

The Christmas Truce 1914 as an Example of “The Interruption of Violence”

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Abstract:

This chapter (1.3) from the book “Zeugnisse der Unterbrechung von Gewalt im Krieg – Grundlegung einer theologischen Ethik des nicht suspendierten Zweifels” Michael Schober, Hildesheim 2019 (2012)¹ – is entitled The Meaning of “The Interruption of Violence” and is a preamble to the theologian’s analysis of the Christmas Truce 1914. His thesis, examining other “interruptions of violence” in the First and Second World War and drawing on primary sources and eye witness accounts, is based on a deep belief in peace ethics and inspired by the American political theorist Michael Walzer.

1.3.1. The ceasefire at Christmas 1914 on the Western Front as an example of the interruption of violence

As a basis to my thesis, I would like to introduce the ceasefire on the Western Front around Christmas 1914² as a poignant example of the interruption of violence. In this instance, reference is made to the collective ceasefires which reached a degree of fraternisation. They are remarkable both in terms of scope and intensity. The available sources are good. The events have been documented and explored by historians in war letters, contemporary newspaper articles, photographs, war memories etc. For this reason, I am able to base my account on a body of relevant material, whilst mainly focusing on The Christmas Truce by Malcolm Brown and Shirley Seaton.³

I concentrate on the events that took place on the Western Front and specifically refer to German-English fraternisations. With respect to informal ceasefires it is important to

¹ cf. Schober 2012/2019. The English title translates to: Interruptions of Violence during War – a Foundation of Theological Ethics in the Non-Suspension of Doubt. To read the full German text see <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:hil2-opus4-9902>. In this extract the second number given in the footnotes refers to the number of the footnote in the original text.

² 58 Brown and Seaton, followed by Shepard point to the fact that in other wars as well, informal ceasefires and incidents of fraternisations took place. The authors mention i.a. examples of such occurrences during the Peninsular war, the Crimean War, the American Civil War, the Boer War and the Korean War (cf. Brown/Seaton 2001, pp. xxiii-xxiv and Shepard 2001. Eksteins confirms the example during the Peninsular War, cf. Eksteins 1990 p. 188).

³ 59 Reference literature: Brown/Seaton 2001 and Ashworth 1980, particularly p. 24-47. Eksteins 1990, pp. 150-211, Weintraub 2001, Shepard 2001, Jürgs 2003, Jahr 2004a and 2004b, Kuschel 2004, p. 80f, Werth 2004, p. 862 et seq., Wakefield 2006, particularly pp. 1-35, Weber 2011, particularly pp. 85-95. Incidents quoted can be found in sources such as, Ulrich/Ziemann 1995 p.153 et seqq., resp. 2008 p. 108 et seqq, as well as Rieker 2007, p. 41 et seqq. and Schulze 2008. The vast array of descriptions cited here above is, however, insofar slightly misleading in that they all directly or indirectly depend on Brown/Seaton 2001 who first published their research findings in this particular format in 1984. A further investigation with a view to broaden the source material would therefore be desirable. A film adaption of the topic was offered by Carion in 2005 *Merry Christmas (Joyeux Noël)*. Also, refer to Schober 2021 for a brief description. Additionally, see Richards 2021. It was during the course of Eva Burke researching German texts on the Christmas Truce for Anthony Richards’ forthcoming publication, that she came across my writings which then encouraged me to undertake this English translation. I would like to express my gratitude for her thorough work and the very inspiring cooperation which ensued. Furthermore I am most thankful Dr. Johannes Grützmaker for his very helpful feedback and his lasting friendship.

understand that on the one hand, a sense of exhaustion prevailed along a frontline frozen into trench warfare⁴, especially after the heavy battles in Flanders and in extremely adverse weather conditions⁵. On the other hand, "a live-and-let-live system" (as Tony Ashworth calls it) had taken hold: a philosophy which advocated exactly that: live and let live.⁶ Thus, informal ceasefires took place even before Christmas, for example, during meal times, with agreements towards bringing these about made amongst snipers during their respective replacement manoeuvres; also, there were unwritten rules with respect to how sentries should conduct themselves in case they would come across each other. Christoph Jahr refers to a "reduction of violence based on ritualisation"⁷. He describes the situation in the front lines as follows:

"The distance between the two front lines measured often not more than a few hundred metres, in some places significantly less and the advance listening posts were usually within earshot or easy throwing distance."⁸

This would explain why light-hearted banter at the front lines would take place, such as the invitation – issued half in jest – to take lunch together. According to Ashworth the events around Christmas, however, contained a novel quality, in that such covert exchanges turned into overt actions.⁹

The change in weather should not be underestimated when it comes to exploring the events around Christmas 1914. Temperatures fell, the soil, softened due the previous rainfall, now hardened because of the recent frost and with that, a noticeable shift in the mood of the combatants took place. On the German side thousands of Christmas trees were delivered to the soldiers who took them to their trenches despite the official prohibition¹⁰ against such actions and who then went on to decorate them on Christmas Eve with either real or improvised candles.¹¹ The French and the British were surprised at seeing the curious light effects and first suspected it was a ruse which explains why in several sections at the front-

⁴ 60. With reference to the conditions during which the trench warfare was waged, see Jahr 1998, pp. 93-98.

⁵ 61 Two war letters from the Western front, dated 18.11.1914 and 14.12 1915 convey the importance of weather conditions in trench warfare. A war volunteer hailing from West Flanders (Belgium) writes: "Well-being is here nothing else than not being supposed to launch an attack across meadows that are completely flooded and poisoned by the odour and putrefaction, but rather to be able to stay quietly and peacefully in the trench with more or less straw that is not completely soaked yet. Or sheer heaven: To have one or two days rest which can be thoroughly enjoyed. Then the drenched clothes can dry, not at a fire though, but on our backs, or at least one can have a try. That way, however, one is prepared, to a certain extent to be freezing for a long time when going back into the trenches. Right now it is bad again. The enemy has apparently penetrated the dikes near Dixmuiden so that water is pouring cheerfully into the trenches. The flood is about half a metre high and might rise up to any possible level until the trench overflows and we can swim." (Ulrich/Ziemann 2008, p.44 et seq.) Carl Puvogel who in his civilian life and prior to the war had worked as a "researcher for the state archives in Hamburg" (ibid p. 45) was also deployed at the Western Front and writes in December 1915: "If the people at home saw *only* this picture, they would be bound to think we had a peaceful and quiet life. It is just a pity that the warriors do not write home about the heavy rain making the trenches collapse and the mud rising over the top of the boots and up to the hips. It is a pity that they cannot send home the whining of even a very small shell for the ones who sit in the pubs and who like to deliver speeches in cafes" (ibid, p.45)

⁶ 62 The events around Christmas 1914 make Tony Ashworth observe a transition from an existing, covert peace to an overt one: "Live and let live had existed in some form on the battalion's front before Christmas, and hence the fraternisation of Christmas was neither a wholly spontaneous, nor an isolated event, but the substitution of overt for a covert peace. More generally, the whole of the Christmas truces might not have been a spontaneous event as is often supposed but a visible and vivid manifestation of the already existing undertone of trench war." (Ashworth 1980, p. 28)

⁷ 63 Jahr 1998, p. 95.

⁸ 64 Jahr 1998, p. 93

⁹ 65 cf. Ashworth 1980, p. 28, as cited above.

¹⁰ 66 cf. Eksteins 1990, p. 171. The other authors do not mention this prohibition.

¹¹ 67 cf. Brown/Seaton 2001, p. 40; Weintraub 2001, p. 15; Jürgs 2003, p. 51 et seq.

line violence still remained the order of the day. In the end, however, up to three quarters of the battalions on the British-German front were to participate in the fraternisations.

When it came to both sides making contact with each other music played a large part. Christmas carols and other songs were sung. Friendly gestures came to pass, for example when German soldiers sang their own songs to the melody of God Save the King and when British soldiers put their own lyrics to the Austrian national anthem, it was welcomed in each case by applause. In some instances, an entire concert programme had been put together. Soloists who were noted professional singers and who at the time were enlisted in the army, impressed with their performances. On Christmas Eve things had progressed so far that there was an exchange of hand-shakes and goods. German soldiers who had worked in England prior to the war, in the hotel industry, for example, would play a particularly significant role at these events as they helped overcome the language barrier.

On Christmas day a lively trade by bartering ensued with the exchange of tobacco becoming the standard symbol of the fraternisation. The dead were buried accompanied by joint burial ceremonies. The activities by a hairdresser who plied his trade in No-Man's Land featured amongst the somewhat curious incidents that happened on that day, and we also hear of a joint rabbit chase. Another bridge which was built used jokes and black humour.

It is rather unlikely that a formal football match took place. Whilst we are aware of internal football games¹² behind the English front line – there even was a football battalion¹³ one should not forget that the conditions of the terrain in No-Man's-Land were unsuitable for a proper football game. When it comes to the historic kernel of these legendary football games, one would, therefore, be better served by imagining improvised and uncoordinated games with balls, tins or other objects that could replace a ball and envision something like a community kick-off.¹⁴ One might conclude that the rumours revolving around formal football games simply attempt to convey something about "the desires and the atmosphere of the men on the front line"¹⁵.

Fraternisation accomplished the short-term effect of rupturing the mutual and hostile image of the "other". To this end, excerpts of war letters written during that particular time period

¹² 68 Refer to Fuller 1990, p. 86 et seqq. for references to football as a significant British recreational sport. Fuller demonstrates how football, a piece of normality, enabled soldiers to find refuge from the daily routine of war; in turn, football was also increasingly utilized by the authorities as a means to boost morale and mentally strengthen the cohesion of the troops (cf. *ibid*).

¹³ 69 cf. Eksteins 1990, p. 195 et seq. According to Eksteins the 17th Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment was made up by football stars (nb. EB Indeed, the core of this particular battalion formed by W. Joynson Hicks MP in 1914 was made up of professional football players and the battalion was referred to as the "football battalion" – but at Christmas this battalion remained in England.) After being used in England as a tool to recruit men for the war, it was transferred to France where, at the end of 1915, they were seen playing against regimental teams. But in June 1916 the battalion was involved in active combat and suffering heavy losses its ranks were weakened. The unit was dissolved in February 1918 (cf *ibid*).

¹⁴ 70 cf. Shepard 2001: "Sadly, I also had to omit the Christmas Day games of football [...] often falsely associated with the truce. The truth is that the terrain of No Man's Land ruled out formal games – though certainly some soldiers kicked around balls and makeshift substitutes." In this instance Shepard leans on Brown/Seaton: "Given all the circumstances – the uneven, shell-pocked ground which had at least been hardened by the recent frost, the crowds of men milling around, the difficulties of language – if, given all this, a football *had* suddenly appeared in No Man's Land, arguably the most likely outcome would not have been a formal game with eleven men neatly attacking opposing goals, but a disorganized, untidy affair with everybody joining in as much or as little as they wanted to – one diversion among the others rather than a major event. (Brown/Seaton 2001, p. 138, cf. also *ibid* p.138 et seqq., Eksteins 1990 p. 177 as well as Jürs 2003, pp. 174-184.) However, Werth believes that an "improvised game of football" between British and German soldiers could very likely have taken place. (Werth 2004, p. 862.)

¹⁵ 71 Eksteins 1990, p. 177.

and referring to “splendid guys” and “fabulous lads” when referring to soldiers in the other camp, suggest a new way of perceiving the enemy.¹⁶

Finally, an exchange of all sorts of memorabilia took place, such as photos, song books, helmets and bayonets, and sometimes soldiers exchanged signatures. One might suggest that the 1914 Christmas Truce cannot be perceived as a concerted action, but as a series of individual initiatives in which both simple soldiers as well as officers participated.¹⁷ The duration of the ceasefire varied greatly. Whilst, in some sections of the front and coinciding with yet a further change in the weather the festival was followed by the “daily routine of war”, in other places ceasefires would last for more than 100 days¹⁸.

We note marked differences in the way the participating nations reported or, as the case might have been, did not report on the events. Whilst the British press was able to publish upfront accounts of the events – Shepard refers to the reporting lasting for weeks¹⁹ – reports in the German press were curtailed after only a few days. Meanwhile in France,²⁰ on whose land, after all, the troops were stationed and where parts of the country were occupied by German troops, the entire topic remained taboo.²¹

With respect to any kind of repercussions impacting on those who participated, Schulze suggests that no disciplinary measures were taken.²² This seems quite plausible for several reasons, i.a. because the ceasefires were widespread, spontaneous and officers were involved as well. However, this might not have held true for all cases. We know that in subsequent years soldiers were being threatened with “drastic consequences” for fraternising with enemy forces,²³ which certainly prevented, apart from some very few exceptions, any repeat of the “small peace” to take place.²⁴

1.3.2 An analysis of the five aspects characterizing the concept of interruption

The five aspects which characterize the concept of interruption are briefly summarised:

1. Interruptions are momentary and on a micro-level
2. The Meaning of “Interruptions” implies that, after the interruption, the (interrupted) actions can either continue or not.
3. Interruptions could be initiated by one side or both sides, so reciprocity of initiation is possible.
4. Whether interruptions can be seen as positive or as negative depends on, what is being interrupted. If the interrupted object is negative the interruption will be positive and vice versa. Thus, because of the negative attribute inherent to the object “violence”, the “interruption of violence” is positive.

¹⁶ 72 cf. e.g. Eksteins 1990, p. 197 et seq.

¹⁷ 73 Brown/Seaton followed by Shepard explicitly disagree with an interpretation of the ceasefire as protest of ordinary soldiers against those in authority over them, cf. Brown/Seaton 2001, p. xxxiii-xxxiv, or Shepard, 2001.

¹⁸ 74 Brown/Seaton mention the following as examples where ceasefires took root and lasted longer: To the north of the British line, Ploegsteert Wood, to the south of the regions of Rue du Bois, Fleurbix and Laventie: “There was to be peace and goodwill here for some considerable time – in some cases well into January, in certain other cases into February and even March.” (Brown/Seaton 2001, p. 157.)

¹⁹ 75 cf. Shepard’s commentary in Shepard 2001.

²⁰ 76 cf. Jürgs, as well, p. 281.

²¹ 77 cf. Eksteins 1990, p. 208 et seqq. Schulze, however and probably referring to Germany, points to a strict suppression of reporting.” (Schulze 2008).

²² 78 Schulze 2008.

²³ 79 Eksteins 1990, p. 209.

²⁴ 80 Jürgs 2003.

5. Interruptions always are the smaller part of a larger whole such as suspensions, or pauses in a tennis match due to rain..

All of these aspects are represented in the example of the ceasefire on the Western Front at Christmas 1914.

There is no question about the fact that the ceasefires were of an interim nature. The First World War was to last nearly another four years, and, without exception, soldiers positioned in those sections of the frontline took up arms again after Christmas 1914. In view of the above, one cannot, therefore, suggest that an enduring shift in the course of the war had occurred. But the possibilities that transformations might have evolved on the micro-level, within individual soldiers, remain a possibility.

What about the second aspect: the issue of continuity vs. discontinuity? Based on Ashworth's analysis that a live-and-let-live system had already been put in place, the overt manifestations of the cease-fire which until then had remained hidden, might be understood as *discontinuity*. Moreover, different incidents of fraternising led to face-to-face meetings between the two groups of "hostile" soldiers. In relation to the concept of war in general, the established live-and-let-live system already constitutes an interruption of violence. But my assumption in both cases is that the context of violence as such had not actually been suspended as these tacit agreements within it were but fragile formations. Can these agreements be understood as something "subversive"? Did they thwart the logic of war or might one need to look at them as a "normal" part of warfare, in other words as a pause, a slowing or a calming down?

Moving on to the third aspect, the issue of initiative, we turn our attention to different reports written on different days, in different sections of the frontline and which are quoted by both British and German soldiers.²⁵ It is not crucial to answer the question as to who might have made the first step. Due to the fact that the special feature of the ceasefires around Christmas 1914 are the direct, face-to-face encounters in No-Man's-Land, it is suggested that the event be considered reciprocal, as an interplay between the two sides. An initiative is met by a positive response, leading perhaps to a further initiative etc. Let us also remind ourselves of the external circumstances, all of which are contributing factors to the concept of interruption: the family celebration at Christmas, the adverse weather conditions which then turned more favourable around Christmas and the state of exhaustion after the battles in Flanders. Thus, in view of this largely reciprocal event I suggest that referring to the concept of interruption is appropriate.

The fourth aspect which defines the commonly accepted term of interruption is neutrality which only then changes when it is affected by the intrinsic value of what has been interrupted, i.e. the object. The object defines whether the interruption is positive or negative. Violence in war is, of course, an extreme form of violence. Seeing as violence with its negative connotation underlies this thesis, "interruption of violence" assumes a positive value by virtue of the actions (causing the interruption) being positive.

Nonetheless, the term "interruption of violence" holds a descriptive kernel with no bearing on valuation. Here, suspending normativity, i.e., leaving any valuation of actions aside, one might simply speak about an interrupted battle with meetings, or rather fraternisations, taking place. Seen through the lens of the interruption's interim nature, there is then no need to consider any long-term impact culminating in a termination of violence. If, linguistically, one would expand the semantic field "interruption of violence" to include terms

²⁵ 81 cf. Brown/Seaton 2001, i.a. p. 50 et seqq., p. 61 et seq., p. 82 et seq.

such as “refusal [to fight]” or “resistance”, one would then need to find an addressee for these actions, i.e., one would need to establish against whom the resistance fighter fought or whose orders had been refused. [Here, in this thesis,] the “interruption of violence” does not need an addressee and the action itself becomes the focus.

When it comes to the fifth aspect, i.e., looking at the interruption of violence as “a small part of a larger whole”, one might do well by following the above line of thought. With respect to the dimension of the world war, the Christmas Truce 1914 obviously refers to a smaller geographic space and this also holds true, with the exception of a few attempted repeats, for the very tight time-frame within which it unfolded. It remains a small, perhaps even the smallest part of the war, albeit, this is the proposition of my thesis – not one which is irrelevant.

1.3.3. Aspects of Violence

So far, we have argued that the concept of the interruption of violence lends itself well as a basis from which to explore the Christmas Truce 1914, both in terms of its formal aspects (duration/size) as well as in terms of its different meanings. Up until now, however, the object of the interruption, the answer to the question of “what” was interrupted – has not been examined in detail. Let us back-track with a view to combine the two elements (“interruption” and “violence”), thus offering us the framework for further analysis.

Which types of violence defined the war on the Western Front at the end of 1914? When responding to this question it is important to limit the time period this war covered, as at the beginning of November 1914²⁶ the war of movement gradually turned into trench warfare which from that point on was to define the course of the war over a prolonged stretch. It should be noted that the two types of warfare are very different from one another. When taking a closer look at how the events around Christmas 1914 evolved and bearing in mind the above description, one can assume that a prior decision had been made. This leads to the conclusion that already in the preliminary stages of the Christmas Truce, trench warfare had been perceived as a given, a fact on the ground so to speak and fights as we know them from the perspective of a war of movement, did not take place. This amounts to a considerable change from what had gone on before, and one which was going to impact on the live-and-let-live system which was taking hold. Furthermore, the Christmas Truce was, as suggested, on one level, part of this system, but then, to a certain degree, went beyond it. This is where I leaned on Tony Ashworth’s analysis²⁷.

What characterizes trench warfare? Two accounts might illustrate what determined the events at the Western Front: first, Markus Pöhlmann’s rather dispassionate description:

“Everyday life [MS added: in trench warfare] varied markedly from one day to the next. Long stretches featuring total inactivity and extreme survival conditions rapidly alternated with phases characterized by the constant dangers of sickness, fire attacks and hostile snipers in action. During rest periods life was defined by guard duty and the upkeep of positions. Night patrols served as sources of information on the enemy. Social relationships amongst soldiers and officers changed, albeit only temporarily, due to the impact of the common experience of battle. The civilian population affected by the trench warfare lived much under the same threats and their supplies fully depended on the goodwill of the military authorities.”²⁸

²⁶ 82 cf. Pöhlmann 2004, p. 864.

²⁷ 83 cf. Ashworth 1980, pp. 24-28.

²⁸ 84 Pöhlmann 2004, p. 867.

When reading Pöhlmann we need to assume that soldiers lived through vastly different experiences which reflect their different deployments – with men either engaged at the frontline, or in the areas behind it which were earmarked for rest, refit and military administration. A quick look at the statistical breakdown of a British battalion offers an insight into its distribution of time spent in different areas. Between 1915-1918, 42% of the time was spent at the front line, closely followed by 38% spent in reserve and 20% spent at rest.²⁹ As the degree to which soldiers were deployed at the frontline varied greatly, serious tensions developed between different sections of the army, or as Bruno Thoß puts it: “vastly different conditions of deployment were cause of profound alienation between military stationed on the frontline and those in the background, behind the frontline.”³⁰ Seen from this perspective, the myth of the so-called “front experience”, a powerful tale which was retold well into the inter-war years and then picked up by the national-socialist ideology, can be understood as having placed a military boundary between (front-liners) and those who hadn’t been there.³¹

Additionally, consideration must be given to the fact that soldiers in different ranks experienced the war differently. Jens Warburg puts it as follows:

“An individual’s rank within the army hierarchy would have impacted on how he could have interpreted his deployment in the battle field. To give an example: officers in a commanding position, such as Ernst Jünger, would have been able to at least experience moments when men such as himself could feel as if they were autonomous individuals and imagine themselves being able to influence the course of events. But for soldiers belonging to the rank-and-file it was different. They continued to be reduced to their nameless status [EB added: in which they were ordered to fight the enemy and focus on battle].”³²

Let us return to the situation around Christmas 1914 when events along the frontline constituted a ceasefire between frontline soldiers on both sides. When defining the soldiers’ experience at the front during this trench warfare, one needs to look at the acute danger engulfing the individual soldier, one which put his physical and psychological well-being at constant risk. Pöhlmann goes on to suggest that in trench warfare, this threat mostly loomed in the form of artillery fire or sniper attacks.³³ From a military point of view, the “absolute superiority”³⁴ of the defence was key. The reality of trench warfare becomes even more obvious when reading Wolfgang Mommsen’s observations, who emphasises that words to describe the experience of war are inadequate; instead, he feels, there exist several contemporary artistic and literary representations of the war which are (more) authentic.³⁵

“Without holding back and with a near cynical approach, they put an end to the conventional and nationalistic-romantic clichés about a soldier’s life and a hero’s death, offering us instead a true picture of a soldier’s daily life in the trenches on the Western Front. [EB added: They include] his constant battle against mud and filth, against the wet and the cold, the deadly boredom along quiet sections of the front, the situation of constant exposure to artillery fire and the threat of enemy snipers attacking; furthermore, they point to soldiers’ self-mutilation or even suicide in order to escape the intolerable circumstances of guard duty in the trenches. Above all, [EB added: These contemporary artistic and

²⁹ 85 Ziemann 2004, p. 159 In this instance Ziemann refers to Fuller 1990 p. 59 et seq. Fuller suggests that the breakdown of other battalions deployed at the front was similar (cf. Fuller 1990 p. 59,) and it is for this reason that Ziemann quotes the numbers as an ‘average’ (Ziemann 2004 p. 159).

³⁰ 86 Thoß 2004, p. 465.

³¹ 87 Brackmann/Birkenhauser 1988, p. 76. Michael/Doerr 2002, p. 169.

³² 88 Warburg 199, p. 109.

³³ 89 cf. Pöhlmann 2004, p. 867.

³⁴ 90 Leick 2004, p. 66 [EB added: He refers to the complex and technically vastly superior German trench structures from which one could fire 4000 metres across No-Man’s-Land.]

³⁵ 91 Mommsen 2004, p. 149.

literary representations of war] convey the pain of suffering and dying soldiers, often in the most dreadful conditions devoid of any human dignity."³⁶

Whilst ceasefires at the front interrupt the acute threat, they remain of fragile character. There remains an underlying sense of death wherein even survivors must face severe physical and psychological consequences.³⁷ Ziemann refers to "eight million soldiers who were permanently damaged by the war both physically and psychologically"³⁸. And yet, this only refers to the visible part of violence and its tangible impact. Beyond that, we must consider that it was above all the rank-and-file soldiers who were particularly caught up in an enforced institutional violence insofar as their possibilities to make decisions were curtailed in just about every respect. Edward A Tiryakian writes the following:

"War [...] is something that destroys lives and social organisation and which is the more repellent because it replaces civilian rule with military rule and standards. [...] War leads not only to the destruction of persons but also to the loss of their autonomy."³⁹

Soldiers are not allowed to pursue the profession of their choice, meanwhile their social relationships, reduced to a minimum of personal contacts, are severely strained. Opportunities to meet up in private only exist during respite leave when they are away from the front. Leaves of absence are, therefore, limited to just a few weeks per year. Front soldiers experienced the war years fundamentally different from those staying at home. This contributed to their sense of alienation and proved a near insurmountable challenge to put into words. Hero worship and sarcasm marked by disillusionment collide. The ordinary soldier especially was threatened, and not only by the enemy and his unleashed violence. By virtue of the fact that ordinary soldiers are part of the military, they exist within an environment of violence where they are thus pressurized from within as well, both by their superiors as well as by their comrades⁴⁰. In turn, they react with violence both against the enemy as well as their own comrades.⁴¹ What emerges is the Nunner-Winkler's triad "who (was the perpetrator) – what (happened) – to whom (victim)"⁴². This results in a complex perpetrator-victim structure in which most soldiers, viewed respectively from the inside and the outside, are both perpetrators and victims.

Intrigued by the fact that most soldiers were "rather unremarkable civilians" both before and after the war,⁴³ Warburg sought to find an explanation for this phenomenon. He pointed out that it was, in the first instance, "the experiences of extreme violence"⁴⁴ – incompatible with the internalized norms and values attached to civilian life – which caused an individual to

³⁶ 92 Mommsen 2004, p. 149.

³⁷ 93 Vivid examples of the emotional impact of daily life at the front and how these were "treated" can be found in Ulrich/Ziemann 2008, pp. 70-75.

³⁸ 94 Ziemann 2004, p. 160.

³⁹ 95 Tiryakian 1999, p. 478.

⁴⁰ 96 Examples regarding group pressure amongst comrades particularly towards outsiders is described by Thomas Kühne when he refers to German soldiers during the Second World War. Quite probably, however, such mechanisms which typically can be observed when people are organized into groups would have also come into play during the First World War. Kühne gives the following examples: "There were many opportunities which comrades used in order to teach dissenters a lesson in the meaning of comradeship all whilst forging a tight-knit unit themselves. It was common practice (e.g.) to drag the outsider through the shower, cover him with soap, smear him with shoe polish or beat him up. Those who snored intrusively would be given short electro-shock treatment if technical conditions were in place. [...] Those who went overboard with being untidy or careless and were labelled by their comrades as an "embarrassment" had to witness their clothes being chucked out of the window "in a friendly way" [...] All of this was carried out collectively or incognito." (Kühne 2006, p.124)

⁴¹ 97 Relationships interpreted as "comradeship" amongst soldiers but displaying ambivalence are mentioned in Kühne 2004, p. 602 f and Kühne 2006 pp. 113-124, and Fritz 1995 pp. 156-186.

⁴² cf. Nunner-Winkler 2004, p. 21.

⁴³ 98 Warburg 199, p. 113.

⁴⁴ 99 Warburg 199, p. 113.

perceive both himself and his environment from a more removed viewpoint.⁴⁵ Picking up on a description offered by Paul Virilio, Warburg refers to this as an "indirect perception"⁴⁶:

"As sight lost its direct quality and reeled out of phase, the soldier had the feeling of being not so much destroyed as derealized, dematerialized, any sensory point of reference suddenly vanishing in a surfeit of optical targets."⁴⁷

This change has an impact on the relationship between soldiers and their hostile opposites.

"Through distancing they sought to protect themselves against the powerful impact of their own emotions whilst repressing even fleeting empathy for anybody around them. This would explain that the soldiers mostly were indifferent towards the declared enemy and seldomly displayed any hatred when in action. The desire to severely humiliate the enemy was expressed by actions such as venting one's feelings with the help of having postcards circulate which derided the enemy, a practice pursued back at the 'home front with special acrimony'. During the first months of the war such postcards were highly popular. This does not suggest that extremely aggressive reactions towards the enemy fell by the wayside. Pain easily turns into fury. What makes such transformation appear particularly attractive is the experience of shedding one's passivity whilst discovering oneself as an active and powerful individual.

However, the claim that berserk fits of rage determined the day-to-day actions of a soldier over a prolonged period of time is not supported; perhaps more likely, they appeared in the phantasy life of soldiers or erupted sporadically with acts of violence carried out against civilians. Generally, these types of demented outbursts of fury contradicted the straight-forward killing orders given to the soldier all the while instructing him to strictly adhere to discipline, thus implicating the obedient agent in a fatal act."⁴⁸

Soldiers and their personalities are, therefore, threatened as a whole. They experience the impact of physical and emotional violence and, based on the stringent military hierarchy, they are furthermore exposed to both institutional as well as structural authority, whilst additionally being victim of cultural control exercised by war propaganda.

1.3.4. Interruption of Violence

Having offered quite a comprehensive insight into the two concepts of "interruption" and "violence" with both relating to the ceasefires on the Western Front around Christmas 1914, it is now possible to take a closer look at the key issue of this thesis: the interruption of violence in war.

First, I want to shed light on the theological discussions around "interruption of violence".

A digression into the theological response to the concept of interruption

Johann Baptist Metz, founder of modern political theology, put it succinctly in the following dictum: the briefest definition of religion: interruption.⁴⁹ His theses, written in a style reminiscent of aphorisms, are entitled "Untimely Theses Relating to the Apocalypticism"⁵⁰ which he had dedicated to Ernst Bloch, a Marxist philosopher. Metz argues for an engaged Christianity which intervenes into world events and, whilst sustained by an eschatological belief, consciously⁵¹ guards against the twin temptations of hatred and apathy.

⁴⁵ 100 Warburg 199, p. 113.

⁴⁶ 101 Virilio 1989, p. 15.

⁴⁷ 102 Virilio 1989 p. 15.

⁴⁸ 103 Warburg 199, p. 113 et seq.

⁴⁹ 104 Metz 1981, p. 86.

⁵⁰ 105 Metz 1981 p.85.

⁵¹ 106 cf. Metz 1981, p. 88 and 91.

On the other hand, Jürgen Moltmann, a protestant colleague of Metz's suggests in his Christian eschatology a distinction between "interruption" and "conversion".⁵² Whilst interruption does not effect any significant change, or, according to Moltmann, "the general run of things remains completely unchanged", the concept of "conversion", occupying a distinct category in eschatological thinking,⁵³ suggests that "time and the experience of time"⁵⁴ change fundamentally.⁵⁵

"The prophets 'interrupt', but not just for a moment; they call the people to the conversion of the courses of time to change time and experience of time. Conversion and the rebirth to a new life change time and the experience of time for they make present the ultimate in the penultimate, and the future of time in the midst of time. [...] The future-made-present creates new possibilities in history. Mere interruption only disrupts, conversion creates new life."⁵⁶

The concept of interruption as derived from everyday language and as suggested at the beginning of my book (see also 1.3.2) stands in contrast (to the above) by allowing interruption to bring both positive and negative changes.

Dorothee Sölle, a theologian who was active in the peace movement uses the composite notion of the "suspension of violence" as early as the mid-1990s. She focuses on both a realistic perception of violence and a response to it.

"Any disengagement from violence can only be understood as a momentary interruption (...). Interruption is less than suspension (and) represents a modest, more realistic goal. The peace movement is in no way just a pleasant dream of a life devoid of violence, but, instead, fully recognizes the reality of violence including the violence residing within us. Whilst this reality cannot be cancelled out in the pre-messianic era, everything depends on interrupting it for a period of time. It is only the process of this rupture, originating from both the victims of violence and those who declare their solidarity with them, which allows a glimmer of hope for change in behaviour to occur in certain situations, and in this sense, for peace to have a chance."⁵⁷

This is a good place to repeat that it is above all the more modest, the more realistic, or, as I put it, the more dispassionate quality of the word "interruption" which lends itself best for this thesis. No claim is being made to the final suspension of violence. The concept of "interruption" as a small part of a larger whole, stands for its inherent limited impact.⁵⁸

This concept was picked up by Weiße who demands an "ethos of interruption"⁵⁹ which he considers a first step on the return path to the promised kingdom of God. In this sense interruption "contains a radical decisiveness and rails against developments which lead to structures of despair."⁶⁰ Weiße adds three further aspects to what has already been said. Accordingly, interruption aims at: "... [EB added: for someone] to gain a better perspective on what appears to be unalterable due to an arbitrary structure, but in fact is not. [...] Secondly, to gain some space to engage in fundamental reflections [...] and thirdly, to arrive at a clearer perception of reality whilst not obfuscating the possibility that the Otherness of God reveal itself"^{61, 62}

⁵² 107 cf. Moltmann 1996, p. 41.

⁵³ 108 Moltmann, 1995 p. 39.

⁵⁴ 109 Moltman, 1995 p. 39 et seq.

⁵⁵ 110 cf. Moltmann 1995, p.39.

⁵⁶ 111 Moltman, 1995 p. 39 et seq.

⁵⁷ 112 Sölle 1994, p. 88 et seq., or Sölle 1996, p. 116.

⁵⁸ 113 cf. above.

⁵⁹ 114 Weiße 2000, p. 102.

⁶⁰ 115 Weiße 2000, p. 102.

⁶¹ 116 Weiße 2000, p. 102.

⁶² 117 Weiße 2000, p. 102 et seqq.

Mieth believes interruption is essential in order to escape the cycle of violence, counter-violence (in the sense of revenge) and counter-revenge. He proposes that forgiveness be practiced paving the way for effective change.⁶³ In the course of discussing "the ambivalence in the relationship of religion and violence",⁶⁴ In his work entitled "interruption of violence"⁶⁵ the Evangelic theologian Hans-Martin Gutmann refers to the positive potential of religious community life and brings into play the "transformation of destructive forces towards beneficial reciprocity"^{66, 67} Here, he studies the possibilities of the concept of interruption. His conclusions⁶⁸ essentially reflect the thoughts expressed at the beginning of this chapter and foreshadowed by Sölle.

Looking at Gandhi's non-violent protest, the Linzer theologian Severin Renoldner believes that the category of interruption corresponds to an ethical impulse which is inherent to all religions. Renoldner therefore assumes that built-in to the new social movements of the 20th century is "an implicit religious character"⁶⁹ and attributes to these movements the initiative of taking the courageous step out of apathy, something which had been strongly advocated by Metz and which, in his thinking, had developed from an insinuated lack of any alternative. Looking at the triad "justice, peace and preservation of creation", interruptions indicate a comprehensive perspective of hope which is rooted in the higher value of human respect.⁷⁰

Running parallel to this particular understanding of interruption, as described above all in contemporary political theology, is an existential interpretation of this concept in literature. Here, the reading leads us to consider the religious custom of keeping the Shabbat or the Sunday as days of rest as an interruption of the every-day, or rather as perceiving the every-day as holy.⁷¹

Thomas Freyer proposed a precise systematic-theological outline entitled "the path towards a theological understanding of time"^{72, 73}

In my work, however, and within the context of the war, I focus on the "interruption of violence".

What, in fact, constitutes interruptions of violence in the context of the events around Christmas 1914?

Some elements to be considered may be seen as counterparts to the characteristics which define the trench-war:

Firstly, the danger that soldiers would be killed or injured by artillery fire or by snipers during the ceasefires is considerably reduced and, over a certain period of time, even totally removed. Along with it, the main causes of physical or psychological violence are avoided, and the massive "alternating current" of violent interactions is interrupted.

⁶³ 118 cf. Mieth 2004, p. 152 et seq.

⁶⁴ 119 Gutmann 2009, p. 11.

⁶⁵ 120 Gutmann 2009.

⁶⁶ 121 Gutmann 2009, p. 179

⁶⁷ 122 cf. Gutmann 2009, especially p. 9 et seqq. and p. 173 et seqq.

⁶⁸ 123 Gutmann 2009, p. 150.

⁶⁹ 124 Renoldner 2007, p. 162.

⁷⁰ 125 cf. Renoldner 2007, p. 159 et seqq.

⁷¹ 126 cf. i.a. Jüngel 1989 who aligns himself here with the Schleiermacher tradition, and from the religious-pedagogical or practicing-theological perspective with Biesinger 1993 and Werner 2000.

⁷² 127 Freyer 1993, p. 117

⁷³ 128 cf. Freyer 1993 and Freyer 1995.

But the events around Christmas 1914 reach far beyond that. At a closer look we note that the passivity of the individual soldier is one of the key characteristics of the First World War, and is tantamount to "the passive state of being exposed to continuous artillery fire"⁷⁴, as described above by Mommsen.. Furthermore, the enemy soldiers are generally invisible.⁷⁵ The encounters in No-Man's-Land represent, both a constructive departure from passivity (a destructive departure might be a berserk killing spree during fighting⁷⁶), as well as a realisation by those engaged in war on both sides that "they are visible and real to the other one". Once again soldiers are in charge of their actions, and it is therefore of little surprise that they often act in a humane manner which either was not possible in war or was something discredited in the context of violence. The purpose of sport activities then shifted from training the soldier to be "fit for the army" to building a bridge across the trenches, from shooting at the enemy, plundering and destroying him, to sharing with him part of their respective private lives, (such as family photos etc.), and to allow himself, on both sides, to be moved by music and engage with the other by bartering. On the social level as well, soldiers once again turn into "civilians" with German soldiers known to go as far as offering up their spiked *Pickelhaube* helmet as a bartering trinket. Additionally, these gestures erupt spontaneously, suspending for just a moment the constraints imposed by the military hierarchy. Also, war propaganda is briefly disrupted. We can see here opposite poles to institutional, structural and cultural violence emerging, albeit temporarily.

The fact that many of these activities actually seem strange to us and that this likely held true for the soldiers at the time as well, suggests how far-reaching alienation of the individual during war times really is;⁷⁷ there is also something rather disturbing about us not hesitating to link such alienation to war, indeed accepting it as one of its integral parts. Events which in normal times would hardly merit a mention in the press, such as people showing each other photos and celebrating Christmas, or a hair-dresser cutting someone's hair, suddenly become news-worthy. Indeed, if one wants to believe the enthusiastic tenor of the war letters to be genuine, these occurrences would have remained in these soldiers' minds as unforgettable and unique experiences. It is common knowledge that exhilaration usually is followed by disillusionment. This leads us to the question whether "sustainability" of such interruptions can be assumed possible, but with the proviso that they might not be guaranteed to last. Indeed, from the macro-perspective and looking at the overall picture, the war continues for a further four years.

In what way and to what extent might such actions – as described above – then be relevant? To address this question, one needs to move from the macro- to the micro-perspective. In terms of the larger context of violence as a whole – reference is being made in this book to the two World Wars of the 20th century – these actions remain practically inconsequential. Interrupting violence is not the same as terminating it. But the answer is different when considered from the micro-level: here such actions might, under certain circumstances (i.e. for those directly affected by it) be a life-saver. For this reason alone, they cannot be considered irrelevant.

Choosing the concept of interruption to discuss the ceasefires around Christmas 1914 shows its significance to have been limited, with the limitation practically implied in the very concept of interruption. Thus, from the perspective of interruption, our view is orientated,

⁷⁴ 129 Mommsen 2004, p. 149.

⁷⁵ 130 cf. Warburg 199, p. 102.

⁷⁶ 131 Warburg 1999, p. 113 et seq.

⁷⁷ 132 I am using the concept of alienation here in its general sense, cf. the definition offered by Vossenkuhl 2002: "Alienation refers to the human being as deprived or disconnected in the process [...] of work [...] Marxist alienation, generally in the course of [...] man's self-development." Vossenkuhl ⁶2002, p. 51.

on the one hand, towards the continuation of the "Big War". By the same token, it is focused on an ethically relevant moment in time: the temporary suspension of violence which both saves human lives as well as returns a sense of self-respect to all those participating in the event. Furthermore, in this "trans-frontier" encounter we can recognise a moment which allows for an overcoming of hostility in the form of reconciliation.⁷⁸

Our remit to consider the concept of interruption as limited, is important if for no other reason than to prevent us from rejecting out-of-hand reasonable objections raised against this understanding. Thus, contemplating the issue from a slightly more sceptical viewpoint, one might ask whether the following proposition was not, in fact, the more noteworthy characterisation of ceasefires: the same soldiers who had connected with their enemies by making peace and forging friendships, only moments later shot at each other as if nothing had happened. The fact that the trench war – though not everywhere and not immediately, but in many places – continued with relentless ferocity, might, however, be interpreted differently: soldiers once again shooting at each other reveal in my opinion, the impact of the perfidious pressure that characterize war. In an industrialized war with its technological innovations⁷⁹, an individual's scopes of action are restricted. The fact that they do at times exist, is therefore all the more surprising and indeed significant in that they enable an individual to manifest and regain his self-respect.

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⁷⁸ 133 Sölle 1996, p. 119.

⁷⁹ 134 cf. Imbusch 2005, p. 521. In this instance, Imbusch leans on Warburg 1999.

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Film

Merry Christmas (Joyeux Noël) 2005. Dir. Christian Carion. Universum Film et al.

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