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Joyeux Noël and Remembering the Christmas Truce of 1914

“What would happen, I wonder, if the armies suddenly and simultaneously went on strike and said some other method must be found of settling the dispute?”—Winston Churchill to his wife, Clementine, November 23, 1914.¹

Preface: July Crisis of 1914

One hundred years ago this July, a crisis occurs that would forever change our world: The July Crisis of 1914, a rapid series of events that, like falling dominos, lead to The Great War. The first domino to fall occurs 28 June 1914 with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo by Bosnians affiliated with the “Black Hand;” then, 5-6 July, Germany issues a “blank check” to Austria; 28 July, Austria declares war on Serbia; 30 July, Russia orders general mobilization of its army reserves; 31 July, Germany delivers a twelve-hour ultimatum to Russia; 1-2 August, Germany declares war on Russia but enters Luxemburg and threatens Belgium; 3 August, France declares war on Germany; and 4 August, Germany invades neutral Belgium, and Britain declares war on Germany. In summary, four declarations of war take place in seven days’ time, and The Great War begins.

¹ Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History*, (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Co., 1994) 25.

Introduction

Exactly five years after the “the fall of the first domino,” The Treaty of Versailles is signed 28 June 1919, ending the state wars between Germany and the allies and, shortly afterwards, the war movie genre is born with William Nigh’s 1919 production of James W. Gerard’s *Beware!* Classics followed in the ensuing decades, such as Lewis Milestone’s 1930 production of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Raymond Bernard’s 1932 production of Roland Dorgeles’s *Les Croix de bois* (*Wooden Crosses*), Howard Hawks’ 1941 production of Alvin York’s *Sergeant York*, Stanley Kubrick’s 1957 production of Humphrey Cobb’s *Paths of Glory*, David Lean’s 1962 production of T. E. Lawrence’s *Lawrence of Arabia*, and Nathan Kroll’s 1964 production of Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August*.

More recent box office hits include Edwark Zwick’s 1994 production of Jim Harrison’s *Legends of the Fall*, Frank Pierson’s 1995 *Truman*, and Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s 2004 production of Sébastien Japrisot’s *Un long dimanche de fiancailles* (*A Long Engagement*). Of particular interest here is a 2005 Cannes, Cesar, Academy Award, and Golden Globe nominee: Christian Carion’s *Joyeux Noël* for its depiction of the little-known but true fraternization story of the 1914 Christmas Eve truce declared by Germans, French, and Scottish infantrymen near Lens, France. The film holds such current significance in Franco-German relations that it was showcased at the Goethe Institute in Brussels in December 2012 for the occasion of the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of the Élysée Treaty, perhaps the most significant reconciliatory document signed by two of the most bitter rival enemies of the twentieth century—France and Germany.

Unlike most classic World War films that are, for the most part, entirely in one language, with perhaps the exception of Darryl Zanuck’s 1962 production of Cornelius Ryan’s *The Longest Day*, where all characters speak in their own languages with English subtitles, a detail which has gone along way to the ranking of the film as “historically right on the mark throughout,” is Christian Carion’s *Joyeux Noël*. Also unique to *The Longest Day*, if only for the most part in cameo appearances, is the *pléiade* of high-profile international cinema stars, a great feat that has never been repeated on such a scale since. Perhaps inspired by Zanuck to a certain extent, Carion produces a tri-lingual (French, English, and German) color production with subtitles. Carion’s decision to have the soldiers speak in their mother tongue renders the movie all the more authentic, for too often we see an all-star cast, such as in *The Paths of Glory*, where all sides speak the movie producer’s language. As with *The Longest Day*, *Joyeux Noël* also features performances from a list of international actors, each speaking in the appropriate language: Diane

Krüger (*Troy*) plays Anna, the Danish soprano who risks her life to be with her man, German Private Nikolaus Sprink, on Christmas; Benno Fürmann plays Sprink, the German soldier and tenor whose most important performance is singing for both his comrades as well as his enemies in *No Man's Land* on Christmas Eve 1914; Daniel Brühl (*Good Bye Lenin*) plays Horstmayer, the Jewish German Lieutenant who struggles with his and his troops' desire for peace; Canat plays Audebert, the French lieutenant whose allegiance to his troops is stronger than it is to his high commanders; Danny Boon plays Ponchel, the French soldier and barber who battles with the thought of the Germans occupying the village where his mother lives; Gary Lewis plays Palmer, the Anglican priest who gives his most important mass on Christmas Eve 1914; Alex Ferns plays Gordon, the Scottish officer who is fascinated with the brotherhood of all soldiers, both the allies and the Germans; Steve Robertson plays Jonathan, the British soldier who suffers from shellshock and is guilt ridden with leaving his dying brother, William, in *No Man's Land* and, as a result, cannot fraternize with his comrades, allies, and Germans in *No Man's Land* on Christmas Eve 1914.

As is characteristic of many war movies whose origins lay both in fiction and in non-fiction novels, memoirs, letters, and other historical documentations, *Joyeux Noël* is a French, Belgian, British, German, and Romanian coproduction and the fruit of Christian Carion, the film director and writer who drew his inspiration from Yves Buffetaut's *Batailles de Flandres et d'Artois 1914-1918*. Also supporting Carion's rendition of the fraternization and the Christmas truce are the works of Marc Ferro, a world-renowned specialist on The Great War, The Russian Revolution, and the history of cinema; of Malcolm Brown, an independent historian and attaché to the Imperial War Museum in London; of Rémy Cazals, a professor at l'Université Toulouse-Le Mirail; and of Olaf Mueller, a German Literature researcher specializing in The Great War and the history of pacifists.

Moved by the history of the Christmas truce of World War I 1914 that takes place in many areas along the seven hundred kilometer Western Front from Nieuport, Belgium to Belfort, France where thousands of allied troops and the Germans abandon their guns in the trenches to meet each other in *No Man's Land* to exchange cigarettes, chocolate, food and drink, and Merry Christmas wishes, Carion focuses his plot on four characters—a Scottish priest, a German tenor, his Danish soprano girlfriend, and a French lieutenant—who find themselves at the very heart of this Christmas 1914 fraternization. To advertise a film as a “true story” is always a risk on the producer's part because viewers wonder which parts are true and which ones are fiction. As is often the case, a “true-story” film indicates that the

producer has taken artistic license to portray the facts in approximately two hours, even if the events have been changed or manipulated. The names of the characters as well as some of the events are either fictitious, such as the love story between Anna and Sprink and their duet in No Man's Land near Lens, or are post 1914, such as the cat's appearance; however, Carion's purpose is not only to assist the viewers to connect to the soldiers' circumstances and the their loved ones left behind, but also to advance the story towards its climax, and to leave the viewers with some idea of the truth about what happened one hundred ago. On the other hand, the film is "true" in that it captures the unplanned efforts of the low commanding officers and the infantrymen to create an armistice that, some may argue, could have lasted, had it not been for the high commanders and politicians.

Besides the rarity of the main theme, also unique among many, if not all war films, is the relevancy of the 2005 release of *Joyeux Noël* coinciding with the timing of the deaths of the last surviving veterans of *La Grande Guerre*. According to Olivier Luminet, psychology professor at l'Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL) and l'Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), the passing of the last witnesses represents a critical moment for its remembrance by the generations that follow. It is one of the great differences that now exists between the collective memory of two World Wars. The recent commemorations of the 70th anniversary of D-Day rendered reality to the difference all too well. For World War I, only the written words now remain, and they certainly lack the vigor of the living, collective memory.²

Psychologists agree that the collective memory lasts approximately three generations, at best. Beyond that point, we are left with a cultural memory only. At the age of 109, Alfred Anderson, the last survivor of the 1914 Christmas truce, died in 2005,³ and Florence Green died in 2011 at the age of 110 (and 350 days),⁴ and World War I now officially belongs to that category of cultural memory. The topic of remembrance of the two World Wars is presently the subject of a study undertaken by both the Université Catholique de Louvain and the Université Libre de Bruxelles. According to Professor Laurent Licata, one of the principal investigators, there is an additional problem with regard to *La Grande Guerre* in that many people either forget or do not know how the First World War began, but they possess a fairly clear understanding of the Second World War because it easily

2 Violaine Jadoul, "Une Guerre Peut Tomber dans l' Oubli," *Le Soir*, jeudi 5 juin 2014, 38.

3 "Prince in Tribute to War Veteran," *BBC News.com* 21 Nov. 2005, Web. 5 July 20014

4 "'World's last' WWI veteran Florence Green dies aged 110." *BBC News*, 7 Feb. 2112, Web. 4 July 2014.

represents good against evil. Thus, there are many who automatically associate the Second World War as a carbon copy of the First One.⁵

Professor Laurent Luminet continues, saying that the First World War began with an unbelievable chain of events and, at the beginning, there were only tensions, but then each affected country believed in being able to rapidly win the conflict.⁶ We could have avoided such an escalation, for Serbia had agreed to all twenty-five provisions of the July ultimatum but, when Kaiser Wilhelm finally studied the Serbian reply for himself and tried to stop the Austrians, it was too late.⁷ It is a great lesson for today's generation and for future generations. For Carion, with the inexorable passing of time, the greater notion is that *La Grande Guerre* was an exceptional War and deserves to be remembered.

Declaration of War

Carion's opening scene focuses on color photographs depicting the pre-war era, a time of peace: a family picnic, mothers with their children at the beach, a woman standing lakeside and holding a parasol, young girls in school courtyard, a little blond girl knitting on a bench on a summer's day, two young boys dressed in French military uniforms, and a map of the French-German border with the Alsace-Lorraine region in black. Because the photo is pre-war, the one of children in uniform appears quite cute; however, little did that generation know that some of their thirteen-year-old schoolboys, including the Belgian Crown Prince Leopold, would find themselves in the trenches.⁸

At first glance, these pictures depict a certain innocence; however, Carion portrays the effectiveness of the bellicose propagandists who convinced their nations to instill in their children hatred for the enemies, as seen with the school children delivering their hatred poems: first, a French boy recites part of Pierre Gaillard's "La France attend"—"Enfant, regarde sur ces cartes ce point noir qu'il faut effacer/De tes petits doigts tu l'écartes, en rouge il vaut mieux le tracer/..."; then, a British boy delivers his hate speech—"To rid the map of every trace of Germany and of the Huns, we must exterminate that race, we must not leave a single one. Heed not their children's cry. Slay them now, the women too. Or else,

5 Jadoul 38.

6 Jadoul 38.

7 Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Co., 1994) 14-31.

8 Rob Ruggenberg, "The Heritage of the Great War," *Greatwar.nl* 9 June 2014, Web. 4 July 2014.

9 Pierre Gaillard, "La France attend," *Études Foriziennes* (Vol. 10. Sainte Etienne: Reboul, 1979) 182.

some day, they'll rise, but dead they cannot do, ..."; and a German boy concludes with part of Ernst Lissauer's "Hassgesang gegen England" ("Hymn of Hatred Against England")—"Wir wollen nicht lassen von unserem Haß, Wir haben alle nur einen Haß, Wir lieben vereint, wir hassen vereint, Wir alle haben nur einen Feind: ENGLAND!..."¹⁰ The British and the German articulate the same general message: destroy the enemy. Ironically, the French boy does not express the desire to kill but rather the longing to reclaim the Alsace-Lorraine area, recently seized by the Prussians in the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War and an area over which the French and Germans have disputed since the *Serments de Strasbourg* of 842, a pledge of military allegiance between Charles le Chauve and his brother Louis le Germanique against their older brother, Lothaire, who had inherited Alsace-Lorraine from his grandfather, Charlemagne.

Following the angelic schoolchildren reciting their propagandist death threats to the enemy, Carion introduces his main characters and focuses on their reaction to the declaration of war, first with William, ringing the village church bell in the Scottish Highlands and yelling to his brother Jonathan that they are going to war: "This is it! War has been declared! Well, li'l brother, . . . in two days, we're all leavin' for basic trainin' in Glasgow. At last, somethin' is happenin' in our lives! Well, ya comin'?" The next main characters sucked in this war are the Danish soprano, Anna, and the German tenor, Sprink, who receives his call to duty from a German officer interrupting their recital performance to announce Kaisers Wilhelm's 31 July declaration of war, "By His Majesty, our beloved Kaiser Wilhelm. These are grave times for Germany. Our country is under siege. The sword is being forced into our hand. I hope that, with the help of God, we will wield the sword in a manner that we can put it back into the scabbard with honor." In these declaration-of-war scenes, Carion accurately conveys the propaganda-induced enthusiasm and sense of adventure with which the young men embrace the war. Millions on all sides volunteer, for they not only wish to defend their country but also fear the war will be over before they have the opportunity to play their role in it!

Senselessness of War

Immediately following the declaration-of-war shots, Carion then introduces Lieutenant Audebert who, unable to stomach the horrors of this "Great War," vomits minutes before going into the only battle scene of the movie. Giving the orders to charge the Germans, whose trenches are only fifty meters away, Audebert tries to reassure his men, informing them that the allies' artillery have been

¹⁰ Ernst Lissauer, "Hassgesang gegen England," *bschamberlain.net*, N.D. Web. 5 July 2014.

bombing the Germans for the past hour, that the Scots are supporting them and that, if they do what they must do, they will all be home for Christmas. He tells them to load their rifles and to set their bayonets, and then leads the charge. When the Scots follow, William, Jonathan's brother, shot in the gunfire in No Man's Land, is the first of two featured characters to die in the film.

In his book *Truce*, Bill Murphy explains that the high commanders gave Napoleonic-style orders to artilleryman and infantrymen who were using the latest twentieth-century weaponry: rifles accurate up to a thousand yards, machine guns firing up to five hundred rounds a minute, field artillery firing twenty shells a minute up to five miles in distance, and heavy artillery launching shells up to twenty-five miles (22). The soldiers quickly learn that to leave their trench and charge the enemy *en masse* in No Man's Land is suicidal, but they willingly rush the enemy for the honor of their battalion and its opinion of them. To describe their willingness to be an easy target for the enemy, Murphy cites a letter by British private Alan Thomas:

We climbed up our ladders and went forward. It was a strange sensation walking upright in No Man's Land when up till then you had only crawled. But I did not feel afraid or at least not nearly so afraid as I had immediately before going over. . . The noise, the smoke, the smell of gunpowder, the rat-tat of rifle and machine-gun fire combined to numb the senses. I was aware of myself and others going forward, but of little else. (41)

Given the focal point of the film is the Christmas truce, additional battle scenes would be superfluous and counterproductive. The one we have seen is fully sufficient.

It is also at this moment that we get a close look at the soldiers' uniforms as well as the conditions of the trenches, and both are amazingly clean and tidy. In his *Joyeux Noël* interview, Carion explains that the trenches in 1914 were in much better shape than they were in the following years,¹¹ which is logical; however, according to Malcolm Brown's "Un Joyeux Entracte" (translated into French by Pierre Guglielmina) in *Frères de tranchées (Trench Brothers)*, the trench conditions were terrible. The British first fight the Germans in Mons, Belgium, on 23 August 1914 and, within the first few months, most of the original troops are killed. So violent are the ravages that the volunteer soldiers who were originally full of a sense of adventure have a change of heart by November (13). "In war, truth is the first

¹¹ Christian Carion, dir. *Joyeux Noël*. perf. Diane Krüger, Benno Fürmann, Guillaume Canet, Daniel Bruhl, Gary Lewis, and Danny Boon. Sony, 2005. DVD.

casualty,” says Aeschylus, and the tragedy begins. Brown references a letter dated 3 September 1914 where Major Herbert Trevor describes the war as rotten and nobody would be sorry to see it end (14).

Brown cites another letter, dated 5 September 1914, in which Lieutenant Ralph Blewitt references that “the romantic dimension” is impossible for him to see. In fact, truth and the “romantic dimension” of this war that are the first “big casualties” in that they died almost as soon as the warfare commenced along the two parallel lines of trenches, sometimes full of waist-high water, between Nieupoort, Belgium and Belfort, France.

Another British officer writes to his family that he has come to the conclusion that this God-forsaken corner is a second Venice (16). It is no coincidence that this officer compares Flanders to Venice for, in October 1914, the Belgians opened the canal locks, flooding the land and trenches, in an effort to prevent the German advances. One reason Carion’s trenches and No Man’s Land do not resemble the flooded fields of Flanders as described in the British soldiers’ letters is Carion filmed them in Romania. According to Carion, a French general did not give him permission to use French military space for his project.¹² If Carion had filmed it in Ploegsteert, Belgium, a well-documented battle site about twenty miles north of Lens, it would have allowed for more authentic-looking topography for portraying life in the trenches and the truce in No Man’s Land.

In his *Silent Night*, an Anglophone study of the Christmas truce, Stanley Weintraub provides additional details about life on the Western Front, such as decomposing bodies floating to the surface in the flooded trenches, soldiers forced to move continuously to avoid sinking in “liquefying mud,” and, with latrines practically non-existent, taking a shit was a nightmare. To give the reader a visual image, Weintraub cites the German Expressionist artist Otto Dix, who describes the landscape of fortified ditches as “lice, rats, barbed-wire, fleas, shells, underground caves, corpses, blood, liquor, mice, cats, artillery, filth, bullets, mortars, fire, steel: that’s what war is. It is the work of the devil” (2). Even though Carion attempts to capture this misery, such as in a shot with Gordon playing a prank on a commanding officer by purposely leading him through the latrine portion of the trench to soil his boots and uniform, he fails miserably. The aspect of the trenches that Carion does succeed in portraying is the soldiers’ effort to echo home by naming the zigzagging trenches with their home villages’ road names and signs, such as “Froggie Land” to indicate the French location and “Fritz” to point to the Germans’.

¹² Christian Carion, dir. *Joyeux Noël*. perf. Diane Krüger, Benno Fürmann, Guillaume Canet, Daniel Bruhl, Gary Lewis, and Danny Boon. Sony, 2005. DVD.

Comradeship

After the allies' and Germans' engagement in No Man's Land, the director focuses on the Scots, particularly Palmer, the Anglican priest, who does his best to comfort the wounded: one disfigured, another holding an artery so he does not bleed to death, and Jonathan, suffering from shell shock and feeling guilty for abandoning his brother. Hearing a cry for help from a fallen soldier in No Man's Land, Palmer disobeys Gordon's orders and leaves his trench, an almost suicidal move, to tend to a wounded soldier, which prompts a German sharpshooter to fire. According to the soldiers' letters, the worst moments are the pre- and post-combat hours, particularly when hearing their wounded comrades cry for help in the thick, cold mire of No Man's Land.

Following the scene of the wounded Scots is that of a secret, father-son liaison, where the old major general criticizes his son, Lieutenant Audebert, for what happened in fifteen-minutes time. When Audebert says he lost a third of his men in five minutes, his father claims that his son gave up when he saw the Scots retreat. Following his natural paternal instincts to save his son, the major general encourages his son to take an artillery position, assuring him that he will quickly rise through the ranks. Audebert refuses the offer, saying that he belongs with his troops in the trenches, and tells his father to find another lieutenant. This shot is important two reasons: first, it explains that the artillerymen, because they were positioned well behind the front trench, were saved of the face-to-face combat with the enemy, and second, it depicts just how physically and psychologically separated the high commanders were from the infantrymen and their horrific reality in the trenches.

It is also in this passage that we meet the "good-son, the homesick barber-soldier," Ponchel, who enters with extra blankets for the night as Audebert is searching for his lost wallet containing the precious photo of his wife. Ponchel, trying to console him, says that a photograph is not necessary to remember his wife's face. It is also at this moment that we see Ponchel carrying his dear alarm clock, set to ten a.m. to remind him to have coffee with his mother. Believing that the clock is broken because it took a bullet (and saved his life), Ponchel discovers it still rings and is "unstoppable," just like he is. According to Carion, there was a French soldier who had the habit of going AWOL, leaving his trench to visit his mother, but the alarm clock aspect is fictional.

Christmas Preparations

Back in Berlin, Anna, wanting to be with Sprink on Christmas, plans a recital for the troops. She visits German high commanders as they are planning Christmas for the soldiers by sending a 100,000 Christmas trees to the front line. Aware of Anna's amorous feelings for Sprink, the officer grants her permission to give the recital, which will also permit her to see her man, Sprink, on Christmas Eve, which marks their five-year anniversary. This scene highlights how differently the commanders and politicians perceive time compared to the soldiers and their loved ones, for Anna says that time for the soldiers is something else than it is for the high commanders who are sitting in their luxurious offices, not in a front-line trench. This part is also significant because it illustrates the importance of Christmas spirit in German culture with the high commanders sending Christmas trees to the frontline, a major psychological factor for the Germans' desire to cease fire on 24-25 December. This scene also portrays the confidence level of the Germans, for they believed they would win the war within a year's time.

Even though Anna's character is fictional, there exists, according to Carion, documentation of French women visiting their boyfriends/husbands in the trenches but only for a couple of hours. Perhaps similar to Nevil Shute's strong dissatisfaction with Stanley Kramer's including a romance in his production of *On The Beach*, true historians may not be too chuffed with Carion's decision to include this fictitious romance in such a poignant moment in war history. Many viewers may have been more satisfied had Carion opted to be faithful to historical accounts of women sharing a fleeting hour in a trench with their beloved soldiers rather than the fabricated "Hollywoodesque" romance between Anna and Sprink. Similar to Kramer, Carion believes the viewers would get bored with watching a war movie with only men in it, so he opted to introduce the Anna-Sprink romance/sex. However, Carion could have learned a good lesson from Gregory Peck (Commander Dwight Lionel Towers), who told Kramer "he was wrong [to include the sex], that he was corrupting [his] character and Ava's character, that self-denial on the matter of principle was romantic. But he didn't agree. And Nevil Shute always hated that scene."¹³

Fraternizing Before Christmas

Carion wastes no time fast forwarding his portrayal of the first five months of the war to focus on 23-26 December; however, in the process, the uninformed viewer is lead to believe that the Christmas truce happened spontaneously, when it did not,

¹³ Nevil Shute Norway Foundation, *Nevil Shute.org*, 2 July 1914, Web. 5 July 2014.

and, in rapidly transposing events, Carion neglects some key factors that prompted the Christmas truce, particularly the low-key fraternizing that happened a month prior to Christmas.

For example, Brown references a letter dated 2 December 1914 in which Horace Smith-Dorrien writes in his journal about his concerns of the British fraternizing with the Germans, fearing that it could be a ruse used to attack the allies (18).

One explanation for this fraternization between the “Tommies” and the “Jerries” lies in the fact that many Saxons in the trenches actually lived and worked in the United Kingdom but had to leave to fight for the fatherland. As a result, many Saxons spoke English very well. Brown references Captain Stockwell of the Royal Welch Riflers near Houplines on the French-Belgian boarder who observes in his diary that a Saxon in a neighboring trench had worked for a barber in Princes Street, Edinburgh, the very same barber who used to cut his hair (20).

Another example of fraternizing is the desire to sing together. The 6th Gordon Highlanders often performed recitals with the enemy. The Germans would cry “half time” as a cue for Wessex to start singing, and the shooting would stop. If an officer appeared from either side, someone would give the signal, everyone stopped singing and resumed shooting, and the officer would be satisfied with the fighting zeal. As soon as he would leave, the singing would recommence (Brown, 20). On 8 December 1914, Private Tapp writes, “I believe by Christmas we’ll all be poets” (Brown, 21) and, on 7 December, Pope Benedict XV expresses his desire for a Christmas ceasefire, but it was largely ignored and problematic because Christmas for the Orthodox Church is 7 January and does not mean anything for the non-Christian soldiers. The Germans accepted the Pope’s proposition, but the allies did not see the sense in it. On 13 December, Lord Loch writes to his wife, “If Armistice is accepted for Christmas, I believe that the fighting will not resume. I believe it should not be accepted. We are at war, and that should not be confused with ‘Peace on Earth’” (Brown, 22).

Similar to Malcolm Brown’s citing a dozen or so letters from British soldiers, Rémy Cazals, in his chapter, “Ici, Les Français et les Boches parlent ensemble comme en temps de paix” (“Here, French and Germans Speak to Each Other as if in Times of Peace”), references letters from French soldiers; however, far less documentation of the French remains due to the censoring of letters and pictures, which the British did not do in 1914. For example, Cazals cites one of Roland Dorgelès’s notes regarding General Mangin, commander of the 5th infantry division, who confiscated all photographs of the 1914 Christmas truce and forbade the French soldiers to have cameras in the trenches (129).

Despite France's censorship, a few photographs and letters still exist and confirm fraternizing with the enemy in a similar but not identical fashion as the British. One difference between the British and the French deals with their location; the British troops were stationed along a thirty kilometer stretch of the Western Front in northern France and in Belgium while the French and Germans fought each other along the entire seven-hundred kilometer front.

Near the British troops, just south of La Bassée, Louis Barthas of the 280th François Guilhem of the 296th, and Gustave Berthier witness and participate in the fraternizing initiated by the Germans. Being only three or four meters from each other, the French and the German crawl out of their trenches, agree to a ceasefire, and sing songs together. Not only in the British sector of the front but also in other areas near Aisne and Argonne, French soldiers describe similar fraternizations. For example, Victorien Fournet, less trusting of the Germans, writes about a truce that lasted from December 12 to mid January, a time when the Germans did not fire, when the French and German met in No Man's Land to shake hands, talk, sing, etc. Fournet wonders, though, if the German truce is a ruse or if they are just sick of the war. Whatever the reason, he does not pay too much attention, for the French artillery resume shelling (Cazals, 127).

Christmas Eve

On Christmas Eve in Carion's *Joyeux Noël*, a very suspicious Horstmayer warns everyone to be vigilant, for he suspects an attack from the allies on Christmas, much like the allies anticipate an attack from the *Boches* (short for *caboches*, which means nail head, a term the French used to refer to the German because of their unique helmets). While the Germans line their trenches with Christmas trees, Sprink performs with Anna for the crown prince in a German-occupied, French, bourgeois home, and Audebert gets a haircut from Ponchel, who confesses that he sneaks out of the trenches to have coffee with his mother.

After their recital for the crown prince, Sprink, disgusted at seeing "all these fat, sated men parading, swilling in champagne," tells Anna that he must return to the front to sing for his comrades tonight. When he explains that he does not want to leave her but that he must sing for his fellow soldiers, Anna suggests accompanying him, especially since she has a pass from the Kaiser.

In the French trenches, the soldiers are quietly enjoying their Christmas-Eve dinner—a lot of food and champagne—and the company of a tabby cat. The Scots are celebrating their Christmas Eve in their trench with food, whisky, and laughter. Palmer starts playing his bagpipes, and the troops join in singing "I'm Dreaming

of Home” (a song written specifically for *Joyeux Noël*). The scout crawling across No Man’s Land is about to shit in his pants from fear of being discovered, and the Germans are looking at each other with a “what-the-hell” expression. All the Scots begin singing, but the French and the Germans are silent in bewilderment.

One major common cultural denominator uniting the two sides and contributing to the fraternization is music. Well aware that the Scots are having fun, Sprink begins singing “Stille Nacht,” and Gordon accompanies him on his bagpipes. Sprink then climbs out of the trench to give his performance in No Man’s Land. When he finishes, the French applaud. Then, Gordon begins playing “Come all Yea Faithfull,” and Sprink follows, holding a small tree and walking in No Man’s Land. When he finishes, a Scotsman says in German “Guten abend, Germans.” When Sprink says “Good evening, English,” a Scot replies laughingly, “We’re not English; we’re Scottish.” When Horstmayer, not at all happy with this fraternizing, reminds Sprink that this is not the German opera, Sprink replies, “This is better than Berlin.” When Gordon walks to the middle of No Man’s Land to meet Horstmayer, the French cannot believe what they are seeing and, to add a bit of comic relief, Ponchel says, “They’ve called a summit meeting and didn’t invite us.”

Audebert, wondering what the hell is going on, climbs out of the French trench to join the Sprink, Horstmayer, and Gordon in No Man’s Land. They all salute each other and discuss a ceasefire for Christmas Eve with the logic that the war will not be decided tonight and that no one will criticize them for putting down their rifles for this night. To reassure Audebert of his being guilty of collaborating with the enemy, Horstmayer says, “Don’t worry, it is just for tonight.” Audebert returns to his trench to get a bottle of champagne, carries it back to No Man’s Land to share with Horstmayer, Gordon, and Sprink, and they all wish each other Merry Christmas in their mother tongue.

With the ceasefire now official, the soldiers crawl peacefully out of their trenches, launch flares to light up the night sky, begin clapping and cheering, and exchange gifts—chocolate, champagne, cigarettes, etc. Even the cat, the only true “king of No Man’s Land,” participates in the truce, for he has been frequenting both lines for some time and, when a German calls him Felix, Ponchel says, “No, his name is Nestor. He’s the cat from the Delsaux farm. No, I know better than you.” Unhappy with the German trying to claim the cat, Ponchel returns the chocolate in exchange for “his” Nestor.

Additional exchanges include showing each other photos of their loved ones and sharing stories. Horstmayer reveals to Audebert that his wife really likes Montparnasse and the Luxemburg Gardens. Gordon asks Audebert if he can see

a photo of his wife, but Audebert says he does not have one, for he lost his wallet. When he shows a hand-drawn sketch, Horstmayer, recognizing the portrait, asks him if he lives on Rue Vavin. Having found Audebert's wallet on the night of the assault and kept it, he returns it to Audebert. It turns out that Horstmayer and his wife spent their honeymoon in Audebert's hotel two years prior.

With church bells ringing in the background and all the soldiers together in No Man's Land, Palmer celebrates the most important mass of his life in Latin, a language familiar to all: "In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen." Jonathan, too traumatized by the loss of his brother, prefers to keep his fallen sibling company instead of participating in the service. When a German soldier asks him to share a bottle of champagne, Jonathan slowly approaches the enemy with knife in hand. Preferring to celebrate than fight, the German retreats to the mass and to enjoy his champagne. As part of the service, Anna sings "Ave Maria" and, as Father Palmer ends his mass, bombs explode in the background, lighting the night sky and reminding all of their harsh reality: *la Grande Guerre*. The lieutenants wish each other a good evening and, as they leave No Man's Land, they all turn around to look at their newly made friends, sad that the war must continue.

In the German trenches, the troops applaud Anna and Sprink for their performance, and Horstmayer tells them that, even though Jewish, he will never forget it. In the Scottish trenches, when Palmer asks Lieutenant Gordon what he wrote in his report for headquarters, he says "no hostilities on the German side tonight, 24 December 1914." Palmer also comments on the fraternization: "Tonight, these men were drawn to that alter like it was a big fire in the middle of winter. Even those who aren't devout came to warm themselves, maybe just to be together, maybe to forget about the war," to which Lieutenant Audebert replies, "but the war won't forget us."

Christmas Day

On Christmas Day, the Germans awake to a thumping noise; they believe a Scot is planting mines, but it is Jonathan digging a grave for his fallen brother. Palmer, with a white flag raised and accompanied by Lieutenant Gordon, goes to Jonathan and begs him to return to the trench. Horstmayer and Audebert meet Gordon in No Man's Land to propose extending the truce so everyone can bury their dead. "It makes sense to bury the dead on the day Christ was born makes sense" says Gordon.

After burying the fallen, some soldiers play soccer, others play cards, and Lieutenant Horstmayer offers to deliver Lieutenant Audebert's letters to his wife. When Audebert asks "and what if you get caught," a confident Horstmayer replies,

“One letter won’t stop us [the Germans] winning the war . . . and once we have taken Paris and everything is over, you can invite us for a drink in Rue Vavin.” Audebert replies, “You don’t have to invade Paris to drop round for a drink.” Meanwhile, Ponchel, curious, asks a German and a Scot how many cartridges they fire in a day; the German replies, “eight,” the Scot says “seven,” and Ponchel says the French fire five, which does not surprise him. Always distant from everyone and unable to come to terms with the death of his brother, Jonathan writes to his mother, saying that William is the best shot in the whole platoon. In denial, he concludes it with “lots of love from both of us.”

The Christmas truce of 1914 is, indeed, a unique moment in war history for several reasons and is the result of several culminating factors. For one, as early as October 1914, the infantrymen no longer believed the lies the propagandists fabricated about the enemy, and the fraternizing begins on a small scale. Another factor was the terrible weather conditions, i.e., cold, fog, frost, freezing rain, flooded trenches, etc., which lasted from October until December 24; however, when the soldiers awakened on the morn of December 25, they saw a frozen, snow-covered ground instead of soft mud and the sun in a bright blue sky instead of low-hanging ominous clouds producing a perpetual rain. Another aspect about this truce that makes it unique is that it was a natural, spontaneous reaction of the infantrymen on the front-line; neither the Church nor the generals called for this moment of respite, and it did not happen in just one place—it happened in some form or fashion and in varying degrees along the seven hundred kilometer front. Another uniting factor was music. Albeit this was wartime, the soldiers, thinking of their families at home and feeling the Christmas spirit, began singing carols and playing their musical instruments, whether it be the bagpipes or the harmonica.

With the few French soldiers’ letters dated December 1914, Cazals provides evidence of the French perspective of the truce. For example, in the Vosges, Captain Dubarle of the 68th battalion, describes a similar ceasefire where his unit, only a hundred-fifty meters from the German trenches, watched the *Boches* walk around, for there was a mutual understanding that nobody would fire while taking meals and working on the trenches. Unlike other letters, Dubarle’s does not reference fraternizing but rather a peaceful day in December (162).

Another account comes from Argonne where the singer Kirchoff gave a recital to the 130th Wurtemberg and, upon hearing this tenor’s beautiful voice, the French climbed out of their trench to applaud, and he did an encore for them. Another example comes from Eugène Lemerrier who, upon hearing an anonymous German tenor, described the moment as magical, when hymns reflected the aspiration for

harmony, the demand for order in beauty and in harmony. Elsewhere, Eugène Pic says the French take the initiative to celebrate Christmas by singing the “Minuit, chrétiens” and the Germans followed the French lead by singing “Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!” (127-128).

As we learn in *Joyeux Noël*, music and, in this case, particularly Christmas carols, contribute in unlatching and amplifying the innate human need to socialize. An element Stanley Kubrick masterfully utilizes in crafting the unforgettable closing tavern scene in his 1957 *Paths of Glory* where a young German woman, played by Christiane Harlan/Susanne Christian (soon to become Mrs. Kubrick in 1958), is forced to sing in front of Colonel Dax’s rowdy, war-weary soldiers. She quickly thinks of the German folk song “Der Treue Husar” (“The Faithful Husar”), and “...though the soldiers cannot understand the words she sings, the simplicity of the melody and her vulnerability gradually moves them to tears, and they begin to hum and sing the tune with her...”¹⁴ In a like manner, Carion also portrays how powerful music can be, particularly in war, in that it unites enemies.

In a different kind of war, April 1958 in Moscow, a note of harmony and friendship rang loudly between the U.S. and the USSR at the International Tchaikovsky Piano Competition, when a 23-year old Texan was awarded first prize by an all Soviet jury who had first asked permission from Premier Nikita Khrushchev to approve its unanimous vote. “The Texan Who Conquered Russia” read Time Magazine’s cover story.¹⁵ In performing the Concerto no. 1, for a few months in history, Van Cliburn unintentionally generated greater mutual appreciation, rapprochement, and peace than the threat posed by any of the largest stockpile of nuclear weapons of the Cold War. Music can do that. However, unlike language, its lingering effects are either too often ephemeral, mostly forgotten or, at best, remembered as a footnote to history.

Similar to the fraternization between the British and the Germans, hundreds of French and Germans also met in No Man’s Land to exchange gifts, food, tobacco, beer, wine, etc.; however, all good things must come to an end. In one case, it was Lieutenant-Colonel Brenot who ended the Christmas 1914 truce in his unit by ordering the artillery to fire but not to kill or wound the Germans (Cazals, 128).

In his chapter, “Brother Boche” (translated from German into French by Alexandra Cade), Olaf Mueller chronicles the German perspective of the events that lead to the Christmas truce of 1914 that lasted until New Year’s Day. According to Mueller, the British in northern France initiated the truce to bury the dead;

¹⁴ Kate McQuiston, *We’ll Meet Again: Musical Design in the Films of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) 24.

¹⁵ “Music: The All-American Virtuoso,” *Time.com*, 19 May 1958, Web. 4 July 2014.

however, according to Brown's accounts, it was the Germans who initiated the truce. Perhaps neither side wanted to admit to being the initiator of the truce for fear of being court martialed.

To describe the German's version of Christmas Day 1914, Mueller references Bernhard Lehnert, who reports that, as soon as the Germans began singing "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht," the French, thinking that the Germans were attacking, started firing like mad; however, once they realized it was related to Christmas, they ceased firing and, when the Germans finished singing, the French began singing "La Marseillaise" (208).

On New Year's Eve, Karl Aldag, an aspiring officer, recounts that an English officer left his trench with a white flag and requested a truce from 11:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. in order to bury the soldiers who died just prior to Christmas. Aldag notes how agreeable it was not to see the dead on the ground and describes how the truce lasted longer than the originally planned. He recounts that the English met his men in No Man's Land to exchange cigarettes, canned meat, and even photographs, that the British said they no longer wanted to shoot, and that everyone was calm and enjoyed walking around carefree. Knowing well that the truce could not last, Aldag says that, when the Germans told the French to return to their trenches because they were going to re-commence firing, the French officer replied that his trenches were full of water and that his mercenary soldiers were sick, were no longer following his orders, and were on strike for they no longer wanted to fight. Aldag concludes his note, saying that his trench was also full of water, that his men did not shoot, and that it was nice to be able to leave his shelter without risking his life (200-201).

Mueller observes that there are two types of brief truces: the one that is negotiated by the officers can be viewed as acceptable because it does not challenge the military hierarchy, but one that is declared by the simple infantrymen is, as Aldag says, a strike, which is not tolerated by the officers, for it undermines their power. Aldag writes that the desire to maintain the truce was stronger with the British than the French, for he recalls an English officer informing the Germans that the Tommies were going to bomb them and inviting them to seek shelter in their trenches. The British, however, did not fire; it was the French artillery that unleashed a fierce bombing. It was, of course, in Aldag's best interest to avoid referencing any German initiative on this peaceful arrangement (201).

In another of Aldag's entries, he describes the conclusion of the truce as taking place at midnight on New Year's Eve 1914. During the hours before New Year's Day, the Germans, sixty meters from the Allied trenches, sang songs and played the

harmonica, and the Scots applauded; then the Scots played their bagpipes, and the Germans clapped. At midnight, the German artillery fired, lighting up the sky like a firework show, prepared grog, and toasted to the emperor and the New Year (202).

The Great War Resumes

When the bombing resumes, Horstmayer pays a visit to Audebert to inform the allies that the Germans will bomb their trenches in ten minutes times and suggests that they seek refuge in the German trench. When the shelling stops, Gordon informs them that the Scots will retaliate by bombing the German trench and, to reciprocate Horstmayer's kind gesture, Gordon invites the Germans to seek refuge in the allied camp.

When the bombing ceases, Horstmayer, realizing that he can no longer be friends with the enemy, says his goodbye, that he was happy to have met them, and that, under different circumstances, they could have been . . . He didn't have to say "friends" because Audebert understands and reciprocates the nice gesture by inviting Horstmayer to have a drink at his home at Rue Vavin when the war is over. Audebert, complimenting Horstmayer on his French, acknowledges that his German is not very good, and Horstmayer, not wanting to take full credit for being bilingual, says that he is married to a French woman and that Audebert's German would be better if he were married to a German.

To be able to stay together, Anna and Sprink surrender as prisoners to Audebert, who, not knowing how to explain their presence to his superiors, orders them to return to the German camp. Anna explains that, if they return, they will be separated, which is why she begs him to take them as prisoners. When Audebert accepts, Sprink hands him a big bundle of German letters and asks that he deliver it to the Red Cross so they can reach their destinations.

Wartime has its norms and its deviances. Far away from the front line trenches either at HQ or sometimes from their homeland, the powers that be try to destroy a nation by using many tactics, such as creating propaganda, causing blockades, ordering the bombings of cities and towns, etc. On the front line, however, in order to win a war soldiers must kill, wound, or capture the enemy, so the norm is for the commanders to give orders to their subordinates, to make sure those orders are followed, and to punish insubordinates. The further away the commanders are from the enemy, the less they know about the enemy, the easier it is for them to give orders to kill the enemy, etc. For the soldiers on the front line, however, wartime is not so black and white. Because the enemy has a face, has a family, sometimes shares the same faith, and is also sick and tired of fighting, there are deviances to

the norms on both sides, but the French powers did not expect such a magnitude of fraternization with the Germans during December 1914 until they read the soldiers' letters.

Censorship of Letters

The high commanders' censoring the letters explains why very little Franco-German evidence of the 1914 truce exists. Carion illustrates this censorship with a shot of several French bureaucrats at a table reading the soldiers' letters before they are delivered to their destinataires. One letter expresses a soldier's hanging on to hope like a climber to his rope; another about his comrade dying between the lines, another about playing soccer with the German soldiers who admitted to being members of the German football club called Bayern; another about hearing a beautiful woman's voice singing on Christmas Eve; another about a soldier opting to stay alone in his trench in peace and would rather die than drink and fraternize with the German bastards; another about a Scottish photographer promising to take pictures of the troops on New Year's Day; another about a Bavarian giving him his address so they could visit each other once the war is over; another about accepting the Kraut's truce invitation to Spend New Year's Eve together and to sing the song they had learned from the Scots; and yet another, read by Audebert's father, saying they would drink to the health of all those bastards.

In his *Joyeux Noël* interview, Carion explains that "the spirit of the soldiers is in the letters. When a soldier thinks he is about to die, he writes a special letter, he tries to find good words and to be sincere, which makes it special."¹⁶ Reading the soldiers' letters with the purpose of getting a feel for their troops' morale, the high commanders discover, to their great surprise, the Christmas truce, prevent these letters from reaching their destination, and decide to break this feeling of peace among the soldiers.

Their Fate

According to Murphy, more than a million soldiers were killed and many more wounded by December 1914 and, as Carion illustrates, faith for many was also lost. Aware of the mass that Palmer gave to the allies and to the Germans on Christmas Eve, the bishop first chastises Palmer and then informs him that he is to be sent back to Scotland and that all those who heard his mass will be disbanded and sent to different front lines. Palmer humbly and respectfully responds to the bishop:

¹⁶ Christian Carion, dir. *Joyeux Noël*. perf. Diane Krüger, Benno Fürmann, Guillaume Canet, Daniel Bruhl, Gary Lewis, and Danny Boon. Sony, 2005. DVD.

“I sincerely believe that our Lord Jesus Christ guided me in what was the most important Mass of my life. I tried to be true to his trust and carry his message to all, whoever they may be.” The other purpose behind the bishop’s visit is also to give a “sermon,” which is nothing more than a harangue to perpetuate propaganda and hatred against the enemies to the new soldiers who replace the ones who went “astray” because of Palmer’s influence.

Christ our Lord said, “Think not that I come to bring peace on earth. I come not to bring peace, but a sword.” The Gospel according to St. Matthew. Well, my brethren, the sword of the Lord is in your hands. You are the very defenders of civilization itself. The forces of good against the forces of evil. For this war is indeed a crusade! A holy war to save the freedom of the world. In truth I tell you: the Germans do not act like us, neither do they think like us, for they are not, like us, children of God. Are those who shell cities populated only by civilians the children of God? Are those who advanced armed hiding behind women and children the children of God? 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 Lord be with you. May God almighty bless you in the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Father Palmer removes his cross necklace, hangs it on a wooden rack in the make-shift hospital room, and walks out the door, suggesting that he, too, has lost his faith, particularly after hearing the Bishop’s propaganda mass to the new recruits.

The scene is important for two reasons. First, the bishop vilifies the efforts of Palmer to bring the Gospel of Peace into this hell on earth and then provokes others to violence by dehumanizing the enemy forces. The second is that the bishop suggests that those who do not support dehumanizing and exterminating the enemy are not worthy to sit in the house of the Lord. According to Carion, the words are from a 1915 sermon preached by the Bishop of London, Arthur Winnington-Ingram in Westminster Abbey and reflect the malicious aspects of many spiritual leaders on all sides who justify killing in the name of religion. The film has come full circle from the opening images of schoolchildren reciting their hatred speeches about the enemy to the dénouement with the old bishop doing the same.

Back in the Scottish trenches, the Major General, seeing a man in a German uniform walking across No Man’s Land, orders his men to shoot “the bloody

Kraut.” Instead of aiming at him, they shoot in the air, indicating that they had, indeed, lost the desire to kill, to fight, and to continue this war. Again, he orders them to shoot him but, instead of shooting, they just look at each other, with the expression that says, “I don’t want to fire; do you?” All have this feeling, except Jonathan, who willingly shoots and kills. Then, the commander says, “Shame on you, Gordon,” for he no longer sees disciplined soldiers eager to kill the enemy but rather simple, innocent men who prefer to hold on to the Christmas spirit of peace on earth.

Hearing Ponchel’s alarm ring 10:00 a.m., Audebert wonders what a German soldier is doing with Ponchel’s clock. Fearing the worst, Audebert runs to the fallen soldier in No Man’s Land and, as he suspected, discovers it is Ponchel disguised as a German; a German obviously allowed him to wear a German uniform so he could have coffee with his mother in her German-occupied village. Ponchel also informs Audebert that he is a father and has a son, whose name is Henri, and then dies in Audebert’s arms. Audebert keeps Ponchel’s clock.

Alone in private quarters, the angry Major General Audebert and his lieutenant son argue. Because fraternizing with the enemy is high treason, it is a crime punishable by death, but the only problem is the French army cannot execute two hundred men, so Audebert and his unit are spared the firing squad but will be transferred to fight on the Verdun front, which is a death sentence of sorts as it was one of the deadliest battle sites. Lieutenant Audebert tells his father that his men feel no shame befriending the Germans, that the public would neither believe nor understand the fraternizing, and that France has no idea how her soldiers are suffering. He concludes his argument, saying he is closer to the Germans than the French who are stuffing their faces at their dinner table and screaming, “Kill the Krauts!” In addition, he tells his non-combatting father that they are not living the same war. Audebert confesses that his son is correct about one observation: he does not understand this war where enemies exchange addresses so they can meet after it is all over. He reminisces about his career in the cavalry and wishes his son had done the same. Finally, he informs his son that the French found the cat with a note from the Germans attached to him saying “Good luck, comrades!” and that he was ordered to arrest the cat for high treason. As they part, Audebert tells his father that he is a grandfather, that his grandson’s name is Henri. “Let’s try and survive this war for him,” says the new grandfather Audebert.

In Carion’s film interview, he explains that, in 1916, on the calmer eastern side, there was a cat that regularly went back and forth between the French and German trenches and, one day when the cat arrived back at the French trench, it had a note

in poor French attached to his collar: “from what region are you?” This note was passed all the way up the chain of command to the general, who considered it evidence of espionage. When he discovered it was a cat, he had it arrested, judged for treason, and shot.¹⁷ “Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction” is the old maxim, and Carion, fearing that today’s viewers would find it “too much,” opts not to include the cat’s execution, perhaps because it might portray French high commanders as animal-hating idiots.

In a train car about to leave France, Horstmayer and his men receive their orders that they will be sent to East Prussia to fight against the Russian army, which is also a death sentence for, if a soldier survived the bullets and bombs, he likely did not endure the cold. The high commander also informs them that, even though the train will cross the fatherland, they will not be allowed to see their families. “Long live Kaiser Wilhelm!” says the commander as he crushes a soldier’s harmonica and leaves Horstmayer and the troops. The infantryman, without his harmonica, hums “I’m Dreaming of Home,” the tune he learned from the Scots, and all his comrades join him. Perhaps the best musical instrument in this film is neither the bagpipes nor the harmonica but rather the human voice.

Conclusion

Because hundreds of allies and Germans fraternized along the northwestern front does not mean that all the soldiers participated in this truce. Approaching the enemy trench had consequences, deadly for some. George Ashurst of the 2nd Lancashire Riflement writes about a German who was taken prisoner for having come too close to the British trench. Another story, more tragic, recounts how a British soldier was crossing No Man’s Land to give cigarettes to a friendly German regiment when he was shot dead by a sharp shooter from a nearby regiment. It was recorded that he died in combat—a combat that consisted of delivering cigarettes (Brown, 48). British soldiers who recorded keeping their distance from the Germans include B.C. Myatt, whose unit played soccer with the French, not the Germans, on Christmas Day. Also, when 2nd lieutenant A.P. Sinkinson was returning to his trench, he remembers in his letter a phrase from Mr. Asquith that told the British not to re-sheath their sword until the enemy had been vanquished, and Sinkinson adds that, when a soldier is in the front-line trenches, it is impossible to hate without a respite (Brown, 49).

17 Christian Carion, dir. *Joyeux Noël*. perf. Diane Krüger, Benno Fürmann, Guillaume Canet, Daniel Bruhl, Gary Lewis, and Danny Boon. Sony, 2005. DVD.

Perhaps one of the most poignant comments regarding this truce comes from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who described it as an “amazing show, an example of humanity in the midst of the horrors of war” (Brown, 63-65). However wonderful this truce was, it was not strong enough, even in theory, possible. If the British and Germans along the Western Front had decided to end the war with the Christmas truce, the French and the Belgians had already lost too much blood and too much of their territory. Nothing could convince these two countries to stop the war in 1914.

Despite some of the film’s minor “false notes,” such as Krüger’s and Fürmann’s lip-syncing to pre-recordings of opera stars, the unusually tidy trenches and uniforms, the inaccurate depiction of the climactic conditions, and the love story between Anna and Sprink, *Joyeux Noël* accurately portrays *la condition humaine* of all those, Germans and allies alike, in the trenches and in No Man’s Land along the Western Front of *la Grande Guerre*. Serenaded and brainwashed by propaganda and lies (e.g., schoolboys reciting propaganda poems in the *ouverture*), hundreds of thousands of innocent young men and boys enlist; immediately find themselves in the *Dantesque-like Inferno* along the seven hundred kilometer Western Front; quickly suss out the malicious lies of their belligerent high commanders, politicians, and clergymen (e.g., bishop’s sermon at the *dénouement*); and also discover their own Rousseauian *l’homme est bon par nature*. Unlike *All Quiet on The Western Front*, *The Paths of Glory*, *Un long dimanche de fiancailles*, etc., *Joyeux Noël* does not limelight World War I’s infamous water-filled ditches, rats, barbed-wires, shells, underground caves, corpses, blood, mice, artillery, filth, bullets, mortars, fire, and steel. Instead, this anti-war film is unique in that it solely focuses on fraternal peace shared between Germans and allies 24-26 December 1914—this message is one that audiences, both young and old, should share and contemplate, for the thousands of soldiers who exchanged *Joyeux Noël*, *Frohe Weihnachten*, and Merry Christmas wishes along the Western Front’s No Man’s Land of 1914 deserve to be remembered.

Epilogue

Of all the literature recounting the spontaneous Christmas truce of 1914, Frederick Niven, a World War I correspondent stationed in the U.K., perhaps summarizes it best in his poem, “A Carol From Flanders.”¹⁸

...Their rifles all they set aside,

¹⁸ Verses 13-28. Frederick Niven, “A Carol From Flanders,” *Hymns and Carols of Christmas*. com. 28 April 2014. Web. 4 July 2014

One impulse to obey;
 ‘Twas just the men on either side,
 Just men — and Christmas Day.
 They dug the grave for all their dead
 And over them did pray:
 And Englishmen and Germans said:
 “How strange a Christmas Day!”
 Between the trenches then they met,
 Shook hands, and e’en did play
 At games on which their hearts were set
 On happy Christmas Day.
 Not all the emperors and kings,
 Financiers and they
 Who rule us could prevent these things —
 For it was Christmas Day...

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