No-Man’s-Land, “exchanged souvenirs and chatted.” Looking back on the experience, the private remarked that the Germans “weren’t a half bad lot, really. You would never think we were flying at one another’s throats a few hours previously.”

During the week following New Year’s Day, the Christmas truce continued to be featured in the major British papers, although none of the newspapers printed letters about the event on a daily basis. As noted in relation to the soldiers’ letters received privately, these accounts continued to challenge not only the contemporaneous narrative of the war, but also provided details that contest the orthodox modern view of the conflict. A letter published in the Daily Telegraph on January 2\textsuperscript{nd}, for example, demonstrated that higher-ranking officers were not necessarily against the truce. A colonel of an infantry regiment, who went up the trenches on Christmas Day to wish his soldiers a happy Christmas, observed that as he was leaving “there was a sudden hurrah and rush, and our men and the Germans both started running to one another, and met half-way and shook hands.” The colonel expressed some reservations, ordering his men back, but “was told they wanted a truce for the day to bury their dead, so I agreed to that.” Leaving half the men in the trenches to “keep a smart look-out,” the colonel went forward and “joined the crowd.” An obliging Saxon interpreted for the officer while he spoke to the German soldiers. Catching the Christmas spirit, the colonel agreed that “if they would have an armistice on New Year’s Day we would play them at football between our lines.” After noting the details of a joint burial service, the colonel observed, in closing, that the Germans seemed keen on the idea of playing the British at football, which, due to the burials, might actually be practicable, as “there won’t be any obstacles like dead Germans lying about unless they try another attack before then.”

A letter from a soldier in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Battalion Rifle Brigade provided an example of a soldier that enjoyed a day off without entertaining expectations that

\footnotesize{\bibitem{181} Manchester Guardian, “Not Half a Bad Lot, Really”, January 1 1915.}
\footnotesize{\bibitem{182} Daily Telegraph, “Christmas Truce in the Trenches/Colonel’s Challenge/A New Year’s Day Match”, January 2 1915.}
the cease-fire would become more permanent. Rifleman Munday’s truce bore marked similarities to those already quoted, including the burial of the German dead, “who had been lying in the fields for two months.” The British suggested a game of football in the afternoon, but the Germans, although keen, “had no time.” As interesting as the experience had been, the rifleman had no expectation that it would lead to any kind of long-term armistice, and remarked resignedly that “I don’t expect we shall shake hands with the enemy again for a long time to come.”

Demonstrating that there were exceptions to every rule, the Morning Post produced an instance of official interference in the truce, printing a letter from an officer who noted that the British and German soldiers had arranged “to have a two hours’ interval on Boxing Day from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. for a football match. This, however, was prevented by our superiors at Headquarters.” The author accepted this restriction philosophically, reflecting that “(i)t is terrible to think that on one day we can be at such peace, with such good feeling, and on the others we must occupy our minds inventing diabolical methods of destroying one another.”

Ironically, in light of this account, an editorial published in the Morning Post on the same day argued that “(w)ar in itself is a thing indifferent, being either good or bad, according to its use and services. In the present case,” the editorial continued, “peace for this country would have been a far greater evil than war, not only because it would have meant an evil day only deferred, but because it would have been enjoyed at the expense of a national moral surrender.” With the customary disregard of any dissonance engendered by the continued information on the truce and the stance that the newspaper was taking towards the war, the Morning Post epitomized the contradictions inherent in the simultaneous reports of both the holiday cease-fire and the ongoing conflict.

Continued coverage of the Christmas truce in The Times in early January 1915 showed that the truce took as many forms as the soldiers who participated in it. A letter from an officer in a Highland regiment, for example, demonstrated his

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284 Morning Post, “German Football Enthusiast”, January 2 1915
increasing frustration with the German troops who refused to fight on Christmas. The officer described himself as initially “horrified at discovering that some of our men actually had gone out, imbued more with the idea of seeing the German trenches than anything else; they met half-way, and there ensued the giving of cigarettes and receiving of cigars, and they arranged (the private soldiers of one army and the private soldiers of the other) a 48 hours’ armistice.” At this point, the officer recalled the lessons of history, and while noting that “(i)t was all most irregular,” consoled himself with the reflection that “the Peninsular and other wars will furnish many such examples; eventually both sides were induced to return to their respective trenches, but the enemy sang all night.”

The officer’s irritation recurred the next day, when once again “out came those Germans to wish us ‘A Happy Day’.” He told the Germans that “we were at war with them, and that really they must play the game and pretend to fight; they went back, but again attempted to come towards us.” Tiring of appeals to their enemies’ sporting instincts, the British troops “fired over their heads, they fired a shot back to show they understood, and the rest of the day passed quietly in this part of the line, but in others a great deal of fraternizing went on.” In spite of his impatience with the German lack of cooperation on Christmas, the officer finished his account with the reflection that it was “a great hope for future peace when two great nations, hating each other as foes have seldom hated, one side vowing eternal hate and vengeance and setting their venom to music, should on Christmas Day, and for all that the word implies, lay down their arms, exchange smokes, and wish each other happiness!” 286 It is clear, from some of the accounts published in the press, that it was not just the editors of the newspapers who found the truce confusing and difficult to reconcile with their attitudes towards the war.

Another hesitant truce participant was an officer in the Rifle Brigade, who saw Christmas trees burning on the German parapets on Christmas Eve. The officer, who noted that “(n)o truce had been proclaimed,” was strongly against “allowing the blighters to enjoy themselves, especially as they had killed one of

our men that afternoon.” His less experienced captain, however, “(who hadn’t seen our wounded going mad and slowly dying outside the German trenches on the Aisne) wouldn’t let me shoot; however, I soon had an excuse, as one of the Germans fired at us, so I quickly lined up my platoon and had those Christmas-trees down and out.” The officer later heard that two officers from another trench met two German officers in No-Man’s-Land, which the writer thought “an awfully stupid thing to do, as it might easily have had different results; but our captains are new and, not having seen the Germans in their true light yet, apparently won’t believe the stories of their treachery and brutality.”

On Christmas, however, the two sides had a “sort of mutual truce; nothing on paper or even in words, but a sort of mutual understanding.” The officer reported that some of his suspicions were allayed when he saw that the Germans opposite were Saxons, “because they’re good fellows on the whole and play the game as far as they know it.” The German dead in between the lines were buried, and the Germans told the British that they would not shoot at them for now, but warned them that, when their Eastern army returned on January 1st, “they were going to wipe us off the face of the earth.” In response, the officer wrote that the British “roared with laughter, but (the Germans) were quite serious about it and evidently believed it all.” In the evening, the officer “took good care to double my sentries, as I trust these fellows devil an inch,” but in spite of his caution, he still thought that the “politicians will be wrong now, and that the war will come to an end because every one will get fed up and refuse to go on shooting.”

This letter demonstrates once again that the newspapers found horrific details about life at the front acceptable to print when they came directly from British soldiers: accounts of wounded “going mad and slowly dying” were certainly not featured in any of the conventional newspaper reports on the war.

Another letter in The Times expressed similar reservations on the part of an officer in the North Staffordshire regiment, who, after the Germans proposed “no shooting” on Christmas Eve, gave them permission to bury some German dead who were laying in No Man’s Land. The truce was arranged to last until midnight.

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on Christmas Day, but the officer took care to ensure his troops’ safety. “Of course,” he wrote, “no precautions are relaxed, but I think they mean to play the game. All the same, I think I shall be awake all night so as to be on the safe side.” After describing the burial of the dead and the usual scenes of fraternization, the officer wondered which side would end the truce, although he was realistic about the fact that it would end. “They say ‘fire in the air and we will’ and such things,” he noted “but, of course, it will start, and to-morrow we shall be at it hard, killing one another.”

The Times also printed a letter from a Belgian soldier, describing a truce that appeared much tamer than those experienced by the British: he reported singing from both trenches, a brief meeting in No Man’s Land, and Christmas passing without hearing one shot fired the whole day. These letters in The Times, including the first report from a truce participant who was neither British nor German, added a level of complexity to the information previously provided about the truce, and the continued coverage of the holiday cease-fire demonstrated how popular the story was proving to be with British readers.

During the first week of January, the newspapers’ accounts of the truce expanded to include its intermittent nature, demonstrating just how different soldiers’ experiences in the front line on Christmas Day could be. Two letters in the Guardian on January 6th from different companies of the 2nd East Lancashires provide an example of this: in the first, from a private in B Company, the German troops requested a cease-fire for the British to collect and bury two bodies of British soldiers that were near the German trenches. “Not a shot was fired between us after that up to the time of our relief on Christmas night,” the soldier wrote. “The scene was very dramatic, and I don’t suppose will be witnessed again on a battlefield.” It certainly was not witnessed by D Company of that regiment, who, while they heard the Germans singing, did not participate in any truce. “Oh, by the way, they have a novel way of wishing one a happy Christmas – namely, shouting out “A happy Christmas to you!” and then firing a

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number of shots at us, only they couldn't hit us, as we were out of sight of them,” a soldier in D company reported. “Of course we returned the salute with interest.”

The Guardian also published an account from a subaltern at the front who participated in a truce that was arranged with the Germans for the purposes of burying both the British and German dead “who had been lying out in the open since the fierce night-fighting a week earlier.” The subaltern, arriving at the site, found the bodies already laid out in rows, and he “went along those dreadful ranks and scanned the faces, fearing at every step to recognize one I knew. It was a ghastly sight. They lay stiffly in contorted attitudes, dirty with frozen mud and powdered with rime.” Two common graves were dug, but because the burials would not be finished on Christmas Day, the truce was extended to December 26th. As a result, the Germans “left us alone that night to enjoy a peaceful Christmas.” At the burials the next day, a service was read over the graves, and the subaltern confessed himself moved by the occasion, writing that it “was one of the most impressive things I have ever witnessed. Friend and foe stood side by side, bare-headed, watching the tall, grave figure of the padre outlined against the frosty landscape as he blessed the poor broken bodies at his feet,” the soldier reported. “Then, with more formal salutes, we turned and made our way back to our respective ruts.” In spite of the cheerful tone of most of the letters published about the holiday cease-fire, they still contained reminders of the horrors of war and the “poor broken bodies” of dead comrades.

As the first week of January 1915 drew to a close, the number of letters referencing the Christmas truce published in the newspapers began to dwindle. The papers also began to feature accounts by soldiers in the front line at times other than Christmas, or by soldiers who were in the front line at Christmas but did not participate in the truce, reminding their readers that the truce was not a universal experience. The Daily Mail, for example, reprinted a letter from a gunner in the R.F.A., who described going into the trenches on Christmas morning. “We

293 Of the sixty-plus letters published in the five main papers reviewed, over 50 of them were published between December 31st and January 7th.
got into action about eleven o’clock on Christmas morning by the side of a road,” he recounted, “and after we had got the guns into position and covered them with trees we had about half an hour’s football.” After this interlude, they “got the order ‘Eyes front’ (which means every man to his post), and then we started sending the ‘Germs’ over Christmas boxes which went into their trenches, so I guess there are a few there who would not have any Christmas pudding.”

While the quantity of letters about the truce tapered off, the newspapers began to report, in the form of short articles, on the responses of the French and German military authorities to the unofficial cease-fire. On January 6th, The Manchester Guardian featured an article headlined “A Sequel to the Truce/French and Germans Refuse to Fight Afterwards,” which was purported to be based on a conversation that the correspondent had with a French soldier in a Parisian hospital. The soldier related that “on the night of December 24 the French and Germans at a particular place came out of their respective trenches and met halfway between them.” The sequel to this event, the reporter wrote, “was more interesting than the event itself,” for the “French and German soldiers who had thus fraternized subsequently refused to fire on one another, and had to be removed from the trenches and replaced by other men.”

The Times also featured a similar article, sent by a correspondent in Amsterdam, entitled “The Christmas Truce/Stringent German Army Order.” It reported that the German newspapers had “recently published numerous descriptions of attempted friendly overtures between the trenches of the Germans and the French.” The article quoted the German paper Tagliche Rundschau, which observed that “(e)very one will recognize that this fraternizing has its serious side, for war is no sport, and one must affirm with regret that those who made or countenanced these overtures evidently mistook the seriousness of the situation.” As a result, the newspaper reported, an Army order had been issued on December 29th forbidding fraternization, and warning the troops that

295 Manchester Guardian, “A Sequel to the Truce/French and Germans Refuse to Fight Afterwards”, January 6 1915. This report might well be the origin of the persistent myth that soldiers who participated in the truce were punished for their involvement.
“every approach to the enemy will be punished as treason.” On January 9th, the Daily Mail also picked up on this article for its own pages.

The Illustrated London News, a weekly journal which did not print any conventional articles or letters from the front but rather turned the news of the day into simple stories accompanied by photographs and drawings, featured the Christmas Truce on the front page of its January 9th edition under the headline of “The Light of Peace in the Trenches on Christmas Eve: a German Soldier Opens the Spontaneous Truce by Approaching the British Lines with a Small Christmas Tree.” The journal clearly assumed its readers would be already familiar with the event, and the brief caption on the drawing contained the information that in some sections of the front the Germans, on Christmas Eve, “decorated their trenches with Christmas-trees and paper lanterns, and invited our troops to stop shooting and come over to smoke and have a palaver.” Both sides, the paper reported, continued the cessation of hostilities the next day, and “spent a happy Christmas.”

Charles Lowe, the Illustrated London News’ rather florid and sentimental weekly columnist, poetically noted in the same edition that “Christmastide brought with it to our trenches in Flanders a sort of ‘truce of God’ by mutual consent, accompanied by such fraternizing between opposing foes as had never been seen, perhaps, since Peninsular days or the siege of Sebastopol.” Of course, he observed, “afterwards the fighting went on as briskly as ever – with results on the whole, as unfavourable to the ‘Boches’ in Belgium as it has been to them in South-West Africa, where we have re-occupied Walface Bay.” The rest of the paper contained further drawings representing different aspects of the truce, with titles such as “British and German Soldiers Arm-in-Arm and Exchanging Headgear,” and “Saxons and Anglo-Saxons Fraternizing on the Field of Battle.” The captions under these drawings described the truce as “informal and spontaneous,” and noted that there was “peace on earth and goodwill towards men’ among those who a few hours before had been seeking each other’s blood,

and were bound to do so again after the truce was over.” The Illustrated London News reminded its readers that the German troops participating in the truce were, of course, Saxons, while in other areas of the front, “where Prussian troops were said to be stationed, there was a certain amount of fighting.” The weekly paper, which obviously appealed to the less-educated part of the British population, described some fairly standard elements of the truce, with fraternization and exchange of cigarettes, and noted that “(s)ome of the British, it is said, visited the German trenches, and an Anglo-German football match was even played.”

The Christmas truce, it appeared, was considered an acceptable subject for coverage by even the most simplistic segment of the British press, as long as it was made clear that the armistice was both spontaneous and temporary, and would shortly be followed by renewed combat.

Up until this time, the British newspapers had refrained from either reporting or providing substantial comments upon the Christmas truce. Now, more than two weeks after the event, and a week after coverage of it had begun to appear in the press, the Daily Telegraph apparently felt ready – or perhaps compelled - to tackle the subject. In an editorial published on January 7th, it acknowledged that “(p)robably no news since the war began has made a greater sensation, and certainly none has made better reading than the accounts which have come through from the trenches of the unofficial armistice established between certain sections of the German line and our own on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.” The newspaper noted that the stories of the truce seemed incredible “in view of the ferocity of the combatants during months past and of the authenticated tales of German atrocities and trickery”; in fact, the Telegraph feared, on the basis of the truce people might believe that the German soldier, once “outside the influence of the Prussian military machine,” was a “good-hearted peace loving individual.”

Not so, asserted the editorial. Truces were traditional, had always occurred between troops facing one another in war, and arose “from a growing

300 The only non-correspondence accounts on British participation in the truce, namely the brief synopses in the Illustrated London News, can hardly be characterized as “reporting.”
feeling of respect for your adversary” with whom soldiers shared “common hardships and common danger.” In those circumstances, “the national feeling gives way before the fellow-feeling for the man opposite, who, after all, is not responsible for the war and is only obeying orders.” Having established that, as it had believed all along, the German leadership and not the unfortunately deluded common German soldier bore the blame for the war, the Daily Telegraph then tried to put the best face possible on the truce. Since it could not ignore the cease-fire, it instead enjoined its readers to remember that it was the Kaiser who had started the war and that, on Christmas Day, “the brave Bavarians and Saxons exchanged greetings and gifts and the dead whilst the author of all Europe’s miseries was publically announcing ‘that to the enemy I send bullets and bayonets.'” While the Daily Telegraph editorial actually tried to place the truce in the context of the standard war narrative as a whole by reminding its readers that a day of goodwill on the part of the troops did not absolve the Kaiser of responsibility for starting the war, most of the other newspapers made no analogous effort, confining themselves to further accounts of the truce and articles on the effects of fraternization in the German and French armies.

The Manchester Guardian, however, in a similar attempt to reconcile the inconsistencies between the Christmas truce and the continuing fighting on the Western Front, featured an editorial about the event in its January 9th edition. This endeavor to situate the truce within the narrative of the war tried to characterize it as proof that, while battles destroyed the bodies of soldiers, their souls survived intact. The editorial noted that the message of the truce, which some wanted to explain as “a truce of God,” was in fact something altogether more complex. The Guardian presented the truce as “the simple and unexamined impulse of human souls, drawn together in face of a common and desperate plight.” To the skeptics who observed that the soldiers involved went immediately back to the business of killing each other, the Guardian pointed out that the reasons for the war still existed – that Belgium still had to be liberated.

and the Germans “taught that Culture cannot be carried by the sword”, and that the soldiers, therefore, had good reasons to continue fighting.

The Guardian editorial argued that the real lesson to be gained from the truce was that the British soldier, while remaining capable, both physically and morally, of defeating the Germans (with their “insufficient insight into the better way”), would return from the war not brutalized or scarred by his experiences. The fact that the British troops were able to put aside their arms for one day, the Guardian argued, proved that “the soul of man” was greater than the guns that the armies used and that the British soldier had been briefly granted a vision of an ideal “that things seen can have no power at all over the things which are not seen.”

While this editorial contained some simplistic and contradictory elements – it appears that the author never asked himself what participation in the truce said about the souls of the German soldiers, and whether they too had been granted a vision of an ideal during the event – it was at least an attempt to reconcile the armistice with the continuation of the war by providing a reasoned, if flawed, argument about the motivations of the soldiers involved, in contrast to the Daily Telegraph editorial that appeared satisfied with merely blaming the Kaiser for the conflict.

These two editorials, which appeared over two weeks after the truce took place, demonstrated the only journalistic attempts to explain the event and find a place for it within the contemporaneous narrative of the war. The approaches that were taken by the Daily Telegraph and the Guardian differed greatly: while the Daily Telegraph merely maintained its pre-truce stance, the Guardian attempted to ascribe greater meaning to the event within the context of the eventual end of the war, and the emotional effects of the conflict on the men involved. After the publication of these two editorials, coverage of the truce tapered off dramatically, with most newspapers only printing the occasional letter on the subject until about the third week in January 1915, when accounts of the truce disappeared from British newspaper columns altogether.

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The Christmas truce, as presented in the pages of the British press, resembles in complexity the event as viewed by individual soldiers in their private letters, demonstrating that the newspapers did not appear to make any effort to choose or ignore letters that presented certain aspects of the truce. The accounts featured in the newspapers included cheerful fraternization between the two sides, when “all enmity was forgotten, and they laughed and joked together and drank to one another’s health”;303 burials of the dead, “while both sides stood bareheaded at attention”;304 exchanges of food and cigars; Germans who “were most friendly and said they did not want to fight us at all, and bore us no hatred”;305; and even the standard offer “to play us at football.”306 There were reports of the ignorance of Germans who believed “that London has been captured and that German sentries are outside Buckingham Palace,”307 and letters that recounted how possible truce offers were rejected, with one company receiving orders on Christmas morning to “fire as rapidly as possible.”308 There were accounts which noted that the truce was only temporary, as “(a)fter dinner we were firing and dodging as hard as ever; one could hardly believe that such a thing had taken place”309 and soldiers who thought, in the face of the holiday armistice with the Germans, that it seemed “so silly under the circumstances to be fighting them.”310 In addition, the soldiers who wrote about the truce also discussed the horrors of the war in the context of the numerous burial parties gathered on Christmas Day. “In one place where the trenches are only 25 yards apart we could see dead Germans half-buried, their legs and gloved hands sticking out of the ground,” a rifleman observed. “The trenches in this position are so close that it is called ‘The Death Trap,’ as hundreds have been killed there.”311

305 Morning Post, “Christmas at the Front/German Cigars for British Tea”, January 4 1915.  
306 Daily Mail, “A German Challenge to Football”, January 4 1915  
While writing about the truce, these letters also continued to present a view of the war that included death, destruction and misery.

During the three weeks that the Christmas truce was featured prominently in the British newspapers, the ambivalence of the press towards the event was apparent. While it was clear that the story of the truce was tremendously popular – after all, twenty-one days would be far too long to devote to an episode that bored the public – it was equally clear that British newspaper editors were unwilling to commit themselves to a stance on the subject. By confining the accounts of the truce to the “Letters from the Front” columns, the British press segregated the episode from the rest of its war coverage, allowing its normal reporting on the conflict to remain untouched by the unofficial cease-fire. The only attempts at reporting the truce covered French and German official attitudes towards it, and British official reaction to the episode was not recorded in any newspaper.\footnote{312} In addition, the rather feeble attempts on the part of the Daily Telegraph and Manchester Guardian to “explain” the truce within the overarching war narrative shows how the temporary armistice and the soldiers’ reactions to the war and their enemies confounded the newspapers’ endeavors to present the First World War as a seamless narrative of triumphant good against easily vanquished evil. Yet the story of the truce, in all its complexity, was openly published, and the British public as a whole was therefore able to understand the event and the emotions of the soldiers involved through their own words, which the papers printed without apparent censorship. In addition, the popularity of the story shows that, whatever reservations the British press may have had about the truce, the British public were able to absorb and accept it without loss of faith in their soldiers or the cause for which the nation fought.

\footnote{312 There were some British generals who expressly forbade fraternization, although these orders were mostly issued after the fact, and do not appear to have ended any truces prematurely.}
Chapter 5

“It was a thing to be hushed up”: The Christmas Truce in Retrospect

Some of the British officers took a dim view of such sport, and when the game came to its exhausted end, the men were encouraged back to their trenches for a carol service and supper....Boxing Day passed without a game. The officers were alarmed at what had happened on Christmas Day. If such friendly relations continued, how could they get the men to fight again? How could the war continue?

-Michael Foreman, War Game: Village Green to No-Man's-Land

Lieutenant Saint Barleigh: ...We had that wonderful Christmas truce. Do you remember, sir? You could hear Silent Night drifting across the still, clear air of No-Man’s-Land. And then they came, the Germans, emerging out of the freezing night mist, calling to us, and we clambered up over the top and went to meet them.

Captain Blackadder: Both sides advanced more during one Christmas piss-up than they managed in the next two-and-a-half years of war.

-Blackadder Goes Forth

By the end of January 1915, the Christmas truce had been largely forgotten. Soldiers stopped mentioning it in their letters home, and the British press ceased publishing any accounts of it. Although histories written during or immediately after the war did sometimes refer to the truce, they presented the cease-fire as a curiosity rather than a significant episode. Nelson’s History of the War, published in 1915, situated the Christmas truce within a historical context – “(o)utposts have always fraternized to some extent” – and attributed the event to the character of the British soldier, “who had none of that venom of hate which seems to have been officially regarded in Germany as the proper spirit in which to fight battles.”

In addition, the practical value of the cease-fire was also noted: the Christmas truce, John Buchan wrote, was probably “connived at by the commanders on both sides, for some of our trenches were nearly flooded out, and the Germans had much timbering to do.”

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314 Buchan, Nelson’s History, pg. 39
published in 1916, referred to the “relieving holiday aspect” of the last week of December 1914, “as though by general consent the carnival of blood was to be considered not consonant with the solemnity of the season,” without mentioning the truce at all. The *Pictorial History of the World War*, published in 1918, reported a brief account of it written by Phil Rader, an American serving with the French army, “that vividly illustrates the nature of the fighting man.” Rader observed that, in the trenches, “savages as we had been...the awfulness of war had not filled the corners of our hearts where love and Christmas live.”

Bruce Bairnsfather, the noted British cartoonist and a truce participant, published a memoir in 1916 in which he wrote of his initial disappointment at finding himself assigned to the trenches on Christmas Day. “Now, however, looking back on it all,” he reminisced in *Bullets and Billets*, “I wouldn’t have missed that unique and weird Christmas for anything.” He observed that December 24th was quiet on both sides, as if the Germans wanted to mark the season, and that on Christmas Eve the Germans began singing. The Germans then called out to the British, who sent an emissary across No-Man’s-Land in the form of a sergeant, who returned with a gift of German cigars. This episode, Bairnsfather noted, came as a welcome relief to the usual monotony of trench life, although it “did not lessen our ardour or determination.”

The next morning, German soldiers appeared in No-Man’s-Land, and a day of fraternization commenced. In spite of the friendly relations, however, Bairnsfather and his fellow soldiers could not forget that the Germans, “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,” were the enemy. He reported that the British soldiers, “superior, broadminded, more frank, and lovable beings,” regarded “these faded, unimaginative products of perverted kulture as a set of objectionable but amusing lunatics whose heads

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315 Author Unknown, *The Story of the Great War: Volume III* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1916), pg. 818. The carnival of blood was apparently considered consonant with the next four holiday seasons.


317 Bruce Bainsfather, *Bullets and Billets* (Project Gutenberg, [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11232/11232-h/11232-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11232/11232-h/11232-h.htm), originally published 1916). All quotes attributed to Bairnsfather are from this publication.
had got to be eventually smacked.” Bairnsfather’s Christmas day ended peacefully, with the taking of a general photograph of the two sides which, he imagined, would repose “on some Hun mantelpieces, showing clearly and unmistakably to admiring strafer how a group of perfidious English surrendered unconditionally on Christmas Day to the brave Deutschers.” He summed up the episode by noting that, although “(t)here 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”: an observation which encapsulated fairly accurately the general attitudes towards the truce taken by those soldiers who joined in it.

The Christmas truce was, therefore, contemporaneously ascribed to the professional character of the British soldier, the influence of the season, the practicalities of needing time off to repair the trenches and the desire on the part of the soldiers for a brief holiday. Whatever motives were attributed to the soldiers who participated in it, it is clear that, while not welcomed by the commanders of the various armies, the temporary cease-fire did not cause enormous consternation, as can be demonstrated by the fact that no British soldiers who participated in the event were punished for fraternizing with the Germans.³¹⁸ Even Field Marshall John French, who served as the first Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force in the first years of the war, wrote in 1919 that, although when the truce was first reported to him he “issued immediate orders to prevent any recurrence of such conduct,” he later realized that he had overreacted. In fact, French believed that, “had the question of the agreement upon an armistice for the day been submitted to me,” he might very well have agreed to it, as he always “attached the utmost importance to the

³¹⁸ The only two cases located, either through the exhaustive research of Brown/Seaton and my own explorations in the Imperial War Museum archives, where a soldier could argue that he had suffered punishment for participating in the truce are of one soldier who claimed he had been denied the DSO because a photograph of him singing in the trenches on Christmas had been published in a British paper, and another soldier who was alleged to have been denied leave after his company commander reported he had been involved in a truce, but neither of these allegations constitute official discipline. No soldier was court-martialed for participation in the truce.

³¹⁹ Note that French’s command against fraternization was designed “to prevent recurrence” of the fraternization, rather than to punish those who were involved in the truce. In any case, it does not seem as if these orders prevented any of the Christmas truces, which were for the most part over before anyone had time to forbid them.
maintenance of that chivalry in war which has almost invariably characterized every campaign of modern times in which this country has been engaged." Of course, it was easier for a British army commander to look forgivingly upon the truce after the war was over and the Central Powers defeated, but French's apparently sincere reconsideration of his orders against fraternization reveals how the cease-fire was viewed in the immediate post-war aftermath as, overall, both temporary and benign.

Of course, the fact that there were no similar cease-fires during any of the remaining holiday seasons of the war helped contribute to the 1914 Christmas truce's contemporaneous reputation as an insignificant event, a curiosity rather than portent of general dissatisfaction and low morale on the part of the troops. In the four years following the truce, after all, there were numerous large and costly battles, the collapse of the Eastern front, a revolution and the eventual defeat of the Central Powers: where in this narrative could a few days off from fighting fit? If the holiday cease-fire had led to some troops refusing to fight, or widespread mutinies such as those that occurred throughout the French army during 1917, doubtless the Christmas truce would have been remembered as the spark of soldiers' insubordination that lit the flame of general rebellion against the war. Instead, as shown by the testimony of those involved, the brief armistices led to nothing more than a few cherished souvenirs and pleasant memories.

As a result, during the decades that followed the war, when nations, soldiers, historians and civilians tried to come to terms with the conflict and its meaning, particularly within the context of the world war which followed it, the Christmas truce largely disappeared from public view. Mostly remembered by those who took part in it, the truce received little notice during this time. The emergence in the 1920s and 1930s of numerous memoirs and other works about the war, generally written by those who served in it, showed how the combatant countries, and individuals within those countries, tried to impose certain interpretations upon the narrative of the war. Justification for the conflict and

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320 Field-Marshall Viscount French of Ypres, 1914 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), pp. 344-347. French, however he may feel about chivalry in war, cannot resist using the opportunity of a discussion of the truce to get in a dig at the Germans, who “glaringly and wantonly set all such sentiments at defiance by their ruthless conduct of the present war.” (French, 1914, pg. 345)
ennoblement of those who served - particularly those soldiers who had died serving - was one such theme; another was the grievous wastage of the war and the disappointment with the peace that followed it. “During those two decades,” Gilbert observes, “the literature of the war reflected all its emotions, from patriotic enthusiasm and national self-assertiveness to individual suffering and disillusionment.” These memoirs, histories and fiction, Todman notes, “tried to depict what the soldiers’ war had been like. In so doing, they drew on pre-existing models and wartime popular culture as well as on soldiers’ own experiences.” However, “(t)here was no immediate overall agreement about what had happened or what the war had meant,” and the controversies over the narrative of the conflict continued throughout those decades, even as a new war overwhelmed the world.

One discussion of the truce that did occur in the inter-war period took place during a Parliamentary debate in 1930 over the status of conscientious objectors who had remained in the civil service during the war. In response to the remark that “men were not sent into the Army for the definite purpose of dying, but to kill,” Major McKenzie Wood, an MP who had served with the Gordon Highlanders during the war, passionately asserted that he did so not to kill, but “to prevent killing.” He then recounted his experiences during the truce, when his unit “went over in front of the trenches, and shook hands with many of our German enemies,” noting that “(a) great number of people think we did something that was degrading.” As a result of that experience, “I then came to the conclusion that I have held very firmly ever since, that if we had been left to ourselves there would never have been another shot fired.” McKenzie Wood, whose truce, he claimed, lasted two weeks, also discussed the resumption of

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321 Gilbert, The First World War, pp. 532-533
322 Todman, The Great War, pg. 17
323 Todman, The Great War, pg. 17
324 The dispute arose over an immediate post-war action by the government to prevent the years the conscientious objectors had remained in the civil service during the war, when other civil servants left to fight, to be counted towards their pensions; in addition, the government had undertaken to make sure that no conscientious objector should be promoted over someone who had serve in the army during the war. While the numbers involved were small, the attempt by the government in 1930 to rescind those rules was bitterly opposed, on the grounds that “the man who has served his country deserves more consideration than the man who has refused to do so.” Conscientious objectors who undertook alternative service were exempted from this rule.
fighting, contending that “the fact that we were being controlled by others...made it necessary for us to start trying to shoot one another again.” In fact, he believed that it was because “we were all in the grip of a political system which was bad” that the war continued. These views had prompted his entry into politics, and caused him to argue in 1930 that conscientious objectors “if they are deserving of any penalties at all, have been sufficiently penalized.” For one participant, therefore, the Christmas truce remained an inspiration that guided his post-war behavior, but it should be pointed out that Major McKenzie Wood appears to have been an exception to the general rule: most soldiers who participated in the truce did not consider it a life-transforming experience, even in retrospect.

Demonstrating that the narrative of the First World War and attitudes towards the truce still contained conflicting viewpoints even into the 1960s, “Christmas Truce”, a Robert Graves short story published in 1962, takes an entirely different approach to the temporary armistice. In the story, about a veteran and his nephew, the younger man is trying to persuade his uncle to join him in a protest march against nuclear weapons, using the truce, in which the veteran had participated, as an argument in favor of joining the demonstration. According to his uncle, the nephew, however, had “drawn the wrong conclusions and didn’t want to be put straight.” To correct his misconceptions, the uncle again told the story of the truce, with all its standard details, including a football match where the Germans “beat us 3-2.” The lesson to be learned from the episode, the old soldier contended, was that if another Christmas truce could not have happened “‘in the days when ‘mankind’, as you call ‘em, was still a little bit civilized, tell me, what can you hope for now?’” The veteran concluded that “‘(o)ly fear can keep the peace,” and refused to join his nephew on the

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325 Commons Sitting of Monday, 31st March, 1930, 1929/30, House of Commons Hansard, George V year 20, 865-1042, Fifth Series, Volume 237
326 Graves, “Christmas Truce”, pg. 101
327 Graves, “Christmas Truce”, pg. 104
328 Graves, “Christmas Truce”, pg. 115
march. While McKenzie Wood saw the truce as inspiration, the character in Graves’ story viewed it as proof that pessimism about “mankind” was justified.\(^{329}\)

By the mid-1960s, however, with the publication of such works as A.J.P. Taylor’s *A History of the First World War*, which argued that the war had begun almost accidentally, “imposed on the statesmen of Europe by railway timetables” which “cannot be improvised”\(^{330}\) and Alan Clark’s *The Donkeys*,\(^ {331}\) in which he famously compared the soldiers of the BEF to lions led to slaughter by the stupid donkeys that comprised the military establishment, the overarching meaning ascribed to the war began coalesce around the theme of utter futility. Assisted by such fictional representations of the conflict as Joan Littlewood’s satirical *Oh What a Lovely War*,\(^ {332}\) the narrative of the war, within which various themes had contested for primacy from the moment it ended, was thereafter dominated by the belief that it had been tragic and meaningless. The view of the war that emerged during that time was tailor-made for the argument that the Christmas truce represented an act of defiance against the smug statesmen who had tricked the soldiers into fighting a wasteful and needless war and the incompetent generals who got them all killed. As a result of this dominant view, since the 1970s the holiday cease-fire has been granted a place in the orthodox narrative of the First World War, and been taken as proof that the interpretation of the war as futile is the only possible way to view the conflict.

In the time since then, the Christmas truce has received a great deal of attention, with two popular histories, *Christmas Truce* by Brown and Seaton and Weintraub’s *Silent Night*, devoted solely to the subject, as well as documentaries, children’s books and even a film, *Joyeux Noel*, all portraying the cease-fire. In these works, the truce is interpreted as a significant event that provides insight

\(^{329}\) There is another veteran of the truce present during the conversation, however, who interjects, during the story of the truce, his opinion that “(t)here wasn't any feeling of hate between the individuals composing the opposite armies. The hate was all whipped up by the newspapers,” and who, after the uncle wraps up the moral of his tale, advises the nephew that he shouldn't “be talked out of your beliefs!” and should make up his own mind on the subject – the double narration, therefore, enabling Graves to give the truce an ambiguous moral.

\(^{330}\) Taylor, *First World War*, pp. 13-14. For someone who lived in the same country that also produced British Rail, Taylor’s faith in the immutability of railway timetables is rather touching.


into not only the attitudes of the soldiers’ involved, but also into the meaning of the First World War and even the nature of war itself. The Christmas truce, Brown and Seaton argue, “cannot be dismissed as unimportant. It halted however briefly the juggernaut of war, gave the men an insight they were never to forget, made some men think twice about the nationally inspired animosities to which they were expected to subscribe.”\textsuperscript{333} The brief cease-fires “offer a light where no light might have been, and are thus a source of encouragement and hope that should not be overlooked and forgotten, rather acknowledged and, indeed, celebrated.”\textsuperscript{334}

Weintraub also contends that the truce was noteworthy, claiming that “(i)t belied the bellicose slogans and suggested that the men fighting and often dying were, as usual, proxies for governments and issues that had little to do with their everyday lives.”\textsuperscript{335} What neither Brown and Seaton nor Weintraub seem to be able to explain, especially in view of the fact that these authors admit that no punishments were meted out to truce participants, is how the soldiers involved were able, in 1914, to perceive their positions as lambs led to slaughter, yet managed to lose sight of that fact for the remaining years of the war. If it provided soldiers with insights “they were never to forget”, why did they all go back to readily fighting a war that, by any standards, did not get any more rational? If it made the troops “think twice about the nationally inspired animosities to which they were expected to subscribe,” how did they return to subscribing to those animosities for another four years without engaging in similar rebellions? These questions remain unanswered in works about the truce, and, by remaining not only unanswered but unanswerable, challenge the war’s orthodox narrative.

The jacket copy for Jim Murphy’s children’s book, Truce, which characterizes the conflict as “a row of falling dominoes as one European nation after another rushed into war,” takes a fairly predictable line towards the temporary cease-fire. “But who would have guessed that, on December 25\textsuperscript{th},” the

\textsuperscript{333} Brown and Seaton, Christmas Truce, pg.193
\textsuperscript{334} Brown and Seaton, Christmas Truce, pp. 215-216
\textsuperscript{335} Weintaub, Silent Night, pg. xvi
blurb rhetorically asks, “the troops would openly defy their commanding officers by stopping the fighting – and spontaneously celebrating Christmas with their ‘enemies’.”\textsuperscript{336} The quotation marks inserted around the word ‘enemies’ leaves no doubt where the work stands on the subject of the war; the aftermath of the conflict, Murphy writes, left soldiers and civilians on each side “angry and vengeful.” Their vengeance, however, was not directed “at their own political leaders for getting them into war under false pretenses or at their military commanders for sticking with clearly outmoded and deadly combat tactics. At the time, most people still believed their country’s propaganda; instead, they blamed their enemies for the slaughter and demanded justice.”\textsuperscript{337} Even after the war ended, therefore, the lies and misrepresentations continued, preventing the citizens of the combatant countries from seeing the war clearly; the implication being, of course, that those writing in the late twentieth century are much more enlightened, and therefore more capable of understanding the true meaning of the conflict.

Murphy calls the Christmas truce “an astonishing event that highlighted all the best qualities of the human spirit.”\textsuperscript{338} Similarly, Joyeux Noel, a 2005 film about the Christmas truce, as the blurb on the back of the DVD case claims, shows how “(e)nhemies leave their weapons behind for one night as they band together in brotherhood and forget about the brutalities of war.”\textsuperscript{339} The film begins with British, French and German schoolchildren parroting their national attitudes towards their enemies; the British child recites “To rid the map of every trace/Of Germany and the Hun/We must exterminate that race.” This early scene establishes the film’s attitude towards the war: that all combatants were equally culpable for the war, and yet equally innocent, as they had clearly been indoctrinated by their governments into unwarranted hatred of the enemy. The

\textsuperscript{336} Jim Murphy, Truce: The Day the Soldiers Stopped Fighting (New York: Scholastic Press, 2009), quotes from jacket copy.

\textsuperscript{337} Murphy, Truce, pp. 92-93. Murphy, unfortunately, cannot find a way to reconcile his belief that the troops, by participating in the truce, were “openly defying their commanding officers,” with the concept that the same troops blamed the enemy for the slaughter.

\textsuperscript{338} Murphy, Truce, pg. 101. Murphy further notes that the story of the cease-fire also provided him with a “new focus for my research.” The Christmas truce, apparently, can be pressed into service for any number of uses.

\textsuperscript{339} Joyeux Noel, Dir. Christian Carion, Sony Picture Classics, 2005.
film then quickly switches to the Western front, showing French and Scottish soldiers attacking a German trench on December 23rd; this unsuccessful offensive leaves many casualties in No-Man’s-Land.

On Christmas Eve, the Germans place lit Christmas trees on their parapet, and a German soldier, singing “Silent Night,” advances into No-Man’s-Land. A Scottish priest, playing “Adeste Fideles” on the bagpipes, also stands on his side’s parapet; other soldiers join him while the German sings along. The soldiers from all three countries walk hesitantly into No-Man’s-Land, and the German, French and Scottish officers (Horstmayer, Audebert and Gordon: all incredibly decent chaps) share a bottle of champagne and arrange for a cease-fire, noting, however, that “it is just for tonight.” The soldiers exchange drinks, cigarettes and chocolate, and, at midnight, the Scottish priest leads them all in a mass. On Christmas morning, the officers return to No-Man’s-Land, and arrange to bury the dead that are lying there. After the bodies are buried, fraternization continues, with the inevitable football match, card-playing, and even a juggler providing entertainment. On Christmas evening, an outspoken German soldier confronts Horstmayer about the war, asking whether it can resume in the face of the armistice. “To die tomorrow,” he declares, “is even more absurd than yesterday.”

The next morning, Horstmayer walks over to the French trenches; Audebert protests that the truce is over, but the German has come to warn the French that their line will shortly be shelled by German artillery, and invites the French and Scottish soldiers to shelter in the German trenches. After the German shelling has ceased, the soldiers from all three armies then congregate in the French trenches, to avoid the retaliatory shelling from the French artillery on the German lines. After the French shelling stops, the German soldiers return to their side of the No-Man’s-Land, while the three officers shake hands wistfully and the Scottish bagpipers play “Auld Lang Syne”.

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340 Horstmayer tells Audebert that he is only warning them about the shelling because they shared the truce together; “If you had been relieved I would not have come to warn your successors.”
Up until this point, the film is relatively accurate to the details of the actual truce, with some minor quibbles.\textsuperscript{341} In dealing with the aftermath of the truce, however, the ‘true-life story’ starts to go awry. \textit{Joyeux Noel} then shows military censors reading soldiers’ letters, while sentences from the letters are heard in voice-over:

“The Scots photographer promised us pictures at New Year’s. Be a chance to get back together.”

“We and the British decided to accept the Kraut’s invitation. We’ll go spend New Year with them.”

“And above all, drink to the health of all those bastards who, sitting pretty, sent us here to slug it out.”

While the letters from the participants do contain occasional negative content - “Drink with those bastards? I’d rather die.” - the overwhelming impression given is that the soldiers, as a result of the truce, have had their eyes opened, are ready to lay down their arms permanently, resent those civilians who are not fighting and now judge the war to be futile.

More interesting, however, is what happens to the soldiers who participated in the truce. Audebert is reprimanded by a superior officer, who tells him that it was disgraceful for his unit to have been involved. “If public opinion hears of this -” the officer says, at which point Audebert interrupts, “(h)ave no fear, no one here will tell...because no one would believe or understand.” The superior officer refers to the attitude of the French, and again Audebert retorts, “(t)he country? What does it know of what we suffer here?” Audebert also admits that he “felt closer to the Germans than to those who cry ‘Kill the Krauts!’ before their stuffed turkey!” His unit is then sent back into battle in the front lines.

The Scottish priest, who volunteered to go the front as a stretcher-bearer, is seen tending the wounded in a large barn when he is confronted by a bishop who tells the priest that, because of his participation in the truce, he will be sent back to Scotland. Further, the regiment that participated in the truce will be disbanded, “by order of the King,” and its soldiers scattered among other

\textsuperscript{341} For example, as there was no place in the line where British, French and German troops were all simultaneously stationed, there were no reports of a three-way truce, and no research into the truce has produced any examples of soldiers inviting enemies into their trenches to avoid shelling.
regiments, “where God knows what will happen to those poor boys.” Their fate is
the fault of the priest, the bishop claims, as he was the one who led the soldiers
astray. “Is that truly the path of our Lord?” the priest asks. “You’re not asking
the right question,” the bishop enigmatically replies. The bishop then walks over
to an improvised altar, where he leads some soldiers in a mass, reminding them
that Christ came “to bring not peace but a sword.” He tells the British soldiers
that they are engaged in a crusade, as defenders of civilization, part of the holy
war of the “forces of good against the forces of evil.” The Germans, the bishop
continues, “do not act like us, neither do they think like us, for they are not like
us... with God’s help, you must kill the Germans, good or bad, young or old, kill
every one of them, so that it won’t have to be done again.”

The Germans are reprimanded by the their crown prince, who lectures the
soldiers briefly before informing them that they are being sent to “East Prussia to
take part in an offensive against the Russian Army.” The door of the rail car in
which the soldiers are sitting, which is both windowless and seatless, is closed and
fastened shut, and as the train pulls out of the station, the destination
‘Tannenberg’ is seen chalked on the outside of the car.342 As punishment,
therefore, for their fraternization with the enemy, the Scottish troop is
disbanded, the French soldiers are returned to a brutal sector of the front, and
the Germans dispatched to join a battle against on the Eastern front.343

Joyeux Noel, like so many recent renderings of the event, situates the
Christmas truce within the conventional narrative of the war: a rebellion by the
soldiers against the futility of the conflict, punished by commanders who must
ruthlessly stamp out any defiance. It further promotes two salient myths about
the cease-fire: that those soldiers who were involved in the event were penalized
for their participation, and that the news of the cease-fire was suppressed, kept
from a public who would be horrified to hear that their soldiers willingly
fraternized with the enemy. These myths are required for the truce to retain its
place within the orthodox narrative of the war, for if the news of the

342 Since it was clearly established that Horstmayer is Jewish, the choice of sealed rail cars to
transport the German soldiers across Germany to Eastern Europe is clearly intentional.
343 Although the Germans did prevail at the Battle of Tannenberg, their casualties numbered 20,000.
fraternizations were known – and even accepted – by the home front, and the men involved in the cease-fires were not punished for their involvement, how does the Christmas truce have any place within the dominant view of the war?

In fact, so pervasive are the beliefs that the news of the truce was suppressed, and the men involved punished for their participation, that they were even eventually adopted by some truce participants. A soldier who served on the western front, W.A. Quinton, wrote in 1929 that the truce in his part of the line lasted for over a week, during which time “for the whole of the day and for many days to come, friend and foe mixed freely out in no-mans-land.” The cease-fire ended when an adjacent company opened fire on a German working-party “at the instigation of a Staff officer from Headquarters.” In spite of the length of the truce, however, “(t)he newspapers made no mention of it. It was a thing to be hushed up, and the Press nobly played their part.”\textsuperscript{344} Similarly, C.A.F Drummond, who served as a subaltern on the Western Front in 1914, wrote in a memoir in 1976 that the cease-fire in his area went on for a week, “(b)ut of course the war was becoming a farce and the high-ups decided that this truce must stop.”\textsuperscript{345} Clearly, for at least these two men, post-war attitudes towards the war shaped what they believed happened during the truce.

Shortly after the war ended, the truce, for the most part, disappeared from the narrative of the war. When it was later resurrected, contemporaneous attitudes towards the cease-fire were largely forgotten, and in their place emerged the myth that became what we now think of as the Christmas truce, the meaning of which varies depending on the attitudes of those discussing it. For Field Marshall French, the truce was, in retrospect, a way to maintain chivalry even in the face of modern warfare. For Major McKenzie Wood, the temporary armistice was the inspiration for a life of service, and a standard on which to model post-war behavior. For Robert Graves, the truce was a reason to be pessimistic about the future of mankind. For Brown and Seaton, the truce is a

\textsuperscript{344} W.A. Quinton, Memoir, Private Papers of W.A. Quinton, Imperial War Museum Collection 6705.  
\textsuperscript{345} C.A.F. Drummond, Private Papers of C.A.F. Drummond, Imperial War Museum Collection No. 854.
“source of encouragement and hope,” amidst the horrors of modern warfare. For Weintraub and Murphy, the cease-fire proves that the war was a farce, against enemies that have, in the orthodox narrative, magically been transformed into ‘enemies.’ And finally, for the writer of Joyeux Noel, it is a vehicle for conveying the futility of the First World War.

For those who had participated in the conflict, the truce, in retrospect, became a way of encapsulating their attitudes towards the war. W.A. Quinton prefaced his 1929 memoir, in which he noted that the truce was hushed up, with the observation that he wanted to create a record of his story of the war so that someday his son “may read it, and form his opinion of warfare and perhaps realize how useless it all was, and how the same uselessness will apply to all future wars.” C.A.F. Drummond, who believed that the truce was stopped by the army administration, also wrote about being wounded on the Somme, and how afterwards he felt “a very keen and lasting sense of the useless destruction, waste and general futility of war.” No one would argue that these men were not presenting accurate accounts of their feelings about the conflict, but their memories of the truce and its aftermath are surely clouded by their retrospective view of the war, and possibly influenced by the existence of outside narratives that influenced their beliefs.

If even men who shared in the Christmas truce eventually came to believe in some of the myths about it, it is hardly surprising that those who wish to impress the temporary cease-fire into the service of the orthodox narrative of the war would also be inclined to distort both the reality and significance of the episode. As demonstrated, however, by the contemporaneous accounts of the soldiers involved, many of which appeared in the British press, it is apparent that the truce was widely publicized, and received by the public in the same spirit in which it was undertaken by those who participated in it: “(w)e went out and met them,” E.G. Morley wrote matter-of-factly to a friend, describing the “the curious pleasure of chatting with men who had been doing their best to kill us, and we

346 Brown and Seaton, Christmas Truce, pp. 215-216.
347 W.A. Quinton, Memoir.
348 C.A.F. Drummond, Memoir.
them.”\textsuperscript{349} The “most weird Christmas of my life,”\textsuperscript{350} as another soldier characterized it, was simply that: odd and unusual, but of no lasting significance. Bairnsfather, whose account of the Christmas truce is renowned, characterized the episode as being “just like the interval between the rounds in a friendly boxing match.”\textsuperscript{351} The boxing match that was the First World War was in fact a deadly and tragic conflict, yet the Christmas truce, and its aftermath, did sum up the attitudes of the soldiers who took part in it: determined to win the war, but at the same time very glad to take a break from the battle.

\textsuperscript{349} E.G. Morley, December 29 1914 letter.
\textsuperscript{350} K.M. Gaunt, December 25 1914 letter.
\textsuperscript{351} Bairnsfather, \textit{Bullets and Billets}. 
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