

Commemorating the Christmas Truce: A Critical Thinking Approach for Popular History

It remains one human episode amid all the atrocities which have stained the memory of the war.

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle¹

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DESPITE THIS GENERATION'S MEDIA SAVVY, they are often not particularly historically savvy: they do not always realize when they are being misled, nor do they have the critical thinking skills to uncover hidden messages or to challenge ideas that come to them through commemorative history. Yet their daily interactions with media not only increase the imperative that they develop this critical perspective, but also ensure that they have a foundation laid for such a critique. As young people navigating advertisements all the time through the media landscape, they can indeed be encouraged to apply that sensibility to the historical landscape as well. We as history teachers can create opportunities for students to develop historical consciousness through deliberately exploring questions about how history is being interpreted in the public realm; how it is being used for some social, political, or economic purpose; and how it is shaped to tell us our values as a community. To this cause, I offer to you a sample lesson used in my senior seminar last fall that can be adjusted for nearly any level of history student.

Fall 2014 marked the centennial of the beginning of The Great War, or World War I, and the 2014 Christmas season marked the 100th anniversary of the “Christmas Truce” that broke out along the trench lines on December 25, 1914. We have seen significant uptick in the number of commemorations—scholarly and popular—about both the war between nations and this moment when the war halted in the name of something greater than nations—a common humanity. This bounty provides many opportunities to explore how our society chooses to remember this striking event.

When students leave the history classroom, the most common way they will interact with history thereafter is through commemoration. Whether it be through movies, museums, plaques, landmarks, re-enactments, or other acts of historical memorialization, young adults will encounter history again. But what kind of history is this? Do students have the critical facility to sort out the historical truth from distortions and propaganda?

These questions have been at the forefront of conversations among history teachers concerned about helping students develop “historical consciousness,” a concept Klas-Göran Karlsson describes as “an essential dimension of our moral, emotional, and cognitive thinking and orientation.” He explains: “It is a time compass that assigns meaning to past events and directs us toward future projects.” Such thinking, he argues, is necessary to our human existence; but instead of being tied to scholarly historical interpretations, historical consciousness is linked to “meanings, memories, metaphors, monuments, and myths.”² Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen’s famous study of U.S. attitudes toward the past has demonstrated that the American public cares deeply about history and uses it in constructing identity and understanding both the present and the future. Rosenzweig and Thelen conclude, “people pursue the past actively and make it part of their everyday life.” Yet history, as it is taught in schools, Americans do not find particularly engaging. Interviewees regarded public history and personal contact with historical witnesses as both more reliable and more directly connected to a useful past than history teachers.³ A critical step for history pedagogy today is to fuse together such popular history, public history, and scholarly history to promote among our students a sense of a usable past: historical consciousness turned into civic consciousness.⁴

In an effort to forge this connection, every fall when I teach our senior research seminar for history majors, we ask and answer high-level questions about how history is made and communicated. We begin the course by talking about social memory—the way that societies remember history—which is often quite different from what the records show us to have occurred. We conclude by talking about historical commemoration—how societies actively develop public interpretations of history—which also frequently differs from the historical record. Social memory and historical commemoration represent ways that societies inject history with agendas other than truth, including building nationalism, reinforcing certain cultural traits or values, and serving current-day political positions. They also make powerful statements about who we think we are and how we came to be that way.

As senior majors, my students had knowledge of World War I, and some knew quite a bit about the Christmas Truce before we discussed its commemoration. Students might prepare for this lesson by reading materials in advance or performing research after seeing the commemoration film. In the appendix to this article, I have offered a list of resources for teachers and students that, while by no means exhaustive, should prove useful. Ultimately, this is a critical thinking exercise that does not require especially detailed knowledge of historical events, but should nevertheless educate students in not only the Christmas Truce itself, but also, and most importantly, its interpretation.

The Christmas Truce in History

On December 24th and 25th of 1914, amid the horrors of trench warfare on the Western Front and as it became clear that the war would *not* be over by Christmas, soldiers on either side ceased firing and even reached across No Man's Land to shake the hands of the enemy. They exchanged gifts, sang songs, and participated in kickabouts or even perhaps full-fledged football (soccer) matches. The Christmas Truce was not one truce, but many—and it was by no means official. It was a legacy of a fading, gentlemanly expectation of mutual respect between enemy combatants (officers, particularly), an expectation that would not survive modern warfare in the trenches. This incident was perhaps its last gasp.⁵

Reports from letters, diaries, memoirs, and contemporary newspapers indicate that a lull in the shootings began on Christmas Eve in some parts of the trenches. German soldiers (likely from the less-nationalistic and predominately Catholic south) in some places erected Christmas trees with candles on the branches. Some English soldiers cheered, while others initially suspected a ruse. Then, the German soldiers began singing Christmas songs, in rare instances accompanied by band instruments. They called out greetings to the British soldiers in the opposing trenches, sometimes promising not to shoot on Christmas Day. British soldiers responded at first with suspicion, even firing at the Tannenbaum. When there was no return fire, they started to sing cheeky, irreverent songs of their own and then Christmas carols.

As Christmas Day dawned, soldiers began to brave No Man's Land, shaking hands, exchanging gifts and pictures, mutually complaining about the war, and kicking a ball around. This spontaneous truce, which in some cases came at the initiative of officers but in others started with teenaged recruits, allowed men on both sides to repair their trenches as well as collect and bury the dead. Although some proposed another truce for Boxing Day, the 26th, the soldiers by then had returned to their trenches and were told to resume fighting. Still, there was not much eagerness to kill those they had celebrated and commiserated with the previous day, and many troops fired uselessly into the air. Indeed, the vigor of the war would not return until the troops were relieved by fresh units. In some cases, participants in the Christmas Truce would have to be moved to other parts of the line entirely.

Truly, this is an extraordinary event, especially since it contradicts the now-common image of the Great War as a massively inhumane and senseless slog through mud, guts, and gore. But it is important to note that parts of the trench line did continue to shell each other on Christmas, and that soldiers died on that day. Some boasted that they had gained new knowledge of the enemies' strategies or whereabouts that would make them easier to kill in the following days. Although the British, too, made such boasts, they projected this suspicion onto the German "Huns" to argue against similar fraternization in later Christmas seasons. Although some officers found the truce "sporting," in the spirit of civilized warfare, those higher up were infuriated by the soldiers' actions and took steps

to ensure that such an event would not happen again. Though one should note that there was a small number of spontaneous truces in 1915, there was nothing on the scale or enthusiasm of the 1914 truce again. Propaganda touting the barbarity of the enemy increased in quantity and viciousness. And the war continued for nearly four more years, resulting in 16 million dead and 20 million injured, only a fraction of which had occurred by Christmas 1914. Thus, the Christmas Truce as an event does not have a particularly clear message ready-made for memorialization.

The Christmas Truce Commemorated (and Commercialized)

There have been many public ways of remembering the Christmas Truce. A British artist has plans to erect a bronze monument of a German and a British soldier extending their hands across the trench line with a football in between them. The 2005 French movie *Merry Christmas* (or *Joyeux Noel*) depicted the event. From November 2014 through January 2015, the Royal Shakespeare Company put on a play (for ages nine and up) re-enacting the truce. Musicians like Paul McCartney (“Pipes of Peace”) and Garth Brooks (“Belleau Wood”) have even written songs about the event.

Any and all of these memorials would make for important critical discussions of the memory of this historical moment. But a particularly subtle and provocative one is last year’s Christmas advertisement for Sainsbury’s, a British grocery store.⁶ Available online, the ad runs less than four minutes and provides a link to two three-and-a-half-minute films—one about the making of the ad and another about the story behind the Christmas Truce. The production quality is high; the images and the story (though fictionalized) aim for an accurate yet beautiful view of this moment in the trenches.

The scene opens on the night of Christmas Eve. A light snow falls as British soldier “Jim” scowls at his meal, an uninspired, standard-issue, hard biscuit. The mail arrives with a letter from home containing a picture of his sweetheart and a prettily wrapped chocolate bar. Then, the sounds of men singing “*Stille Nacht*” (“Silent Night”) emerge from the opposing trench. The British soldiers smile and sing along in English. English and German lyrics entwine as the troops sing through the evening.

A little bird perched on barbed wire flies away as the day dawns. Our soldier Jim clenches his hands, begins to rise, lifts his hat above the trench parapet, and then stands up in the trench. The German soldiers rouse quickly and draw their guns, but they are stopped by “Otto,” a young German soldier who insists that they “halt” because this man is unarmed. Otto, too, rises out of the trench and the two men, followed by their fellows, walk toward each other across No Man’s Land. They shake hands, introduce themselves, exchange pictures, and the revelries of the Christmas Truce begin.

The centerpiece of the film is the football match, but other famous moments of the two sides being photographed together and exchanging haircuts are also referenced. Later in the day, as the sounds of the guns return, the men gather their belongings and head back to their own trenches. Jim hands Otto the coat Otto had taken off for the game, and they exchange Christmas greetings. On returning to his trench, Otto reaches into his coat pocket to find Jim’s chocolate bar; meanwhile, back in the British trench, Jim looks at his hard biscuit with a smile. Birds fly across a sky tinged by sunset.

The message is made clear at the end of the ad when the words “Christmas is for sharing” appear on screen. The ad evokes powerful feelings made to fit the season, and also suggests the importance of gift-giving—and, importantly, gift-buying—for creating human bonds. Sainsbury’s film, “The story behind our Christmas ad,” includes brief interviews with historians as well as a representative of the Royal British Legion, which was consulted in the making of the ad. It, too, confirms the idea that this is a story of giving and of hope. Historian Alan Cleaver explains the Christmas Truce as demonstrating, “Even at the toughest of times, in the heat of war and in the most dreadful occasions, there can be great humanity.”⁷

Engaging the Debate

When my students first saw the ad, they were overwhelmed by its heart and its attempt to capture as accurately as possible the details of the trenches, the uniforms, the guns. But as we talked, not about the details, but about the overall interpretation of the Christmas Truce put forth by the ad, they began to find the message more problematic. A series of questions helped to get students past the initial emotional pull as well as the attraction of getting the details “right.”

- How does the ad portray the war? Is this accurate?
- Does the ad romanticize the war? What mythic elements are included and to what effect?
- What elements of the war are absent in this presentation? Why were they left out?
- Which elements of the truce are emphasized and which are deemphasized? Why?
- What aspects of the war or truce appear to be “forgotten” by the makers of this film?
- Why did Sainsbury’s make this ad? What’s in it for them?
- How do we feel about the commercial purposes of this historical commemoration? Does it make the message suspect?
- What is the message of this piece? Is it a valid interpretation of this event? Is it the *best* interpretation of this event? How would you interpret the Christmas Truce?

Through our discussion, we uncovered some concerns about the ad’s portrayal. We started with small inaccuracies. For example, in the film, the British soldier emerges first, though the Germans seem to have been the instigators according to most historical accounts. Why did the ad’s creators make this change? What might a German audience think? Even such small choices have interpretive consequences.

The romanticizing of war is one of the main critiques of this—and practically any—artistic treatment of almost any war.⁸ Is it possible to memorialize war in a way that does not make it seem beautiful and glorious? What is the point of representing it this way? Why might this be problematic? Students became more concerned about the positive portrayal as they considered how early in the war this event occurred, that millions of men would die after this point, that some men expressed murderous intent toward those with whom they had just spent a merry Christmas,⁹ and that army leaders would work hard to ensure that this moment of common humanity never repeated. The Christmas Truce failed to produce lasting change and even contributed to demonizing the enemy in future propaganda.

Romanticizing leads to mythologizing, and students can usefully spend time analyzing the myths of the war and the truce portrayed

here. As Karlsson notes, metaphors and myths are essential to how we orient the present in relation to the past.¹⁰ Look for symbols (like the football, the barbed wire, the trench) to see what messages they conveyed and how they served as shorthand for more complex interpretations of the war and this brief, informal truce. Consider how such symbols create either distance or connection between the past, present, and even the future.

Our class spent quite a bit of time examining the commercial agenda of the piece. This film is supposed to sell chocolate bars and sell Sainsbury's. Facsimile chocolate bars, we are told in the "making of" documentary, would be sold at the front of Sainsbury's stores up until December 25, 2014, with the proceeds going to the Royal British Legion. Rosenzweig and Thelen's study demonstrated that the American public is quite cynical about the use of history for commercial gain and typically expects commercially oriented histories to be distorted.¹¹ Our class explored whether this purpose indeed distorted the ultimate interpretation presented in this ad, and whether "Christmas is for sharing" represents the best interpretation of the Christmas Truce as a historical event.

We also asked why, as a community, British viewers might desire this message. Why were so many people, including historians, so determined to emphasize the hopeful and generous elements of this story, when in the larger context it failed to temper the horrors of the Great War beyond that one day? Commemorating history necessarily entails deciding not only what to remember, but also what to forget. An opinion article in *The Guardian* pointed out, "Nowhere in the new advert do we see the blood and entrails, vomit and faeces, the rats feasting on body parts. The response might be 'well, they can hardly put that in a Christmas advert can they?' and that would be entirely true. Which is why the scene is entirely inappropriate for a Christmas advert in the first place."¹² Writing in December 1914, before the Christmas Truce occurred, German Captain Rudolf Binding warned, "Enemy, Death, and a Christmas tree—they cannot exist so close together."¹³ Does the Sainsbury's ad support or refute the notion that Christmas and war remembrance can (or should) be brought together in such close proximity? Why was Sainsbury's interested in doing this at all, and what accounts for the largely positive British reaction to the ad?

Conclusions

At the end of our discussion, some students in the class still quite liked the ad and thought its interpretation was at least a reasonable one. What I appreciate about using the Sainsbury's ad for this exercise is that it is a sophisticated memorial. There are aspects of its interpretation that make sense, and that correspond to scholarly interpretations. Certainly, critics of popular history can find much more problematic examples. Iconoclasm has been a feature of such critiques, exemplified in works like James Loewen's *Lies Across America*.¹⁴ But this ad, because of its subtlety and its care with history, makes it possible for students to come to a variety of acceptable conclusions about the quality of this popular historical interpretation.

The Sainsbury's ad opens up a conversation about the larger issue of historical memory and acts of "remembrance," as historian Jay Winter calls them.¹⁵ Whether creative, political, or commercial, public acts that commemorate history—military history prominent among them—carry the weight of popular interpretation. Which myths are reinforced and which ones are shattered in the public discourse? Why do interpretations change and how can we chart those interpretive transformations? Winter notes, "War experience is not in your belly, unless you were wounded there; for everyone else it is in your mind and your memories and they never remain fixed. They are collages of retrieved and recombined traces of the past, which we put together to make sense of our lives. As our lives change, so do the stories we tell about who we are and how we got here."¹⁶ Memorials like this one force us to ask: What is important to remember about the past, and what can we afford to forget?

Commemorations of history necessarily serve social purposes; too often, we take in these acts of public historical interpretation uncritically and unreflectively. Historical accuracy isn't just about getting the facts straight; it is also about developing an interpretation of history that fits the facts. In some acts of commemoration, the issues are factual. But in others—like in Sainsbury's compelling ad—the issues have more to do with the meaning we ascribe to the event. In his own history of the war, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle famously found the Christmas Truce to be the "one human episode" to relieve the "stain" of the Great War on the British memory of its past. As

teachers, we can enhance students' historical consciousness, their sensitivity to the messages they receive from acts of remembrance, so that they and our whole society, without forgetting what may be unsavory or unpopular, can remember and make good use of that which is important and true.

Notes

1. Arthur Conan Doyle, "Chapter XI The Winter Lull of 1914," *The British Campaign in France and Flanders, Volume I—1914* (London, United Kingdom: Hodder and Stroughton, 1916), <<http://freeread.com.au/@RGLibrary/ArthurConanDoyle/History/H241-TheGreatWar.html>>.
2. Klas-Göran Karlsson, "Processing Time – On the Manifestations and Activations of Historical Consciousness," in *Historicizing the Uses of the Past: Scandinavian Perspectives on History Culture, Historical Consciousness and Didactics of History Related to World War II*, ed. Helle Bjerg, Claudia Lenz, and Erik Thorstensen (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 129-130.
3. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 18-21.
4. On relating historical consciousness to civic consciousness, see Johan Sandahl, "Civic Consciousness: A Viable Concept for Advancing Students' Ability to Orient Themselves to Possible Futures?" *Historical Encounters: A Journal of Historical Consciousness, Historical Cultures, and History Education* 2, no. 1 (January 2015): 1-15.
5. This brief explanation synthesizes information from a number of sources, listed in the Appendix, but draws primarily from Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton, *Christmas Truce: The Western Front, December 1914* (London, United Kingdom: Pan Books, 2001). See also Stanley Weintraub, "The Christmas Truce," in *The Great War: Perspectives on the First World War*, ed. Robert Cowley (New York: Random House, 2003), 50-64.
6. "Sainsbury's OFFICIAL Christmas 2014 Ad," YouTube video, 3:40, posted by Sainsbury's, November 12, 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWF2JBb1bvM>>.
7. "Sainsbury's Christmas: The story behind our Christmas ad," YouTube video, 3:18, posted by Sainsbury's, November 12, 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s1YvnfcFVs>>.
8. Noah Berlatsky, "Anti-War Art: Nearly Impossible," *The Atlantic*, July 29, 2014, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/07/the-imp Possibility-of-anti-war-art/375134/>>.

9. "WW1 Christmas Truce Letter Found in Staffordshire," *BBC News*, December 4, 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-stoke-staffordshire-30296660>>.
10. Karlsson, 129-130.
11. Despite the greater public accessibility of commercialized history, interviewees rated history-for-profit (including movies, television, and books) as the least reliable source of historical information. Rosenzweig and Thelen, 97-98.
12. Ally Fogg, "Sainsbury's Christmas Ad is a Dangerous and Disrespectful Masterpiece," *The Guardian*, November 13, 2014, <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/13/sainsburys-christmas-ad-first-world-war>>.
13. Weintraub, 53.
14. James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 1999).
15. "Sainsbury's Christmas: The story behind our Christmas ad."
16. Jay Winter, "Museums and the Representation of War," *Museum and Society* 10, no. 3 (November 2012): 150-163.

Appendix: Christmas Truce Resources

Sainsbury's Advertisement

- "Sainsbury's OFFICIAL Christmas 2014 Ad." YouTube video, 3:40. Posted by Sainsbury's, November 12, 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWF2JBb1bvM>>.
- "Sainsbury's Christmas: The story behind our Christmas ad." YouTube video, 3:18. Posted by Sainsbury's, November 12, 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s1YvnfcFVs>>.
- "Sainsbury's Christmas 1914 – The making of our Christmas ad." YouTube video, 3:16. Posted by Sainsbury's, November 12, 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jx3pQWbysmM>>.

On the History of the Christmas Truce

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On Commemoration

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