

The Christmas Truce
8th Grade U.S. History
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Directions:

1. First, read the essay question below, so you have the end goal in mind as you complete this assignment.
2. Second, read the historical background of the Christmas Truce, and keep these facts in mind as you complete the third step.
3. Now look at each of the primary source documents and answer the questions that follow. Your answers to these questions will help you write your essay.
4. Finally, re-read the essay question and begin writing your response. Use examples from the background information and the information from the primary sources to back up your statements. The only wrong answer is one that is not supported with facts from the documents.
5. Use the rubric as a guide to understanding what is expected from this assignment.

Essay Question:

Would you have crossed the trenches into “no-man’s land” to share a Christmas Eve celebration with the enemy?

Historical Background:

During the early part of World War I, trenches were not well constructed. During bad weather, the walls of the trenches would sometimes crumble while the floors would flood. On Christmas Eve, 1914, British and German soldiers alike found themselves in muddy trenches, cold and wet, and lying next to the decaying bodies of fallen comrades. Their only comfort was the arrival of Christmas packages from home. The British troops received packages of plum puddings, cigarettes, chocolates, and butterscotch candies. The Germans received meerschaum pipes, food, warm clothes, and miniature Christmas trees, or *Tannenbaum*.

As each side slowly ceased fire to enjoy some of these treats, the British heard singing coming from the German trenches. Although the words were foreign, several men recognized the tune to be that of “Silent Night.” The British soldiers started to sing along with the Germans in English. Then, slowly, German heads began to poke up from their trenches. A few brave souls called out to meet in the middle and, with hands raised, hopped out of the trenches and began to cross the distance between sides. This expanse of ground was called “no-man’s land.”

The men exchanged puddings and chocolates for cakes and tobacco. Germans gave the British candles and mini Christmas trees. They exchanged all sorts of buttons and trinkets. They shared pictures of family members and sweethearts back home. The men ate and sang and shook hands. In some places, the men even joined together in playing a game of soccer.

Some of the officers from both sides tried to put an end to the fraternizations, but to no avail. Other officers allowed the festivities to continue, using the time to strengthen their trenches. Of course, the truce or cease-fire could not last forever. Soon, officers were calling their men back to their respective trenches. Regardless of the time spent together, men from both sides knew that they must do their duty as soldiers. In the days that followed, men began to open fire once again on the enemy, and the war resumed.

Document A:

"On Christmas Eve there was a lull in the fighting, no firing going on at all after 6 p.m. The Germans had a Christmas tree in the trenches and Chinese lanterns all along the top of a parapet. Eventually the Germans started shouting, "Come over, I want to speak to you."

Our chaps hardly knew how to take this, but one of the 'nuts' belonging to the Regiment got out of the trench and started to walk towards the German lines. One of the Germans met him about half-way across, and they shook hands and became quite friendly. In due time the 'nut' came back and told the others all about it. So more of them took it in turns to go and visit the Germans. The officer commanding would not allow more than three men at a time.

I went out myself on Christmas Day and exchanged some cigarettes for cigars, and this game had been going on from Christmas Eve till midnight on Boxing Day without a single round being fired. The German I met had been a waiter in London and could use our language a little. He says they didn't want to fight and I think he was telling the truth as we are not getting half so many bullets as usual. I know this statement will take a bit of believing but it is absolutely correct. Fancy a German shaking your flapper as though he were trying to smash your fingers, and then a few days later trying to plug you. I hardly knew what to think about it, but I fancy they are working up a big scheme so that they can give us a doing, but our chaps are prepared, and I am under the impression they will get more than they bargained for."

-Gunner Herbert Smith
5th Battery, Royal Field Artillery

1. Who wrote this account? Was he British or German?
2. If the enemy had called you over to their trenches "to speak to you," what would you have thought they really wanted?
3. Why do you suppose Herbert Smith calls his fellow soldier a "nut" when he got out of the trench and went over toward the German lines?
4. Why do you think the officer commanding would not allow more than three men to go to the German lines at a time?
5. What was the significance of Smith finding out that the Germans didn't want to fight?
6. What was Smith's final prediction after this fraternization had taken place?

Document B:



British Trench, 1914

1. How are the soldiers in the trench dressed and why are they dressed that way?
2. Describe some of the things you see in the picture.
3. What do you suppose the living conditions were in the trenches?
4. What kinds of exercise or entertainment do you think these men get, if any?
5. Do you think soldiers would have welcomed an excuse to leave the trenches?

Document C:

"On Christmas morning we stuck up a board with 'A Merry Christmas' on it. The enemy had stuck up a similar one. Platoons would sometimes go out for twenty-four hours' rest - it was a day at least out of the trench and relieved the monotony a bit - and my platoon had gone out in this way the night before, but a few of us stayed behind to see what would happen. Two of our men then threw their equipment off and jumped on the parapet with their hands above their heads. Two of the Germans done the same and commenced to walk up the river bank, our two men going to meet them. They met and shook hands and then we all got out of the trench."

-Frank Richards
Old Soldiers Never Die, a Memoir

1. Who wrote this account? Was he British or German?
2. What does "monotony" mean, and why did the men need to escape it?

3. Why would some of the men stay behind? Why were they hesitant?
4. What happened after the two British soldiers met the Germans in the middle?

Document D:

"We came up to take over the trenches on the front between Frelinghien and Houplines, where our Regiment and the Scottish Seaforth Highlanders were face to face. It was a cold, starry night and the Scots were a hundred or so meters in front of us in their trenches where, as we discovered, like us they were up to their knees in mud. My Company Commander and I, savoring the unaccustomed calm, sat with our orderlies round a Christmas tree we had put up in our dugout.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, our enemies began to fire on our lines. Our soldiers had hung little Christmas trees covered with candles above the trenches and our enemies, seeing the lights, thought we were about to launch a surprise attack. But, by midnight it was calm once more.

Next morning the mist was slow to clear and suddenly my orderly threw himself into my dugout to say that both the German and Scottish soldiers had come out of their trenches and were fraternizing along the front. I grabbed my binoculars and looking cautiously over the parapet saw the incredible sight of our soldiers exchanging cigarettes, schnapps and chocolate with the enemy. Later a Scottish soldier appeared with a football which seemed to come from nowhere and a few minutes later a real football match got underway. The Scots marked their goal mouth with their strange caps and we did the same with ours. It was far from easy to play on the frozen ground, but we continued, keeping rigorously to the rules, despite the fact that it only lasted an hour and that we had no referee. A great many of the passes went wide, but all the amateur footballers, although they must have been very tired, played with huge enthusiasm."

-Lieutenant Johannes Niemann
133rd Royal Saxon Regiment [German Regiment]

1. Who wrote this account? Was he a British officer or a German officer?
2. Who were the Germans fighting against at this particular position?
3. What were the conditions in the trenches on Christmas Eve?
4. Why did the Scots fire on the German lines?
5. What did Lieutenant Niemann discover of his troops on Christmas morning?
6. What specifically were the men doing? (Hint: "Football" is soccer to Americans.)
7. What was Niemann's reaction to the situation?

Document E:



Football [Soccer] game between the Germans and the British, 1914

1. Who are the men in the picture?
2. What are these soldiers doing?
3. What is their demeanor? Are they enjoying themselves?
4. Why do you think they would drop their guard to play a game like this?
5. Was there any benefit to playing a game of soccer with the enemy?
6. Was there any danger in playing a game of soccer with the enemy?

Document F:

"At 8.30 a.m. I was looking out and saw four Germans leave their trenches and come towards us. I told two of my men to go and meet them, unarmed, as the Germans were unarmed, and to see that they did not pass the half-way line. We were 350 - 400 yards apart at this point. My fellows were not very keen, not knowing what was up, so I went out alone and met Barry, one of our ensigns, also coming out from another part of the line. By the time we got to them, they were three-quarters of the way over, and much too near our barbed wire, so I moved them back. They were three private soldiers and a stretcher-bearer, and their spokesman started off by saying that he thought it only right to come over and wish us a Happy Christmas, and trusted us implicitly to keep the truce.

He came from Suffolk, where he had left his best girl and a three-and-a-half horsepower motor-bike. He told me that he could not get a letter to the girl, and wanted to send one

through me. I made him write out a post card, in English, in front of me, and I sent it off that night. I told him that she probably would not be a bit keen to see him again.

We then entered on a long discussion on every sort of thing. I was dressed in an old stocking-cap and a man's overcoat, and they took me for a corporal, a thing which I did not discourage, as I had an eye to going as near their lines as possible. I asked them what orders they had from their officers as to coming over to us, and they said none; they had just come over out of goodwill.

I kept it up for half-an-hour and then escorted them back as far as their barbed wire, having a jolly good look round all the time, and picking up various little bits of information which I had not had an opportunity of doing under fire.

I left instructions with them that if any of them came out later they must not come over the half-way line, and appointed a ditch as the meeting-place. We parted after an exchange of Albany cigarettes and German cigars, and I went straight to HQ to report.

On my return at 10:00 a.m., I was surprised to hear a hell of a din going on, and not a single man in my trenches; they were completely denuded (against my orders) and nothing lived. I heard strains of "Tipperary" floating down the breeze, swiftly followed by a tremendous burst of "Deutschland Uber Alles," and, as I got to my own Company HQ dugout, I saw, to my amazement, not only a crowd of about 150 British and Germans, at the halfway house which I had appointed opposite my lines, but six or seven such crowds, all the way down our lines, extending towards the 8th Division on our right.

I hustled out and asked if there were any German officers in my crowd, and the noise died down. (At this time I was myself in my own cap and badges of rank.)

I found two, but had to speak to them through an interpreter, as they could talk neither English nor French. I explained to them that strict orders must be maintained as to meeting half-way, and everyone unarmed; and we both agreed not to fire until the other did, thereby creating a complete deadlock and armistice (if strictly observed.)"

-Captain Sir Edward Hulse
Bart., 2nd Scots Guards

1. Who wrote this account? Was he a British officer or German officer?
2. Why didn't Capt. Hulse want the Germans coming past the halfway mark?
3. Why do you think Capt. Hulse referred to the German's comment of wishing them a Happy Christmas to be "smarting off"?
4. What do you think Hulse was after in trying to get as close to the German lines as possible?
5. Why was Hulse surprised when he returned at 10am to his trenches?
6. How far-reaching was this event?
7. What did Hulse do about the situation?

Essay Question and Instructions:

Write a five paragraph essay answering the following...

Would you have crossed the trenches into “No-Man’s Land” to share a Christmas Eve celebration with the enemy?

Use the answers to the questions for each document and the information in the historical background to support your argument. Follow the rubric below as a guide.

Rubric:

A:

- stays on topic throughout the essay, answering the question presented
- supports all opinions with historical and primary source information

B:

- mostly stays on topic and answers the question presented
- supports most of the opinions with historical and primary source information

C:

- strays somewhat from the topic and original question given
- uses some historical and primary source information to support his or her opinions

D:

- frequently gets off topic and loses sight of the overall question
- uses only a few facts from the historical background or documents provided to support his or her opinions

F:

- does not answer the question given at all
- uses opinions only, does not support statements with any facts