

Kluwer Mediation Blog

The Christmas Truce

Martin Svatoš (FORARB/Charles University) · Wednesday, December 20th, 2017



Christmas Spirit in Air

It is hard to miss that the Christmas is coming, especially if you live in this part of the world. The streets of both major cities and smallest villages are decorated, the trees' candles lit up and everybody is carrying lots of presents in public transport. If you are lucky enough, you may steal a couple of minutes and profit from the Christmas markets and enjoy mulled wine and roasted chestnuts. I wish I can write that the festive atmosphere is contributing to human kindness and politeness. Unfortunately, the pressure of the obligation related to the year's end, the household chores and the disarray sometimes to be spotted in some shopping malls is contradicting this assumption.



However, as soon as the Christmas Eve will approach and the folks will gather around the family tables, the mighty power of Christmas truce will once again appear. Then, everybody will be happy. There is definitely something like Christmas spirit in the air that tends to put people together and force them to behave better, at least for a couple of hours of the year. I believe it is no coincidence that there is huge pressure to schedule the mediation sessions before the year will end: Everybody wants to settle, to start the new year with a clean slate.

The Most Peaceful Event in the Most Violent Setting

This might be proved also by one of the most extraordinary events in the history that occurred during the Great War (better known as the World War I, 1914-1918) which is definitely one of the most violent human conflicts.

This first global warfare involved more than 70 million military personnel. As a direct result, over nine million combatants and seven million civilians died, several genocides were conducted and many military inventions were presented: It was the first time for the poison gas, massive use of machine-guns, air rides and tanks. As terrible as this incident was, it also gave a rise to one spectacular event showing unlimited human kindness and tendency to peace: The Christmas truce of 1914.

During the first five months following the declaration of war, the German army initially encountered some success after an attack through Belgium into France. It was, however, repulsed by French and British forces and the fighting quickly degenerated into a trench-war stalemate.

Guns May Fall Silent upon Night Angels Sang

Although there were some official attempts to reach a ceasefire at this time, none of them met with any success. Such was the fate of both the Open Christmas Letter, a public message for peace addressed “To the Women of Germany and Austria”, signed by a group of 101 British women activists and the initiative of Pope Benedict XV who called for an official truce between the warring governments at least for the period of Christmas:

“The guns may fall silent at least upon the night the angels sang.”

Both proposals were, however, refused as both the belligerent parties believed their victory is within arm’s reach. And so, the first war Christmas reached hundreds of thousands of man in war tranches from the North Sea to the Swiss mountain.

We do not know, where it began. Also, the unknown hero who took the first step is probably forever covered by shadows of history. However, at the sunset of 24th December, the first signs of truce appeared as the German troops decorated their trenches with candles and Christmas trees. The opposing soldiers believed this was a kind of provocation or trap. Then the Germans started to sing carols. The British joined them with their own Christmas songs.

Football Match in No Man’s Land

Soon after, first man and then many others appeared in the No Man's Land – a piece of destroyed country between two enemies' trenches. The wounded comrades were taken into safety and killed ones were buried. Furthermore, prisoner swaps occurred. All from sudden first small gifts, such as food, cigarets, spirits, and souvenirs were exchanged and joint services were held. According to many witnesses, a couple of football matches were organised. However, no records of precise score survived. The exhausted soldiers far away from their homes were in embrace profiting from the minutes of peace and silence in the country that resembled more a fire site than one of the most fertile regions of Europe.



And then, all of sudden, the Christmas was gone and the ceasefire ended as suddenly as it appeared in the Western front. It involved more than 100,000 British, French and German soldiers and now, those once again stood in their trenches in an attempt to erase each other.

It is a paradox that the Christmas Truce was reported mainly from the neighbourhood of the Belgian town Ypres. Right in this area, the first mass use of poison gas would appear in less than six months. The following year, only a few units arranged for local ceasefires and almost none appeared in 1916. The war had become increasingly bitter after devastating human losses suffered during the carnage of the Somme and Verdun.



Yet, we should spare a thought for the soldiers overcoming the hostility for those short moments of Christmas 1914. Many of them never returned home, for many of them, this was the last Christmas. Their message, however, carries on.

And so, I wish you the following: May the spirit of Christmas truce be everywhere...and may we never celebrate the Christmas in tranches!

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