

THE GREAT TRUCE

It was proudly described as “the War to end all Wars” and it’s still known as “The Great War”. World War I (1914-1918) was the first modern industrial war, where aviation and tanks made their debut; the first war just for extermination, where toxic gases were regular weapons; and the first war that proved that the economic interests of weapon’s makers are the main drive for war, a hypothesis already suggested during the US Civil War (1861-1865)¹.

All the imperial powers of those years were involved in WW I – Great Britain, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and France - and also the rising empires – Japan, Italy, Belgium and the USA. All had philosophical, humanitarian or political reasons to intervene, because of racial, religious, political and social conflicts in the Balkans, Ireland, the Caribbean and the Middle East. Those reasons helped also to turn attention from their own internal struggles: from strikes and pro-independence rallies to genocide, religious repression, etc.

The “cause” of WW I, it’s constantly and still repeated, was the assassination of the Austrian heir to the throne, on June 28, 1914². The War was declared by Austria against Serbia on July 28, by Germany against Russia on August 1, and by Great Britain against Germany on August 4. Could so many states get ready for war in just a month? Could those states turn against each other because of two people who were not even their citizens? No, no, but everybody seems to keep on believing that lie.

Some countries remained neutral during the first months of WW I. In January, 1917, British secret services informed the US Government of the “Zimmerman telegram”, where a German agent promised to help Mexico in recovering the lands taken by the USA in the War of 1846-1848. Panic took over, and the USA entered the War on April 6.

There were 65 million soldiers mobilized, and about 10 million died in the War. Also, almost 10 million civilians died³. There were 21 million soldiers and civilians wounded in combat or as a

¹ This issue is well documented in Smedley D. Butler’s *War is a Racket* (Gainesville, Florida, Crises Press, 1995). A WW I veteran, and a high-ranked soldier for three decades, Butler ended describing himself as “a gangster for capitalism”.

² Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife Sophie survived a bomb attack that same day in Sarajevo, and were shot later by the Serbian Gavrilo Princip. The killings were planned by Serbians who claimed the independence of those parts of the Austro-Hungarian empire considered Serbian land.

³ Centre-robert-schuman.org/.../REPERES.

consequence of them; maimed by toxic gases and infected wounds, or permanently affected by “shell-shock” or “war neurosis”, known now as Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

The Great War was the final step for the downfall of the Russian monarchy and the pathway for the Bolshevik Revolution. It deeply changed the *mapa mundi*, when the Ottoman Empire disappeared and made-up countries with made-up frontiers (Syria, Iraq or Palestine) appeared, “protected” by France or Great Britain. And, of course and more important, it made greater the banking accounts of the weapon’s barons – Krupp, Siemens, Rotschild, Du Pont de Nemours, Ford, etc., etc., etc. WW I costs were estimated then in 956,000 million German Marks (more than 4 trillion dollars) ⁴.

Despite the destruction and death that come with any war, an important - though not new - event happened in WW I: a truce. Truces have happened since ancient times as ways to negotiate and make treaties, to recover corpses, to gain time from the enemy, and even to fly from the battlefields. The 1914 Winter Truce became a Christmas party⁵.



British and German soldiers were looking at each other immobilized in Belgian land when the 1914 winter began. They neither advanced nor retreated in the fields described forever by Erich Maria Remarque in *All Quiet in the Western Front* ⁶. Weather was bad and cold, nearby towns could be barely seen, and food came with high-spirited notes from the English King and the German Kaiser, which the Commanders managed to distribute.

⁴ Herman Kinder, Werner Hilgemann and Manfred Hergt: ***World History Atlas II: From the French Revolution to The Present*** (Spanish Version, 2006), p. 140.

⁵ Firstworldwar.com/features/christmastruce.

⁶ First published in 1929 and filmed in the USA in 1930 (Oscar for Best Picture). Remarque, a WW I veteran, also wrote *A Time to Live and a Time to Die*, filmed in the USA in 1958.



For no military reasons, the Germans sent a chocolate cake to the British and asked for a stop in their fight. This happened between December 15 and 23, and the Brits answered with tobacco and smiles. Then, they saw their enemies raising Christmas trees, even with garlands. On Christmas Eve, there were toasts, banquets and carols, in English and German.

In December 25, they gave gifts to each other: liquors, cigarettes, socks, soaps, pencils. There were also joint burials. Then, someone brought a soccer ball. That first World Game ended 3-2. Germany won.



The desire to live in peace was found in other places in the Western Front, from Switzerland's frontier to the North Sea. There were no gunshots. No cavalry charging, no tanks advancing, no airplanes bombing the enemy. There were, instead, frequent hugs, games, chocolate candies, smoke from cigarettes and bonfires. In some places, the truce extended over to the New Year.

But rumors got to the High Commanders. And to Governments. And to weapons' makers. All of them moved for killing to resume. They sent the officers to tell all those who kept, promoted or accepted the truce, that they could be court martialed, jailed or even shot like traitors. Thus the truce ended and the war moved on; a war that caused the loss of millions of young healthy and strong human beings, more greed, animosity, high debts, and other conditions that ended in the next international insanities: the Spanish Civil War and WW II.



Anyway, intolerance gave way to sharing for a few days. For a few days, soldiers were no longer killing machines, but plain human beings. A hundred years later, the Christmas Truce is the only event of WW I that deserves to be remembered.

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