

The True Story of the Christmas Truce: British and German Eyewitness Accounts from the First World War. By Anthony Richards. Barnsley: Greenhill Books, 2021. 228. pp.

The recent monograph by Anthony Richards examines the famous Christmas truce of 1914 between the British and German soldiers on the Western Front. Richards is the head of the Documents and Sound Department at the Imperial War Museums and a best-selling author who has published several popular academic books about the military history of World War I and World War II. His recent monograph aims for a wide audience while also trying to contribute to more focused academic discussion.

Although historians have written a fair amount concerning several aspects of the temporary ceasefire, Anthony Richards' monograph is important in part simply because of his unique methods of researching and writing. First, he focuses on the voices of individuals by using oral history. Second, he seeks to debunk widespread misconceptions about the Christmas Truce familiar from television and musical adaptations. Third, unlike many earlier works, he uses German sources, including interviews and memoirs, to discuss the events of December 1914.

As Richards notes at the beginning of the book, the most important problem is that we have inherited a rather distorted notion of the story of the ceasefire, as most people focus only on the football match played between the enemy troops. This has served as the basis for other distorted or simply inaccurate notions, such as legends which were born in the autumn of 1914 related to the hopes for the end of the war.

The book has eight chapters in addition to the foreword, introduction, and conclusion, and it can be divided thematically into three main parts. The first part offers a general overview which deals with the current knowledge and most important preconceptions about the event. Richards contends that the temporary ceasefires that were held on the Western front on Christmas Eve or in the first days of the new year can be explained by the principle of "live and let live." As we know, there was an informal agreement between the enemies regarding ceasefires under extraordinary circumstances, such as poor weather conditions or the need to bury dead soldiers. This simply means that soldiers were reluctant to initiate aggression under these circumstances. As a ceasefire was actually held on Christmas of 1914 that was more extensive in space and time, one can understand why this ceasefire has been judged in a special way

in the historiography. Contemporary writers and later historians had difficulty fitting it into the narrative of the bloody war. Marxist historians even interpreted it as a proletarian uprising.

In the second section, Richards writes about the conditions and causes which led to the temporary ceasefires. He shows the pre-truces which evolved in November and December thanks to the closeness of the trenches. There is no doubt that the fact that soldiers could give something to the soldiers fighting for the other side also contributed to the ceasefire: as we know, there was a huge social action in the last months of 1914, when a large number of packages from the hinterland were given to soldiers. This created the set of circumstances in which the first steps came from the German troops. Richards notes that the sight of a Christmas tree was important, as were the sounds of Christmas carols, because these sights and sounds could awaken empathy in soldiers on both sides. Namely, the religious side of that time of year had considerable significance, as Christmas meant a sort of moment of relief in a soldier's life, even for soldiers who were not religious.

Richards also points out that the temporary treaties were scattered across the western front, which means that the event in question (the Christmas truce of 1914) was not part of a larger contiguous peace. Only two-thirds of the English line was affected by the temporary ceasefires, which can be explained by a few factors. At the same time, as truces were formed in an informal way between commanders, one would assume that soldiers themselves took little part in the process, apart from exchanging meals or cigarettes or telling each other jokes. But the fact is that an array of extraordinary events took place during the Christmas truce. For instance, some of the German soldiers had been hairdressers before the war, so they cut the English officers' hair. Soccer matches were also memorable moments of the ceasefires, though they were merely spontaneous events and not part of some organized choreography.

The third thematic section of the volume contains the last three chapters and deals with the afterlife of the Christmas truce. Richards writes about the reasons for the ceasefire, and he sums up its most significant characteristics. He emphasizes that ceasefires were not a result of spontaneous initiatives. Rather, they were a clear sign and symptom of the human desires which first found expression in the autumn of 1914. He notes that Christmas was significant not only for Christians and thus the Christmas season could touch everyone involved in the events. At the same time, the most important reason behind the ceasefires was the desire among soldiers to improve their living conditions, as they were

unable to repair the trenches and bury the dead when under constant artillery fire. As there was no precipitate at Christmas, it an ideal period to deal with these tasks. Some shared culture and shared traditions also facilitated communication: one advantage on the western front was that some German soldiers could speak English, as they had worked as hairdressers in Great Britain before. This enabled the two sides to communicate by shouting from the trenches or even showing notes to enemy soldiers when the opposed trenches were very close. The shared language also made propaganda less effective and, indeed, less common on the western front in 1914. However, as Richards adds, this was the last great ceasefire. In the later years of World War I and throughout World War II, fighting was more aggressive, as military techniques changed and resulted in more casualties.

Róbert Károly Szabó
ELTE Doctoral School of History
rszabo.elte@gmail.com