



The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory, and the First World War by Terri Blom Crocker.

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The centennial observances of the First World War have elicited an outpouring of new books, some of which explore the war through the lens of popular remembrance. In *The Christmas Truce*, author Terri Blom Crocker (Univ. of Kentucky¹) highlights the evolving (mainly British) collective remembrance of a famous, iconic moment of the war—the spontaneous informal holiday ceasefire between combatants along sections of the Western Front. Her premise is that “The myth of the 1914 armistice is based on the belief that the soldiers who took part in it shared our modern sensibilities, hated war as we hate war, and rebelled against that futile conflict as we are certain we would have rebelled against it.” Yet, as Crocker painstakingly demonstrates, “The Christmas truce, shorn of its mythology, is impossible to categorize simply” (219). Though the truce has over time solidified in memory as a unique moment of humanity and near rebellion against warfare, this perception reflects the distinctly anti-First World War stance of later twentieth-century students and historians rather than the events and reactions to them that actually occurred a century ago.

Crocker writes that “As soon as the British became aware of the 1914 Christmas fraternization, the story of the truce and the desire for peace on the part of the soldiers involved that it symbolized became a vital part of the narrative of the war, as the number of books, newspaper articles, and websites devoted to it demonstrate” (5). In the days and years following the truce, people were intrigued by the brief hiatus in the grinding course of a war to which the troops nevertheless felt committed. By the late 1920s, however, a profound sense of disillusionment began to dominate interpretations of the First World War, a disillusionment that only grew after the Second World War and the conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere. The truce, then, was reinterpreted as an act of rebellion, frowned upon by commanding officers who supposedly punished the soldiers who participated in it (despite the lack of any evidence of reprimands), “a moment of sanity in the midst of the brutal and senseless lunacy that the First World War comprised” (11). But, Crocker stresses,

The truce, which at the time it occurred was largely perceived as an interesting but unimportant event, was not an act of defiance but one that arose from the convergence of a number of factors: the professionalism of the soldiers involved, the unprecedented conditions of static trench warfare, the adaptation of the troops to their new environment, foul weather on the Western Front in the first winter of the war, the absence of major initiatives along that front during the last two weeks of December, and memories of traditional celebrations of Christmas. The holiday truce, in short, was caused by rain, mud, curiosity, lack of personal animosity toward the enemy, and homesickness rather than by frustration and rebellion. (4)

The book’s eleven chapters mix thematic and chronological approaches. Crocker opens with a brief discussion on the Christmas truce and its place in First World War historiography, then turns to

1. Where she is the senior paralegal for investigations in the Office of Legal Counsel and a PhD candidate.

a perceptive overview of the war along the Western Front. The third chapter is a superb account of the unpremeditated manifestations of the truce along the front line: “The separate truces that occurred on 25 December 1914 and for a few days afterward were not prearranged, centrally coordinated, or consistent, but rather were composed of individually negotiated armistices, entered into at different times, ranging from early Christmas Eve through Christmas afternoon, and widely divergent in nature” (45–46).

The following three chapters explore contemporary accounts of the truce in official histories, news reports, and soldiers’ letters and memoirs. Crocker devotes the rest of her short work to the long-term remembrance of the event. Four chapters concern, respectively, the periods 1920–59, 1960–69, 1970–89, and 1990–2014. Crocker emphasizes the influence of the 1960s anti-Vietnam War movement on remembrance of the First World War. A concluding chapter wraps up her argument about the evolution of the truce tale in popular and official memory.

Focusing mainly on the British, Crocker astutely places the remembrance of the truce in a wider political and cultural context. Given the near universal perception of the war as an unmitigated disaster, the truce came to seem a shining moment of rebellion, a political statement against the futility of the war and the ineptitude of its generals. The author shows that this simplistic narrative contradicts the contemporary evidence of official reports, letters home, and soldiers’ own memoirs. She rightly blames historians, filmmakers, and newsmen for “editing out the parts that did not fit their theories, creating a monolithic discourse that apparently captured the public imagination and drove out all dissenting views” about the truce (190). She stresses the enduring appeal of a reductive tale that decries official incompetence and brutality, while hailing the common soldiers who stood up to express their humanity, only to be punished for doing so. Crocker exposes how such a story betrays the actual events. She maintains that, though the soldiers certainly welcomed a brief respite, they were eager nonetheless to win the war, while many officers actually condoned the truce, if only to seize a chance to rest their men and repair defensive works. Moreover, these circumstances were well known to those back home in Britain.

There are some weaknesses in this generally cogent corrective account.² One is a failure to draw on recent studies of the complexities of historical remembrance,³ which results in an overly linear and too tidy depiction of the process of collective memory. Thus, for example, the author’s chapter spanning some four decades glosses over the critical dualities apparent in the remembrance of the twentieth century’s two world wars (149–52). In chapter 2, she contends that letters home conveyed a real sense of the war’s miseries and made civilians in Great Britain aware of its true horrors. But questions centered on just how people understand warfare from a distance have driven a perennial debate in military history concerning historical memory.⁴ One would also like to have seen some comparative assessment of French and German understandings of the truce.

These blemishes aside, the book makes a welcome assault on the prevailing disillusionment narrative that historians have only recently begun to dismantle. Specifically, Terri Blom Crocker has written a cautionary tale of the power of selection bias in news stories, oral history interviews, and films (in-

2. The book’s origins in a master’s (then doctoral) thesis may explain its repetitiveness, clunky organization, and sometimes convoluted prose.

3. E.g., Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It! Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (NY: Pearson, 2004), clarifies how imperial longing, a sense of contribution to world destiny, easily asserted moral superiority, and echoes of American commemorations conditioned British remembrance of World War II.

4. Crocker also states that the Second World War became a “good” war in British popular memory because of the “relatively low number of casualties” (16). But 658,000 British died in the First World War and ca. 449,000 in the Second—not a sufficient difference to explain the widely divergent perceptions of the two conflicts.

cluding documentaries) to transform a historical event into an icon of antiwar sentiment in the decades that followed it. These virtues make *The Christmas Truce* valuable reading for anyone interested in an odd moment of the First World War and its evolution in historical memory.