FREE TEACHING RESOURCE · PHOTOCOPIABLE

The First to Stand Up

The Christmas Truce of 1914 in the Classroom

With letters from the front in Germany, Britain and France

Free in English, German and French: **humane-world-formula.com/teaching**

SUBJECTS
History · RE and Ethics · English · Citizenship

AGES
13 to 16, with extension work up to 18

TIME
about 90 minutes with one focus, or about three hours with every module

CONTENTS
Map, timeline, three letters, extracts from the book, answer guidance

What it is about

At Christmas 1914, at many points along the Western Front, soldiers climbed out of their trenches and walked towards the enemy. They sang across no man's land, shook hands, swapped cigarettes, newspapers and addresses, and buried their dead together. A few days later the war was back, and the high commands forbade any contact with the enemy.

This resource lets men who were there speak for themselves: a German volunteer, a British captain and a French schoolteacher. Students compare their letters, test what is true in the famous story of the football match, and look at how images of the enemy are made, and why they fall apart up close. The guiding question comes at the end: what makes someone the first to stand up?

Christmas 1914 at the front: British and German soldiers bury their dead together. Illustration, 2026

Learning objectives

Students will …

- describe, from letters written in three countries, how soldiers experienced the Christmas Truce of 1914 (M1, M2),
- tell contemporary sources apart from later retellings and explain how an event turns into a myth (M3),
- explain how images of the enemy are manufactured and why meeting the enemy in person weakens them (M4),
- apply the guiding question to conflicts today and to their own lives (M5).

Two routes through the material

All five modules will not fit into a single 90-minute session. For one session, choose a focus; to cover every module, allow about three hours, for example two double lessons or three to four single lessons.

Route A · About 90 minutes, with one focus

TIME	PHASE	CONTENT AND METHOD	MATERIAL
15′	**Starter**	Hulse's sentence on the board: 'If I had seen it on a cinematograph film I should have sworn that it was faked.' Collect guesses, then use the map and timeline to set the scene.	M1
30′	**Jigsaw**	Each home group reads one letter and fills in its column of the table. In mixed groups of three, students present and compare the letters.	M2
25′	**Focus**	**History:** the football myth and working with sources (M3). **Citizenship, RE, Ethics, English:** the enemy factory (M4). With whole-class discussion.	M3 or M4
20′	**Reflection**	Texts 1 and 3, tasks 1 and 3 and the optional writing task. El Salvador (text 2, task 2) is kept for extension.	M5

Route B · About three hours, every module

PART	CONTENT	MATERIAL
1	Starter with map and timeline (15′), jigsaw with the three letters (35′), the football myth (30′), plenary: why did both sides forbid contact? (10′)	M1, M2, M3
2	The enemy factory (35′), the first to stand up with all three texts, 1914 and 1985 compared (40′), writing task and close (15′)	M4, M5

Variations

Single 45-minute lesson: starter with M1, one letter from M2 read as a class or all three shared out, finishing with tasks 1 and 3 from M5.

Sixth form: take M3 further. The historian Terri Blom Crocker regards the picture of ordinary soldiers rebelling against their officers as a later legend. Can the three letters in M2 support or challenge her view?

German and French: this resource is also available in German and French, with the same sources in each language. That makes it suitable for modern foreign languages, bilingual history teaching and partner schools.

Background

How it came about. In the summer of 1914 many people believed the war would be over by Christmas. After the German invasion of neutral Belgium and the Battle of the Marne, the armies dug in. By November a line of trenches ran from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border. The two sides faced each other in rain and mud, sometimes less than a hundred metres apart, with the dead of the last attacks lying between them. On 7 December Pope Benedict XV asked for a truce on Christmas night. The plan failed.

What happened. On Christmas Eve, at many points, German soldiers set trees with candles on the edge of their trenches and sang. Applause and songs came back from the other side. Here and there someone called across, men climbed out and met in the middle. On Christmas Day, in many places, both sides buried their dead, often together, and exchanged gifts and addresses. Germans made such truces with British, French and Belgian soldiers, above all in Flanders, but also in Artois and on the Somme. An often-quoted estimate puts the number of men involved at around a hundred thousand; nobody counted. The truces were small, unplanned and permitted by no high command. Some ended after a day, others lasted for several.

The ban. Even before Christmas, both sides had forbidden any contact with the enemy. Afterwards headquarters tightened the reins. On 29 December 1914 the German Supreme Army Command expressly forbade any fraternisation with the enemy. In early January 1915 German newspapers reported that anyone who made a friendly approach to an enemy trench faced punishment for treason. A year later, strict orders and shells were meant to prevent a repeat. In January 1916 a British captain was court-martialled for allowing a short truce to bury the dead on Christmas Day 1915.

Myth and reality. To this day the truce is often told as a rebellion of ordinary soldiers against the war and against their officers. The historian Terri Blom Crocker has studied letters, newspaper reports, memoirs and official accounts and regards this reading as a later legend. The truces, she argues, were set off by rain and mud, curiosity, homesickness and the absence of personal hatred for the enemy. Many officers tolerated them, and most of the men still wanted to win the war. The famous football match is partly legend too: there are accounts of balls kicked back and forth between the trenches and of a great kick-about with no referee. A proper match with a score is disputed (M3).

Why the topic works. Precisely because the men were neither saints nor revolutionaries, young people can relate to their story. It shows that peace does not require people to become someone else. Sometimes it is enough for one person to call out and another to answer.

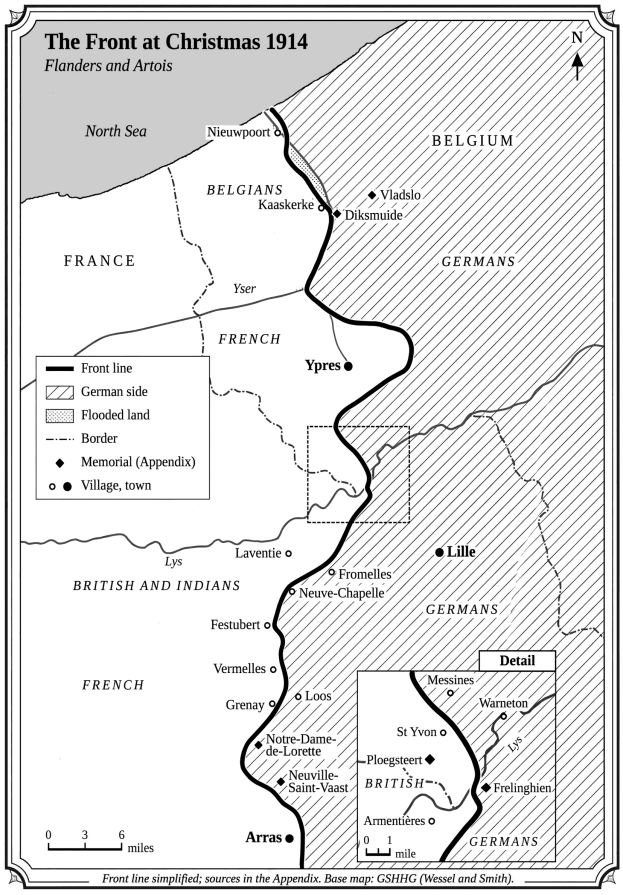
Please note

Families. The book this resource comes from links the Christmas Truce with the silent trenches inside families. The resource takes up this idea only in M5, and there it is optional: students choose for themselves which trench they think about, and no one has to read out what they have written. In every class there are children for whom Christmas is not a peaceful time.

Sources. All texts come from the book by Bernd Blasius, *The First to Stand Up. The Christmas Truce of 1914 and the Courage to Leave Our Trenches* (Edition Resonanz, 2026), which draws on letters, diaries, war diaries and the work of historians. Edward Hulse's letter follows the text published by the Western Front Association. Joh. Rocholl's letter follows its printing in the Wittener Volks-Zeitung of 5 January 1915, and Gustave Berthier's the French collection Paroles de poilus; both were translated for the book. Omissions are marked [...], explanations appear in square brackets. The letters use contemptuous names for the enemy, such as 'Huns' or 'Boches'. They are explained in square brackets and make a good way into M4. The resource and its drawings were made with the help of AI; the letters and quotations are documented.

Pictures. The drawings in this resource are illustrations made in 2026, not images from the time. M3 makes deliberate use of this.

M1 The front at Christmas 1914



1914

28 June	In Sarajevo, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, and his wife Sophie are shot dead.
August	German troops march into neutral Belgium. In Louvain the university library burns.
Early September	On the Marne the German advance is halted. Then the armies dig in.
November	The front stands still. Trenches run from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border, and in Flanders it rains almost without a break.
7 December	Pope Benedict XV asks for a truce on Christmas night. Five days later the plan has failed.
23 December	The weather turns, and a hard frost settles over Flanders.
24 December	Trees with candles stand on the edge of the German trenches, and songs go back and forth. Between Basseville and St Yvon, Saxon and British soldiers shake hands halfway across. Near Arras a French lieutenant strikes up ‘Minuit, chrétiens’, and the Germans sing the ‘Marseillaise’.
25 December	At many points along the front, both sides bury their dead, often together, and exchange gifts and addresses.
29 December	The German Supreme Army Command expressly forbids any fraternisation with the enemy.

1915 – 1918

Christmas 1915	Strict orders and shells are meant to prevent a repeat.
January 1916	Captain Iain Colquhoun stands before a court martial for allowing a short truce for the dead on Christmas Day.
11 November 1918	In the Forest of Compiègne an armistice is signed. At eleven o’clock the fighting ends.

‘If I had seen it on a cinematograph film I should have sworn that it was faked.’

Edward Hulse, British captain, in a letter to his mother, late December 1914

1. In the summer of 1914, people in Britain said: ‘It’ll all be over by Christmas.’ Use the timeline to explain why the soldiers spent Christmas in trenches instead.
2. Find Grenay on the map. Near there, on Christmas Day, the Frenchman Gustave Berthier talked to three German soldiers (M2). Find St Yvon in the inset. There, on Christmas Eve, Saxons and Britons called out to each other (M5).
3. Read Edward Hulse’s sentence. What might he have seen? Write down a guess and check it later against M2.

M2 Three letters from three countries · Letter A

A · Joh. Rocholl, German volunteer, to his family, 26 December 1914

I cannot imagine a lovelier Christmas! We had a clear, starry night. Up on top of the trench you could see Christmas trees burning. [...] Then the English stopped firing too, so that not a shot was fired. Then came 'Holy God, We Praise Thy Name', 'Silent Night' and so on. After that we called 'Fröhliche Weihnachten' to our 'comrades', the English, and they called it back. One of us, a one-year volunteer [a volunteer with a higher education, who served only one year], who could speak English, then dared to go across to the English. At last, after much coaxing, an Englishman came out to meet him halfway. They wished each other a happy Christmas, lit a cigarette, and each went back to his own trench. [...] Then several of us risked it. When I went across with an NCO, an English officer came out. We talked with him in French. We wrote our names down for him and he wrote his name down for us. [...] Then everyone wanted to run across. But it was forbidden for the night, and we went on singing our carols. We had agreed with the English not to fire on Christmas Day until midnight. That gave us time to dig [to deepen and strengthen the trenches]. Everybody was strolling about up top. [...] In the daytime we stood peacefully with the English between our trench and theirs. We took them bread and got tinned meat in return. [...] The truce the Pope had striven for, we ordinary 'foot-sloggers' [infantrymen] have made ourselves.

Rocholl came from Freienohl in the Sauerland. The letter does not say where he was, only who lay opposite him: the English. At the beginning of January 1915 a newspaper in Witten, in the Ruhr, printed the letter. Translated from the German.

M2 Three letters from three countries · Letter B

B · Edward Hulse, British captain in the Scots Guards, to his mother, Christmas 1914

On my return [from headquarters] at 10 a.m., I was surprised to hear a hell of a din going on, and not a single man left in my trenches; they were completely denuded (against my orders), and nothing moved! I heard strains of 'Tipperary' floating down the breeze, followed by a tremendous burst of 'Deutschland über Alles', and as I got to my own company headquarters dug-out I saw, to my amazement, not only a crowd of 150 British and Germans at the half-way 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. [...] Meanwhile Scots and Huns [a contemptuous name for the Germans] were fraternizing in the most genuine possible manner. Every sort of souvenir was exchanged, addresses given and received, photos of families shown, etc. One of our fellows offered a German a cigarette; the German said, 'Virginian?' Our fellow said, 'Aye, straight-cut'; the German said, 'No thanks, I only smoke Turkish!' It gave us all a good laugh. A German N.C.O. with the Iron Cross – gained, he told me, for conspicuous skill in sniping – started his fellows off on some marching tune. When they had done I set the note for 'The Boys of Bonnie Scotland, where the heather and the bluebells grow', and so we went on, singing everything from 'Good King Wenceslas' down to the ordinary Tommies' song, and ended up with 'Auld Lang Syne', which we all, English, Scots, Irish, Prussian, Wurttembergers, etc., joined in. It was absolutely astounding, and if I had seen it on a cinematograph film I should have sworn that it was faked. [...] The same night the Borderers and we were engaged in putting up big trestle obstacles, with barbed wire all over them, and connecting them, and at this same point (namely, where we were only 85 yards apart) the Germans came out and sat on their parapet and watched us doing it, although we had informed them that the truce was ended.

Edward Hulse was a captain in the Scots Guards, whose dead were buried between the trenches on Christmas Day. In a long letter to his mother he described what happened in front of his company over those days. What follows is an extract. Hulse was killed at Neuve-Chapelle in March 1915.

M2 Three letters from three countries · Letter C

C · Gustave Berthier, French soldier, to his wife, 28 December 1914

My dearest Alice, We are in reserve again for four days, in the village of Les Brebis. The duty, as it is organised now, is less tiring. Four days in the trenches, four days in reserve. Our four days in the trenches were trying because of the cold – it froze hard – but the Boches [a contemptuous name for the Germans] left us well alone. On Christmas Day they signalled to us and let us know that they wanted to talk to us. It was I who went up to within three or four metres of their trench to talk to them; three of them had come out. I will sum up the conversation, which I have since had to repeat perhaps two hundred times to everyone who was curious. It was Christmas Day, a feast day, and they asked that not a single shot be fired during the day and the night; they themselves declared that they would not fire one shot. They were tired of making war, they said, they were married like me (they had seen my ring), and they had nothing against the French, only against the English. They handed me a packet of cigars and a box of gold-tipped cigarettes; I slipped them the Petit Parisien in exchange for a German newspaper, and went back into the French trench, where I was soon cleaned out of my Boche tobacco. Our neighbours opposite kept their word better than we did. Not a single shot. We were able to work on the trenches and fix up the dugouts as if we had been in a meadow. The next day they could see for themselves that it was no longer Christmas: the artillery sent them a few well-placed shells slap in the middle of their trench. Remember me to everyone, and to you my fondest kisses. Gustave

Berthier was a teacher, and so was his wife Alice; they lived in Sousse, in Tunisia. Les Brebis lies near Grenay in Artois. Gustave Berthier was killed on 7 June 1915, aged twenty-eight, near Bully-les-Mines, in the same sector of the front where he had spent Christmas. Translated from the French.

Christmas 1914 at the front: Gustave Berthier talks with three German soldiers near Grenay. Illustration, 2026

M2 Comparing the three letters

1. Read your letter and fill in your column of the table.
2. In your group of three, compare: what do all three letters describe? How are they different?
3. Hulse calls the Germans ‘Huns’, Berthier calls them ‘Boches’, and Berthier’s Germans have ‘nothing against the French, only against the English’. What do these words tell you about how the men thought of each other, even in the middle of the truce?
4. *Extension:* all three were writing to their families, and Rocholl’s letter appeared in a newspaper a few days later. What does that mean for their value as sources?

	A · Rocholl German	**B · Hulse** British	**C · Berthier** French
Who is writing, when, and to whom?			
What happens between the trenches?			
Who takes the first step?			
What is ex-changed or shared?			
How does the peace end?			

M3 Myth and reality: the football match

Text 1 · From the book, chapter 4

And here and there a ball flew. In one sector a British soldier kicked a football from his own wire over to the German wire, and someone over there trapped it and kicked it back. That was how a British officer described it the next day. It took no more than that. A ball that goes across and comes back is a question and its answer, and both sides understood it at once. In other sectors it did not stop there. An NCO from Cheshire, home on leave, told a newspaper about football 'in which the Germans took part'. A soldier of the same battalion could still see it nearly seventy years later: a great kick-about with 'no referee and no score', men in heavy boots and greatcoats all chasing one ball at once – 'simply a melee'. In the retelling, the melee later became a proper match, with a result: the Saxons are said to have won 3–2. It appeared in The Times as early as New Year's Day 1915, in a letter from an officer who did not give his name, and a German lieutenant also remembered a 3–2. The war diary [the official daily record every unit kept] of the British battalion the Saxons are supposed to have played says nothing about it. Perhaps the melee is even the lovelier picture. No one counted goals. No one had to win.

Christmas 1914 at the front: football and a handshake in no man's land. Illustration, 2026

Text 2 · From the afterword, 'What Really Happened'

A story retold over more than a century changes along the way. A kick-about between the trenches becomes an international match, and many small truces become a peace along the whole front. [...] To this day some people tell the story of that Christmas as a rebellion of ordinary soldiers against the war and against their officers. The historian Terri Blom Crocker has studied letters, newspaper reports, memoirs and official accounts and regards this interpretation as a later legend. The truces, she argues, were set off by rain and mud, curiosity, homesickness and the absence of personal hatred for the enemy, not by discontent or revolt. Many officers tolerated them, and most of the men still wanted to win the war.

1. Text 1: sort the evidence about football. Which accounts date from those days, which from later memory, and which from an official record?
2. The war diary of the British battalion says nothing about a match. Does that prove there was no match? Give reasons.
3. Why does a 'melee' turn into a match with a score as the story is retold? Suggest possible reasons.
4. Text 2: what does the historian Crocker regard as a legend, and what does she say speaks against it? Does Hulse's letter (M2) fit?
5. The drawing was made in 2026. What in it is supported by sources, and what is imagination?
6. A story goes viral online today. Write three questions you would ask to check whether it is true.

M4 The enemy factory

Before the men shook hands in no man's land, poets, newspapers and scholars had spent months telling them who lay on the other side. All texts are from the book, chapter 8.

1 · A greeting and a poem, Germany, autumn 1914

In the autumn of 1914, people in Germany greeted one another with a curse. 'Gott strafe England' – may God punish England – they would say when they met. The words appeared on postcards and on stamps stuck on letters, and people even wore them as cufflinks. How many of those who greeted each other like this had ever met an Englishman? The tone was set in August 1914 by a Berlin poet named Ernst Lissauer. His 'Hassgesang gegen England', his 'Song of Hate against England', became the best-known poem of the first months of the war. Its refrain runs:

Wir lieben vereint, wir hassen vereint,
Wir haben alle nur einen Feind: England.

We love as one, we hate as one, we all have only one foe: England. [...] The poem went into schoolbooks. It was set to music and sung in theatres, rendered into dialects, printed on postcards and enclosed with business letters. The Crown Prince of Bavaria, whose army faced the British south of Ypres, had thousands of copies handed out to his soldiers. Some of them were the same men who, a few months later, sang 'Silent Night' across no man's land.

2 · A name for the enemy, Britain, September 1914

On the other side of the Channel, the enemy needed a name. The German Kaiser had supplied it himself. In July 1900, at Bremerhaven, Wilhelm II saw off soldiers bound for China to put down an uprising there. 'No quarter will be given! No prisoners will be taken!' he cried. They were to make a name for themselves like the Huns under their king Attila a thousand years before. Rudyard Kipling, the celebrated poet and Nobel laureate, handed the name back to the Germans. On 2 September 1914 his poem appeared in The Times:

For all we have and are,
For all our children's fate,
Stand up and take the war.
The Hun is at the gate!

3 · An appeal by German scholars, October 1914

In October 1914, ninety-three German scholars and artists signed an appeal 'To the Civilised World', among them Max Planck, Wilhelm Röntgen and Fritz Haber. Paragraph after paragraph begins with the same words: It is not true. It was not true, they declared, that Germany had violated Belgium's neutrality [Belgium was neutral and on neither side]. It was not true that German troops had run riot in Louvain. Both were true. German troops had marched into neutral Belgium, and in August they had set fire to the university library in Louvain.

4 · Invented atrocities

So the propaganda on the other side need not have invented anything. It did so all the same. Soon there were tales of children whose hands German soldiers had hacked off. Today there is much to suggest that these stories were phantoms of distorted memory. The false stories did a second kind of damage: when they came to be seen as lies after the war, people no longer wanted to believe in the real crimes either. It took decades for historians to bring them back to light.

5 · Up close, Christmas 1914

In no man's land, though, the hatred fell apart within an hour. A British soldier wrote in a letter that the New York Times printed on the last day of 1914 that the Germans opposite had been 'awfully decent fellows' – Saxons, intelligent, respectable-looking men. He had had a good talk with three or four of them, and now had 'two names and addresses' in his notebook. Huns had become names.

6 · What repetition does: a recent study

A study from Poland, published in 2018, surveyed more than a thousand adults and almost seven hundred teenagers. Those who often heard demeaning language about minorities came over time to find it hardly hurtful at all, and were themselves more prejudiced against the people spoken of in that way. In an experiment this desensitisation could even be induced, and those who had been desensitised then judged the victims more harshly. Hatred does not have to convince. It is enough for people to get used to it.

Tasks for M4

1. Sources 1 to 4: what methods are used here to create an image of the enemy? Look at rhyme, names, denial, invention, and who is speaking.
2. 'We love as one, we hate as one': what job did the hatred do at home, inside the country?
3. Source 4: invented atrocities did 'a second kind of damage'. Explain it.
4. Source 5: explain the sentence 'Huns had become names.' Why did the high commands have to forbid contact?
5. Source 6: where do you come across demeaning labels for whole groups of people today? According to the study, what do they do to people who hear them often?

M5 The first to stand up

Text 1 · Christmas Eve between Basseville and St Yvon · from the book, chapter 3

Setting the scene: in the company of the Saxon lieutenant Kurt Zehmisch served a soldier named Möckel, who had lived in England for many years. On Christmas Eve 1914 he called across no man's land in English. Opposite lay British soldiers from Warwickshire, among them Bruce Bairnsfather, who later wrote down what he heard.

In the trenches opposite that evening lay Bruce Bairnsfather too. [...] Suddenly, he recalled, they heard confused shouting from the other side. Everyone stopped and listened. The shout came again. A voice in the darkness called out in English, with a strong German accent: 'Come over here!' Whether it was Möckel calling, we do not know. Many men called out that night. But it was the same night and the same stretch of the front, and two men wrote it down, each from his own side. Laughter ran along the British trench, then a high-spirited jumble of mouth organs and shouting. When it had died down, a sergeant called back those very words: 'Come over here!' Out of the darkness came the answer: 'You come half-way – I come half-way.' 'Come on, then!' shouted the sergeant. 'I'm coming along the hedge!' Then the voice from the other side called back: 'Ah! but there are two of you.' That one sentence holds all the fear of that night. [...] In the end the sergeant set off along a hedge that ran right across no man's land from trench to trench, and after a few steps the darkness had swallowed him. Behind him, men listened in breathless silence. Then they heard it. Out in the darkness, where for weeks there had been nothing to hear but shots, the sergeant was talking to someone from the other side. Haltingly, in scraps. But they were talking to each other. [...] On the German side, Kurt Zehmisch recorded that night in his diary. After Möckel had called out, a lively conversation had soon got going between the trenches. Then a few men on each side climbed out of their trenches. In the middle of no man's land they shook hands and wished each other a happy Christmas. And they agreed not to fire on each other the next day. I do not know which of them held out his hand first. I only know that they did.

Text 2 · El Salvador, 1985 · from the book, chapter 15 · extension

Setting the scene: in El Salvador, a small country in Central America, the army and a guerrilla movement, that is, armed rebels, fought each other in the 1980s. In the combat zones, children were dying of diseases for which vaccines had long existed. UNICEF, the United Nations children's agency, and the Church negotiated a truce for vaccination days.

It was 1914 in reverse. Back then, men in the trenches had started a truce, and headquarters had banned it. Now the leaders on both sides were to agree on one. [...] Three Sundays were fixed: 3 February, 3 March and 21 April 1985. They were called Days of Tranquillity. [...] On the first Sunday – in tents and refugee camps, in villages, schools and parks, on both sides of the front line – more than 217,000 children were vaccinated in a single day. Health workers and volunteers vaccinated, and so did guerrilla fighters. Both sides let children and medical teams travel safely to the posts and back. [...] Looking back, Gregorio Rosa Chávez, who in 2017 became his country's first cardinal, said the children had opened the road to peace: three times a year, from 1985 onwards, the war had been stopped for them. And because it had gone so well, people had begun to wonder whether the war could be stopped for good.

Text 3 · From the book, chapter 13

Everyone who waits has a good reason. One waits because the other started it. The other waits because last time they took the first step and were turned away. One waits out of pride, one out of fear, most out of both. And so one Christmas goes by, and then a year. The quarrel turns into a silence, and the silence into a habit. At some point no one can quite remember what it was all about. All that remains is the certainty that the other one ought to get in touch. Over there, someone is thinking the same thing. About you. [...] Had everyone waited for the other side to show itself first, no one would have stood up in 1914.

Tasks for M5

1. Text 1: what did the men who called out first and set off first risk? What helped them to do it anyway?
2. *Extension:* compare 1914 and 1985. Who started the peace, and who wanted to stop it? What could both sides agree on in each case?
3. Text 3: do you agree? Collect reasons why people wait after a quarrel for the other person to get in touch.

4 · Just for you (optional, you do not have to show anyone)

Think of a trench in your own life: in your class, your club, among friends, or wherever you like. Write the first sentence you could say to come halfway.

Answer guidance

M1

- The German advance was halted on the Marne; then the armies dug in, and from November the front stood still. The quick victory never came, and a war of movement became a war of trenches.

M2

- **A · Rocholl:** the Germans sing, the English stop firing. A one-year volunteer who speaks English goes across, and an Englishman comes out to meet him halfway. Names are written down, bread is swapped for tinned meat. Agreement: no firing on Christmas Day until midnight. Both sides use the quiet to dig. Running across is forbidden for the night. First step: from the German side.
- **B · Hulse:** his men have left the trenches against his orders. At the meeting point he himself appointed, British and Germans stand together; souvenirs, addresses and family photos are exchanged, and they sing together, ending with ‘Auld Lang Syne’. In the evening Hulse tells the Germans the truce is over; even so, they sit on their parapet and watch the British put up barbed wire. The extract does not say who took the first step; officers like Hulse were part of the truce.
- **C · Berthier:** the Germans signal, and Berthier goes to within three or four metres of their trench. They ask for a day without shooting and give him cigars and cigarettes; he swaps the Petit Parisien for a German newspaper. The Germans keep their word; the next day French artillery shells their trench. First step: the Germans with their signals, then Berthier.
- **In common:** Christmas as a shared occasion, exchanges and conversation, relief at the silence, a peace for a limited time. **Differences:** the writers’ rank and point of view, tone (enthusiasm, amazement, matter-of-factness), how the peace ends.
- **Images of the enemy:** the contemptuous names remain, and so does the dislike of the English. The men did not become different people; they stopped shooting for a day.
- **Value as sources:** letters home choose what the writer wants his family to hear. A newspaper printing is a second selection. On the other hand, the letters are immediate and personal.

M3

- **From those days:** the British officer’s letter the next day (a ball goes across and back), the letter in The Times on 1 January 1915 (3–2), the NCO home on leave. **Later memory:** the soldier nearly seventy years later (‘simply a melee’), the German lieutenant who remembered a 3–2. **Official record:** the war diary, which says nothing.
- The war diary’s silence proves nothing for certain; something forbidden may simply not have been written down. But it is a reason to be careful.
- Stories become neater as they are retold: a match with a score is a stronger picture, everyone understands football, and anniversaries and memorials need symbols.
- For Crocker, the legend is the rebellion against the war and the officers. Against it: rain, mud, curiosity and homesickness as triggers, many officers tolerating the truces, and the men’s wish to win the war. Hulse, an officer, had appointed the meeting point himself.
- Questions to check a story, for example: who is telling it, and how do they know? When was it written? Is there a second, independent source? What is missing?

M4

- **Methods:** rhyme and refrain, repetition, a nickname that dehumanises the enemy (‘Hun’), denial of true facts, invented atrocities, the authority of famous names, spreading the message through schoolbooks, postcards and the army.
- **At home** the hatred created unity: people who had just been quarrelling became a single ‘we’.
- **The second kind of damage:** when the invented stories came to be seen as lies after the war, people no longer believed in the real crimes either.
- **Up close:** anyone who meets an enemy sees a person with a name, a family and an address. Images of the enemy only work at a distance; that is why contact was forbidden.
- **The study:** people who often hear demeaning language become desensitised, hardly find it hurtful any more and become more prejudiced themselves.

M5

- **Risks:** a trap, death, punishment. **What helped:** a shared language, a shared festival and its songs, ‘half-way’, curiosity, humour, the longing for quiet.
- **In 1914** men in the trenches started the peace and headquarters banned it. **In 1985** the leaders on both sides agreed on the truce, with UNICEF and the Church as go-betweens. In both cases there was something that mattered more to both sides than the fighting: Christmas, the children. Both times the peace was only temporary; but in El Salvador people began to wonder afterwards whether the war could be stopped for good.
- **Reasons for waiting:** pride, fear of rejection, the feeling that the other person started it, a bad experience with taking the first step.
- Please do not collect or mark the writing task.

Further reading

Bernd Blasius: The First to Stand Up. The Christmas Truce of 1914 and the Courage to Leave Our Trenches

Edition Resonanz, 2026 · paperback, hardback and ebook · British English edition
Also available in German (Wer zuerst aufsteht) and French (Le Premier à se lever).

The book tells the story of the truce in full, from Flanders to the Somme, with seven letters, a map and a timeline, and asks what it can teach us today about the trenches in our families and between nations. The author plans to use the proceeds to found a non-profit organisation devoted above all to children growing up in difficult circumstances.

Also: Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton, Christmas Truce (1984) · Stanley Weintraub, Silent Night (2001) · Terri Blom Crocker, The Christmas Truce: Myth, Memory, and the First World War (2015) · Bruce Bairnsfather, Bullets & Billets (1916, free to read on Project Gutenberg) · Christian Carion, Joyeux Noël, feature film (2005)

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