

How Was the Christmas Truce of 1914 Possible? Erklärungsansätze für die Kooperation im 1. Weltkrieg erarbeiten

Nach einer Idee von Dr. Christoph Kunz, Rastatt



British and German soldiers during the Christmas Truce of 1914, published in the British newspaper *The Daily Mirror* (January 1915)

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In den Weihnachtstagen 1914 kam es zu Fraternisierung und Kooperation, wo man sie kaum erwarten würde: auf den Schlachtfeldern des Ersten Weltkriegs. Nach dem Motto „leben und leben lassen“ stellte sich Ende 1914 für kurze Zeit ein inoffizieller Waffenstillstand an der Westfront ein, der als „Weihnachtsfrieden“ in die Geschichte einging.

Doch wie kam es dazu? Welche anderen Arten der Kooperation zwischen den Kriegsgegnern gab es noch an der Front? Und warum endeten die Verbrüderungen wieder, anstatt dass sie in einen dauerhaften Frieden mündeten? Anhand von Primärquellen (Feldpost von der Front) sowie Sekundärquellen (Erklärungen des Sozialwissenschaftlers Robert Axelrod) setzen sich die Schülerinnen und Schüler mit diesen Fragen auseinander. Abschließend reflektieren sie die Lerninhalte, indem sie einen Dialog zwischen zwei Soldaten verfassen und darüber spekulieren, was geschehen wäre, wenn man es geschafft hätte die Kooperation aufrechtzuerhalten.

Klassenstufe: 9/10

Dauer: 3 Stunden

Bereich: Stellungskampf im Ersten Weltkrieg, Kooperation feindlicher Soldaten im Weihnachtsfrieden 1914, militärische Technik der Stoßtrupp-Angriffe

Kompetenzen:

- das Zustandekommen des Weihnachtsfriedens von 1914 erklären
- Fraternisierungs- und Kooperationshandlungen feindlicher Soldaten im Stellungskampf des Ersten Weltkriegs erläutern
- verstehen, wie Kooperation entstehen und aufrechterhalten werden

Internetseiten

<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/history/the-1914-christmas-truce-a-plum-pudding-policy-which-might-have-ended-the-war-2167090.html>

Unter diesem Link findet sich der vollständige Brief des britischen Soldaten Frederick W. Heath über den Weihnachtsfrieden, der im Januar unter anderem in der britischen Zeitung „*The Daily Mirror*“ abgedruckt wurde. Ein eindrucksvoller und emotionaler Augenzeugenbericht zu den Geschehnissen.

http://www.lexikon-erster-weltkrieg.de/Briefe_gefallener_Studenten

Eine Sammlung eindrucklicher Feldpostbriefe, die von jungen Männern aus den französischen Schlachtfeldern geschrieben wurden – oft wenige Tage oder Wochen vor deren Tod. Sie erzählen von den unterschiedlichsten Situationen und zeigen die verschiedensten Charaktere, Wünsche und tiefste Gefühle.

<https://www.phbern.ch/ideenset-weltkrieg/unterrichtsmaterial/unterrichtseinheiten.html>

Auf ihren Internetseiten bietet die Pädagogische Hochschule Bern eine Unterrichtsreihe mit dem Titel „Der Weihnachtsfriede 1914. Eine Fallstudie für die Sekundarstufe I“ von Nadine Ritzer und Sabine Ziegler zum Download an. Die Einheit enthält Quellentexte und Anregungen für die Unterrichtsgestaltung. In den Aufgaben geht es auch darum, mit den Schülern zu ergründen, wie sie sich in einer ähnlichen Situation verhalten hätten.

<https://livewellforless.sainsburys.co.uk/the-real-story-behind-our-christmas-tv-advert/>

Kurzer Dokumentarfilm der Supermarktkette *Sainsbury*, der als Hintergrundinformation zu ihrem Werbespot zu diesem Thema produziert wurde. Mit Quellenzitaten und Interviews mit Historikern.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWw23Bb1bvM>

Werbespot der britischen Supermarktkette *Sainsbury*, mit dem sie Ende 2014 an den Weihnachtsfrieden im Ersten Weltkrieg erinnert.

Verlaufsübersicht zur Reihe

- 1. Stunde: The Christmas Truce – What happened in the winter of 1914?
- 2. Stunde: Cooperation on the battlefield – What led to the Christmas Truce?
- 3. Stunde: The end of the cooperation – the war continues

Verlaufsübersicht zu den Stunde

- 1. Stunde: The Christmas Truce – What happened in the winter of 1914?

| Material | Verlauf |
|----------|---|
| M 1 | The First World War – What happened in the winter of 1914? / Aktivieren von Vorwissen und Motivation anhand einer Fotografie; Bilden von Hypothesen |
| M 2 | The First World War – the situation at the end of 1914 / Erarbeiten der Ausgangslage für den Weihnachtsfriedens anhand eines Sachtextes und Auszügen aus Feldpost |
| M 3 | The Christmas Truce of 1914 – a British soldier's letter / Erarbeiten der Geschehnisse am Weihnachtsabend 1914 auf dem Schlachtfeld anhand von Auszügen aus Feldpost eines britischen Soldaten |

2. Stunde: Cooperation on the battlefield – What led to the Christmas Truce?

| Material | Verlauf |
|----------|--|
| M 4 | Cooperation instead of fighting? – A sociological study / Erarbeiten eines sozialwissenschaftlichen Erklärungsansatzes anhand einer Sekundärquelle |
| M 5 | Cooperation in trench warfare – The strategy of “live and let live” / Erarbeiten der Entstehung und Aufrechterhaltung von Kooperationen auf dem Schlachtfeld anhand von primären und sekundären Textquellen |
| M 6 | Cooperation in trench warfare – the “imagined” war / Untersuchen von Beispielen des Waffeneinsatzes während Waffenstillständen als Mittel der Kooperation anhand von primären und sekundären Textquellen |

3. Stunde: The end of the cooperation – the war continues

| Material | Verlauf |
|----------|---|
| M 7 | The end of the cooperation – the war continues / Erarbeiten der Gründe für das Scheitern der Kooperation anhand von sekundären Textquellen |
| M 8 | The Christmas Truce – a shimmer of hope? / Entwickeln eines kreativen Dialogs zur Bedeutung des Weihnachtsfriedens |

Materialübersicht**1. Stunde** **The First World War – What happened in the winter of 1914?**

| | | |
|-----|------|--|
| M 1 | (Bi) | The First World War – What happened in the winter of 1914? |
| M 2 | (Tx) | The First World War – the situation at the end of 1914 |
| M 3 | (Tx) | The Christmas Truce of 1914 – a British soldier’s letter |

2. Stunde **Cooperation on the battlefield – What led to the Christmas Truce?**

| | | |
|-----|------|---|
| M 4 | (Tx) | Cooperation instead of fighting? – A sociological study |
| M 5 | (Tx) | Cooperation in trench warfare – the strategy of “live and let live” (Partner A) |
| M 6 | (Tx) | Cooperation in trench warfare – the “imagined” war (Partner B) |

3. Stunde **The end of the cooperation – the war continues**

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|-----|------|--|
| M 7 | (Tx) | The end of the cooperation – the war continues |
| M 8 | (Bi) | The Christmas Truce – a shimmer of hope? |

Lernerfolgskontrolle

| | | |
|-----|-------|---|
| M 9 | (LEK) | Test: What do you know about the Christmas Truce of 1914? |
|-----|-------|---|

Ab: Arbeitsblatt – **Bi:** Bildimpuls – **LEK:** Lernerfolgskontrolle – **Tx:** Text

M 1 The First World War – What happened in the winter of 1914?

On 9 January 1915 the British newspaper „The Daily Mirror“ published a very unusual photograph which quickly became famous.



© picture-alliance/Mary Evans Picture Library

Tasks

1. Describe the front page of the newspaper. Discuss the photograph as well as the title.
2. Speculate about why British and German soldiers were photographed together in the winter of 1914 during the First World War.

M 3 The Christmas Truce of 1914 – a British soldier's letter

It was war, but nobody wanted to shoot. Read the following letter from the British soldier Frederick W. Heath to learn how the soldiers celebrated Christmas.

The night closed in early – the ghostly shadows that haunt the trenches¹ came to keep us company [...]. Under a pale moon, one could just see the grave-like rise of ground which marked the German trenches two hundred yards away. Fires in the English lines had died down, and only the squelch of the sodden boots in the slushy mud, the whispered orders of the officers [...], and the moan of the wind broke the silence [...]. The soldiers' Christmas Eve had come at last, and it was hardly the time or place to feel grateful² for it. [...] With overcoat thick with wet mud, hands cracked and sore³ with the frost, I [...] fixed weary eyes on the German trenches.



German and British soldiers during the Christmas Truce of 1914

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Picture Library

[...] My eyes caught a [...] light in the enemy's trenches [...]. Then [...] there came to our ears a greeting unique in war: "[...] English soldier, a Merry Christmas [...]!" Following that salute boomed the invitation [...]: "[...] English soldier, come out here to us." For some little time we were cautious⁴ [...]. Officers [...] ordered the men to be silent. But [...] one heard the men answering that Christmas greeting [...]. How could we resist wishing each other a Merry Christmas, even though we might be at each other's throats immediately afterwards? So we kept up a running conversation [...], all the while our hands ready on our rifles⁵. [...] The night wore on to dawn – a night made easier by songs from the German trenches [...] and from our broad lines laughter and Christmas carols⁶. Not a shot was fired [...].

Under the early light we saw our foes⁷ moving recklessly about on top of their trenches. [...] A brazen invitation to us to shoot and kill with deadly certainty. But did we shoot? Not likely! We stood up ourselves and called benisons⁸ on the Germans. Then came the invitation to fall out of the trenches and meet half way. Still cautious we hung back. Not so the others. They ran forward in little groups, with hands held up above their heads, asking us to do the same. Not for long could such an appeal be resisted⁹ – beside, was not the courage¹⁰ up to now all on one side? Jumping up onto the parapet¹¹, a few of us advanced to meet the on-coming Germans. Out went the hands and tightened in the grip of friendship. Christmas had made the bitterest foes friends.

Here was no desire to kill, but just the wish of a few simple soldiers [...] that on Christmas Day [...] the force of fire should cease¹². We gave each other cigarettes and exchanged all manner of things. We wrote our names and addresses on the field service postcards, and exchanged them [...]. We cut the buttons off our coats and took in exchange the Imperial Arms of Germany. But the gift¹³ of gifts was Christmas pudding. [...] At the first bite of it they were our friends for ever. [...] After we had chatted, we turned back [...]. All through the day no shot was fired [...].

As I finish this short and scrappy description of a strangely human event, we are pouring¹⁴ rapid fire into the German trenches, and they are returning the compliment¹⁵ just as fiercely¹⁶.

Source: <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/history/the-1914-christmas-truce-a-plum-pudding-policy-which-might-have-ended-the-war-2167090.html>

Annotations

1 **trench**: Schützengraben – 2 **grateful**: dankbar – 3 **sore**: schmerzhaft, wund – 4 **cautious**: careful – 5 **rifle**: long gun – 6 **carol**: song – 7 **foe**: enemy – 8 **benison**: Segen – 9 **to resist**: widerstehen – 10 **courage**: Mut – 11 **parapet**: protective wall in front of a trench – 12 **to cease**: to stop – 13 **gift**: present – 14 **to pour**: to shoot – 15 **compliment**: here: attack – 16 **fierce**: strong, violent, energetic

Tasks

1. Create a timeline of the events leading to the Christmas Truce and the people involved.
2. Explain the soldiers' difficulties in initiating the peaceful meeting.
3. Make speculations about why the enemies could meet peacefully, despite the difficulties.

M 6 Cooperation in trench warfare – the “imagined” war

Which other examples of fraternisation¹ between enemy soldiers were there and how can they be explained? Here you will learn about two concrete examples.

Situation 1

Text B

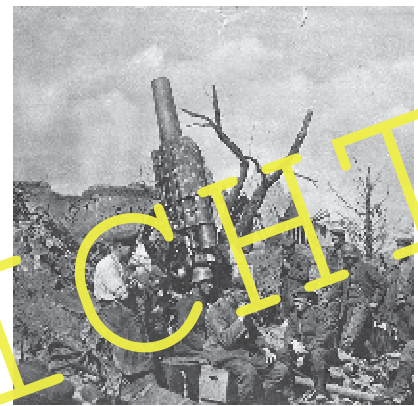
“I was having tea with a company when we heard a lot of shouting and went out to investigate. We found our men and the Germans standing on their respective parapets². Suddenly a salvo³ arrived but did no damage. Naturally both sides got down and our men started swearing⁴ at the Germans, when all at once a brave German got on to his parapet and shouted out ‘We are very sorry about that; we hope no one was hurt. It is not our fault, it is that damned Prussian⁵ artillery’.”

Situation 2

Even more striking was the predictable⁶ use of artillery: “So regular were they (the Germans) in their choice of targets⁷, times of shooting, and number of rounds fired, that, after [...] one or two days, Colonel Jones had discovered their system, and knew to a minute where the next shell⁸ would fall. His calculations⁹ were very accurate, and he was able to take what seemed to uninitiated Staff Officers big risks, knowing that the shelling would stop before he reached the place being shelled.”

The other side did the same thing, as noted by a German soldier commenting on “the evening gun” fired by the British: “At seven it came – so regularly that you could set your watch by it. ... It always had the same objective, its range was accurate, it never varied laterally¹⁰ or went beyond or fell short of the mark. ... There were even some [...] fellows who crawled out... [...] in order to see it burst.”

These rituals of perfunctory¹¹ and routine firing sent a double message. To the high command they conveyed aggression, but to the enemy they conveyed peace. The men pretended¹² to be implementing an aggressive policy¹³, but were not.



© picture-alliance/ZB

Source: Axelrod, Robert: The Evolution of Cooperation. New York 2006: Basic Books, pp. 84–86.

Annotations

1 **fraternisation**: Verbrüderung – 2 **parapet**: Brüstungsmauer – 3 **salvo**: gleichzeitiges Abfeuern mehrerer Geschütze – 4 **to swear at so.:** jmdn. beschimpfen – 5 **Prussian**: preußisch – 6 **predictable**: vorhersehbar – 7 **target**: Ziel – 8 **shell**: bomb – 9 **calculation**: Berechnung – 10 **lateral**: seitlich – 11 **perfunctory**: nachlässig, ohne Interesse – 12 **to pretend to do sth.:** vorgeben etw. zu tun – 13 **policy**: strategy

Tasks

1. Explain how and for what reasons weapons were used in this truce.
2. Explain how situations 1 and 2 are different from each other.
3. How could this difference be explained?
4. Reflect on what a military superior could do to stop this cooperation with the enemy.
5. Report your results to your partner.

M 7 The end of the cooperation – the war continues

The following texts explain what led to the end of the cooperation between the enemies.

Most officers tolerated fraternisation between enemies on Christmas. The truces, some of which lasted into January, were however too long for the officers. Officers were afraid that the soldiers would not be able to continue fighting, so they ended the truce and threatened disciplinary measures and stopped every attempt to halt fighting. A British witness reported that Christmas carols could still be heard from a German trench when suddenly there were shots and screams.

This method was also used for other truces:

“Direct truces were easily suppressed¹. Orders were issued making clear that the soldiers “were in France to fight and not to fraternize² with the enemy” [...]. Several soldiers were court-martialled³ and whole battalions were punished. Soon [...] such arrangements became rare.” (Axelrod: 78)



German soldiers leave a trench for an attack.

Finally the system of the early war months collapsed:

“What finally destroyed the live-and-let-live system was the institution of a type of [...] aggression that the headquarters could monitor⁴. This was the raid⁵, a carefully prepared attack on enemy trenches which involved from ten to two hundred men. Raiders were ordered to kill or capture the enemy in his own trenches. If the raid was successful, prisoners would be taken; and if the raid was a failure, casualties⁶ would be proof⁷ of the attempt. There was no effective way to pretend that a raid had been undertaken [...] and [...] to cooperate with the enemy in a raid [...]” (Axelrod: 82)

This was however, not on purpose:

“The British High Command [...] did [...] do so in order to [...] show their French allies that they were doing their part to harass⁸ the enemy.” (Axelrod: 83)

The war developed in the following years into an extreme battle of material in which there could be no cooperation. In this type of war, weapons, not people were important. Enormous quantities of weapons capable of large destruction were used, for example machine guns, tanks and mines. Poisonous gas was also used. Shells up to a meter long were fired around the clock. Supplies⁹ were constantly being sent – not only weapons, but also soldiers as replacement for the dead. For this reason the entire economies of the home countries were oriented towards war.

Source of the quotes: Axelrod, Robert: The Evolution of Cooperation. New York 2006: Basic Books, p.78, p.82, p.83.

Annotations

1 to suppress sth.: etw. abstellen – 2 to fraternize: sich verbrüdern – 3 to court-martial so.: jmdn. vor das Kriegsgericht stellen – 4 to monitor sth.: etw. überwachen – 5 raid: Stoßtruppenunternehmen – 6 casualty: Verwundete, Todesopfer – 7 proof: Beweis – 8 to harass so.: bedrängen, drangsalieren – 9 supply: Nachschub

Tasks

1. Give the original reason for raids.
2. Explain why a “pretended war” was no longer possible with the raids.
3. Speculate about why there were no Christmas truces in the following three years (1915–1917).

M 8 The Christmas Truce – a shimmer of hope?

In 1918 two of the many wounded and traumatised soldiers returned home:



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Can you remember the Christmas of 1914? There was peace for a short time ...

How would history have been different if we soldiers had simply kept eating pudding and smoking cigarettes?

Would it have been possible to make a lasting peace treaty?

Task: Answer the soldiers' questions by writing the rest of their dialogue. Work in pairs.