

[Soccer in the trenches: Remembering the WWI Christmas Truce](#)



A memorial marks the field outside Ploegsteert Wood, Flanders, where British and German soldiers played football during the World War I Christmas Day truce in 1914.

Kurt Zehmisch was a German lieutenant in the first World War. He disappeared forever in the Soviet Union in the second. In 1999, his son Rudolf found his dad's diary in the attic. This is what Zehmisch Senior recorded for Christmas Day, 1914: "A couple of Britons brought a ball along from their trenches, and a lively game began. How fantastically wonderful and strange. The English officers experienced it like that too -- that thanks to soccer and Christmas, the feast of love, deadly enemies briefly came together as friends."

It was one of several impromptu soccer matches played between British and German soldiers in No Man's Land that Christmas. For one day -- and in some sectors of the line, for several days -- the enemies made a spontaneous peace. A century on, these games transfix Europeans. "We all grew up with the story of soldiers from both sides putting down their arms on Christmas Day," says Prince William, president of the English Football Association. No wonder, because this extraordinary story suggests an alternative history of the 20th century. Many people, including some veterans of the war, have doubted that these games were ever played. The story seems [too good to be true](#). Indeed, Geoff Dyer in his 1994 book "The Missing of the Somme" dismisses it as myth. Some historians believe the truth is somewhere in between. Others contend that the impact of the games has been overstated as we witness the Premier League and FA, among other organizations, commemorate the moment.

But based on a slew of books and other sources, I believe the Christmas matches happened. They are described in dozens of letters, regimental histories, diaries, contemporary British newspapers and postwar memoirs. They are commemorated in the "In Flanders Field" war museum in Ypres, Belgium. Authoritative books by the American historian Stanley Weintraub (emeritus professor at Penn State University), by the German writer Michael Jurgs and a joint history by Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton have described the Christmas truce.

According to all these sources, the following narrative emerges. The troops had gone to war in August 1914 expecting to be home by Christmas. That didn't happen. Many, in fact, would never come home. By Christmas 1914, stunning modern killing machines had left about 750,000 people dead.

In December, the German high command, hoping to boost morale, sent thousands of little Christmas trees to the trenches. The aim was to keep the soldiers' hearts in the battle. Instead it had the opposite effect. Christmas highlighted similarities between Christian nations in opposite trenches. When German soldiers at La Chapelle d'Armentieres in France sang the carol, "Stille

Nacht" (the original of the English "Silent Night", with the same tune), a British regiment shouted for more. Near the French village Fleurbaix, British soldiers in their trenches saw Christmas trees hung with lights advancing into No Man's Land. The Germans were making a seasonal gesture. The Brits responded.

As well as sharing Christmas, the soldiers had gotten to know the enemy. In some spots the trenches were barely 50 meters apart. You could see enemy soldiers shaving in the morning. Often there were informal truces while stretcher-bearers went around No Man's Land collecting the dead. Few French or Belgian regiments participated in the Christmas truce. They had more reason than the Brits to hate the Germans, who had invaded their countries. But for hundreds of miles along the British-German lines, there was fraternization.



Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, helps unveil the Christmas Truce Football Monument at The National Memorial Arboretum on Dec. 12, 2014 in Stafford, England.

It began spontaneously, and slightly differently in each sector, and yet a coherent story emerges. Germans would raise sheets with texts scrawled on them like,

"You no shoot, we no shoot." A head would pop up above the parapet. Suddenly German soldiers would be walking in No Man's Land. Britons left their trenches to meet them.

Everywhere enemies shook hands, wished each other merry Christmas, and arranged not to shoot the next day. Together they fantasized about the war dissolving in a burst of brotherhood. In the surviving photographs -- one of which appeared in several British newspapers on January 8, 1915 -- they still stand huddled together in No Man's Land. They all wear moustaches, thick coats and scarves. Smoke rises from the German cigars they are sharing.

They also shared Christmas dinners, promised to meet again after the war, and wondered why they were fighting. Britons donned German helmets. Germans sang "God Save the King." Some Germans told stories of working as waiters, barbers or taxi drivers in prewar Britain. "Good morning, sir," [a German said](#) to a British lance corporal. "I live at Alexander Road, Hornsey. And I would see Woolwich Arsenal play Tottenham tomorrow."

How do men without a common language express friendship? They play soccer. Christmas kickabouts erupted across No Man's Land. After German and Scottish soldiers had finished their game (inevitably, the Germans won), one German produced a camera. "The players of both teams gathered in a group, always beautiful coloured rows, the ball in the middle," recalled the Saxon lieutenant Johannes Niemann. The Scots were wearing kilts, and as the Saxons had discovered to their glee during the match, wore no underpants. Sadly, the best team photograph ever has disappeared, unless it's still mouldering in somebody's attic.

The games weren't serious. One lasted only an hour, after which both teams were exhausted. And though corpses had been cleared from the battlefield earlier that day, shell holes and the soldiers' huge boots made close control impossible.

Players who fell in the mud were pulled out by the enemy, to cheers from spectators perched on the parapets.

"Goalposts were either a couple of pieces of wood, or caps or helmets," writes Jurgs.

Ernie Williams, in 1914 a British soldier in the 6th Cheshires regiment, told the BBC TV programme *Grandstand* 69 years later: "It was just a general kickabout. I should think there were about a couple of hundred taking part ... I was pretty good then, at 19 ... There was no sort of ill-will between us. ... It was simply a melee -- nothing like the soccer you see on television. The boots we wore were a menace -- those great big boots we had on -- and in those days the balls were made of leather and they soon got very soggy."

Not everyone liked the truce. Superior officers on both sides stopped it within days. The British brigadier CM Richards (also quoted by Weintraub) recalled in a postwar memoir having received a signal from Battalion Headquarters on Christmas Day "telling me to make a soccer pitch in No Man's Land, by filling up shellholes, etc, and to challenge the enemy to a match on the 1st January. I was furious and took no action at all. I wish I had kept that signal. Stupidly I destroyed it -- I was so angry. It would have been a good souvenir."

A 25-year-old German soldier named Adolf Hitler was equally shocked by the truce. In Weintraub account, he had spent Christmas Day in the cellar of an abbey near Ypres, Belgium. Told later that men of his regiment had played soccer with them, he exclaimed: "Something like that should not happen in wartime. Have you no German honor?" German regimental histories written under Nazism do not mention the truce.

A memorial to the Christmas Truce in World War One was dedicated by Prince William, the Duke of Cambridge.

THIS MONTH BRITONS in particular are remembering the soccer games of Christmas 1914. Indeed, the British Council found that over two-thirds of British adults knew about them. Schools around Britain are playing commemorative matches. Earlier this month, before every English professional game, all 22 starting players posed for a group photograph, recalling the picture of German and British soldiers posing together.

You can see why people remember. The Christmas truce offers a glimpse of an alternative history: a 20th century in which, starting at Christmas 1914, everyone stops shooting and starts playing soccer. Then we'd have had no Russian revolution in 1917, no future for lance-corporal Hitler, no Stalingrad, Auschwitz or the divided Europe of the Cold War. "Christmas 1914," writes Weintraub, "suggests an unrealized potential to burst its seams and rewrite a century." The soccer players of that day, most of them probably dead by 1918, would have wanted it.

There's one other thing to say about the Christmas soccer. To the soldiers chasing balls amid shell holes that day, one fact was obvious: soccer wasn't war. In fact, it was its opposite. Yet until that Christmas, the British consensus had been that soccer was a sort of war. The traditional idea was that sports bred the manliness and team spirit required for "the greater game" of war.

Long after peace had returned to Europe, many European newspapers and soccer men still talked about soccer as if it were a kind of war. Bobby Robson, England manager from 1982 to 1990, eulogized his captain Bryan Robson with imagery straight from the first World War: "You could put him in any trench and know he'd be the first over the top ... he wouldn't think well, Christ, if I put my head up there it might get shot off."

This sort of talk wasn't just an English disorder. Sepp Herberger, who coached

West Germany to victory at the 1954 World Cup, wrote: "A good soccer player is also always a good soldier." West Germany's great striker during the 1970s, Gerd Müller, was nicknamed "The Bomber". This kind of talk has almost died out now. Nobody uses military metaphors to eulogize Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo, and nobody still likens the German team to Panzer tanks. We're now remembering Christmas 1914 in part because we're returning to its vision: war is war, and soccer is something much better.

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