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[The Saturday Essay](#)

When the Guns Went Silent

The famous truce of 1914 was just of many cases of cooperation between enemies during World War I. What can these episodes teach us about peacemaking today?



‘The Christmas Day Truce of 1914,’ a lithograph by Arthur C. Michael published on Jan. 9, 1915, shows British and German soldiers out of the trenches of World War I, arm in arm and exchanging headgear. Arthur C. Michael/The illustrated London News Picture Library, London, UK/Bridgeman Images

by Robert M. Sapolsky

On Christmas morning we stuck up a board with 'A Merry Christmas' on it. The enemy had stuck up a similar one.... Two of our men then threw their equipment off and jumped on the parapet with their hands above their heads. Two of the Germans done the same and commenced to walk up the river bank, our two men going to meet them. They met and shook hands and then we all got out of the trench...

So wrote a British soldier named Frank Richards, referring to the first Christmas of World War I, one hundred years ago this Thursday. Up and down the four hundred-odd miles of trenches on the Western Front, men risked their lives with similar acts, meeting opposing soldiers in “no man’s land.” Wary and unarmed, they made their way out of their trenches, taking steps that, a day earlier, would have guaranteed their death at the hands of sharpshooters and machine gunners a hundred yards away.

The relaxation of hostilities spread, and what has come to be called the “Christmas truce” took hold. Soon, soldiers were holding joint burial services for the dead. They began trading goods. British soldiers had been given holiday tins of plum pudding from the king; German soldiers had received pipes with a picture of the crown prince on them; and before long the men were bartering these holiday gee-gaws that celebrated the enemy’s royals. Eventually, soldiers prayed and caroled together, shared dinner, exchanged gifts. Most famously, there were soccer matches at various locations, played with improvised balls.

The truce mostly held through Christmas and, in some cases, even to the New Year. It took senior officers’ threats for fighting to resume, and such comprehensive battlefield peacemaking never happened again during the Great War. Courts-martial were brought against those involved later in even brief Christmas truces to retrieve the dead.

The Christmas truce was an extraordinary event, not just in World War I but in the history of warfare. But its familiarity and fame—just last month, a short film dramatizing the episode, produced by the Sainsbury’s supermarket chain, created a sensation in the U.K.—should not lead us to ignore less dramatic instances of cooperation and trust-building across battle lines during World War I. Indeed, these more modest episodes may be the key to understanding how, in our own day, we might work to lessen political violence and hostility, even among the most bitter enemies.

Sainsbury memorialized the 100th anniversary of the Christmas truce with its viral ad earlier this fall.

Why did the 1914 Christmas truce work? The static nature of trench warfare meant that soldiers faced each other day after day. Sometimes, friendly shouting across the lines in the period before Christmas established a vague sense of connection. And the stationary fighting meant that, if you betrayed the truce, the other side knew where to find you for revenge.

The truce mostly involved British and German troops, and its success was aided by shared religious traditions, racial identity and culture; many knew the others' language, had visited their country. Brits typically perceived themselves as fighting to save *les derrières* of the French, a frequent historical enemy, and during the truce, they would tell Germans that they both should be fighting the French.

These special circumstances are very far, of course, from the conditions in nature where we see other sorts of creatures develop something akin to cooperation and mutual restraint, however lacking they may be in conscious intent. *E. coli* bacteria, for example, limit their own growth at high population densities, avoiding resource depletion. Social insects forgo reproduction to aid their queen's reproductive efforts. Female bats feed each other's babies, African wild dogs let the young eat first at kills, baboons form coalitions, and chimps patrol their territory cooperatively.

The advantages of mutual restraint and cooperation may be obvious, in the Christmas truce as in the much simpler world of animal behavior, but that doesn't tell us how such systems get started. After all, the first *E. coli* that, in a burst of selfless idealism, limits its growth immediately finds itself one step behind in the competition with other bacteria.

For evolutionary biologists, the big question is: What conditions make it possible for survival-minded organisms, otherwise inclined to treat other organisms as rivals or even enemies, to begin cooperating? Here's where the lesser-known truces of World War I come in, because they occurred without the special circumstances of the Christmas truce: They were spontaneous, emerged without negotiations, without direct interactions or even formal communication.

How did this system of "live and let live," as it has been called, evolve in the harsh environment of the World War I battlefield? First was what evolutionary biologists call "preadaptation." We know, for instance, that feathers didn't evolve for flying. The first birds used them for temperature regulation and dominance display, and only after other pieces of physiology fell into place did those feather thingies turn out to be useful for getting airborne.

Something similar often happened in the trenches. There tended to be a lull in the fighting during meals. Those pauses existed for the simple reason that no one, on either side, wanted to interrupt dinner to kill or be killed.

But these lulls began to be used as ways to send signals to the other side. As the British historian Tony Ashworth writes in his book "Trench Warfare 1914-18," ritualizing these pauses made it possible to communicate through contrasting behavior. So the soldiers would make a point not just of shooting less frequently during dinner: They would let the guns thunder until the stroke of 6 p.m. and then go utterly silent until 7 p.m., every day. And if the other side started doing the same, they had essentially negotiated a narrow truce: no fighting during dinner. Similar truces evolved from lulls in fighting during horrible weather, when everyone's priority became avoiding hypothermia.

A next step occurred during situations in which mutual restraint was most tangibly beneficial, under the sort of win-win circumstances shaped by what evolutionary biologists call "the shadow of the future." Wagon trains delivering food on roads behind the lines were easy targets for

artillery. But if you destroyed the enemy's food, he would do the same in return. Thus, food wagons were mostly left unharmed. The same process made latrines safe zones.

The system of "live and let live" would spread further. One side might get their best sniper to put a bullet into the wall of an abandoned house near enemy lines. Then he would do it repeatedly, hitting the same spot. What was being communicated? "Look how good our guy is. He could have aimed at you, but chose not to. What do you say to that?" And the other side would reciprocate with their best sniper. What had just started? An agreement to shoot over each other's heads.

The key, again, was developing rituals of cooperation—shooting repeatedly at the same inconsequential target, renewing the agreement daily through repetition. Many primates have ritualized gestures of aggression—say, a male baboon yawning in the face of a rival, displaying his canines. Such displays serve as a threat. But in the trenches, the ritual of bullets flying innocuously by, well over soldiers' heads, signaled a continuing commitment to peace.



Ruth Gwily

Nor did violations destroy such truces. Mr. Ashworth documents the way that soldiers would toss a rock with a note attached into an enemy trench, saying things like, “Sorry, we must shoot for real, senior officers coming. We will stop tonight.”

Evolutionary biologists, working with researchers in game theory, wrestle with two thorny problems for the emergence of stable cooperation: cheating, when one side takes advantage of a truce to attack, and signal errors, mistakes made when, say, some clueless newbie lets loose with a shell.

The punishment for such violations? Reminding the other side of the “shadow of the future”—that is, the likelihood of future retaliation. Mr. Ashworth describes an instance in which German troops unexpectedly fired a shell into British trenches. “We are very sorry about that; we hope no one was hurt,” a German soldier soon shouted. “It is not our fault, it is that damned Prussian artillery.” Back flew some British shells—and then the peace resumed.

The thorniness lies in figuring how much retribution is optimal. Too little, and you encourage further exploitative cheating. Too much, and cooperation collapses.

Landmark research by the political scientist Robert Axelrod and the evolutionary biologist W.D. Hamilton found that, on both a mathematical level and in the real world of animal behavior, the best way to police against cheating and signal errors is a variant of tit-for-tat—that is, retaliation that is not much more than the magnitude of the violation—and then a return to cooperation. Think of it as the functional equivalent of forgiveness. Mr. Ashworth documents that, during World War I, the typical response to a violation of “live and let live” would be retaliation of roughly twice the magnitude.

Such truces emerged repeatedly during World War I, and just as often, the brass in the rear would intervene by rotating troops, threatening courts-martial and ordering savage raids requiring hand-to-hand combat—all to shatter any sense of shared interests between enemies. And still the truces would start up again.

Mr. Ashworth describes various steps in these soldiers’ development of a psychological portrait of each other. First, once mutual restraint emerged, they could conclude that their enemy was rational and responded to incentives to hold fire. This prompted a sense of responsibility in dealing with them. Initially, this was a purely instrumental impulse, self-serving cooperation to prevent retaliation.

With time, however, this sense of responsibility developed a moral tinge, tapping into the soldiers’ resistance to betraying those who dealt honorably with them. It occurred to them that: The other side didn’t want dinner disturbed any more than we do; they also don’t want to fight in rainstorms; they also have to deal with brass from headquarters who screw up everything. A creeping sense of camaraderie emerged.

This produced something striking. The war machines in Britain and Germany spewed typical propaganda about the enemy’s subhuman nature. But in studying diaries and letters, Mr. Ashworth observed surprisingly little hostility toward the enemy expressed by trench soldiers; the further from the front, the more hostility. In the words of one front-line soldier, “At home one abuses the enemy, and draws insulting caricatures. How tired I am of grotesque Kaisers. Out here, one can respect a brave, skillful, and resourceful enemy. They have people they love at home, they too have to endure mud, rain and steel.”

Feelings of “us” and “them” were always in flux. If someone was shooting at you, they were certainly Them. But otherwise, soldiers on both sides were likely to think that the more formidable Them was the rats and lice, the mold in the food, the cold or the comfortable officer

at headquarters who seemed, in the words of one soldier, an “abstract tactician who from far away disposes of us.”

While the “live and let live” system of World War I was extraordinary, an unsentimental observer could note that it occurred only under special circumstances and didn’t last. Eventually, soldiers returned to fighting and killing, and the war’s final period was a bloodbath, a result of the British strategy of “ceaseless attrition.” The miracle was that the truces occurred at all.

Which raises a challenging thought. Step back from the grainy black-and-white photos of the Great War and consider a thought experiment in which all the fighters don’t know “Silent Night.” Our adversaries today kidnap girls and sell them into slavery, commit atrocities and, instead of concealing their evil deeds, post them online. It is hard to imagine relaxing for a few minutes and exchanging holiday gifts with al Qaeda grunts.

But time can bring about profound changes. At the ceremony in Hawaii commemorating the 50th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, a handful of the attending veterans were Japanese airmen who had participated in the attack. These tentative, elderly men came forward to apologize and to seek reconciliation with the elderly Americans who had been on the ground.

This led to subsequent meetings with larger numbers of such veterans, joint ceremonies and something resembling friendships. One Japanese veteran paid for roses to be placed monthly at the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial; one American survivor, who worked as a docent at the memorial, playing taps there on his bugle daily, took to also playing the Japanese equivalent. And similar reconciliations have taken place between U.S. and Viet Cong veterans of the Vietnam War; there are even tour agencies specializing in trips to Vietnam for such veterans.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett has pondered a revealing scenario: Someone is undergoing surgery without anesthesia but with absolute knowledge that afterward, she would receive a drug that would erase all memories of the event. Would the pain be less agonizing if she knew that it would be forgotten? Would the same happen to hatred, if you knew that with time, the similarities would become more important than the differences?

A hundred years ago, in a place that was hell on earth, those with the most reasons to hate one another didn’t need even the passage of time to see the similarities. And they were able, however briefly, to cooperate—and to establish some small measure of peace.

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