

Christmas Celebrations

Introduction

Marking the birth of Jesus Christmas is a religious holiday for Christians. For many people it is no longer only a religious festival. It has become a season of general celebration and giving presents. The holiday is officially observed on 25 December, but often celebrations begin a few days earlier and last until the new year. It is one of the most colourful and festive times of the year.





The History of Christmas

The word Christmas comes from the Old English term *Cristes maesse*, meaning 'Christ's mass'. That was the name of the Christian worship service held on 25 December to honour the birth of Jesus. Although Christians believe that Jesus was born in the small town of Bethlehem, the day and year of his birth are not certain.

The stories of Jesus's birth were written down several decades after the event, as Christianity developed, and no specific dates were given.



Christmas Truce

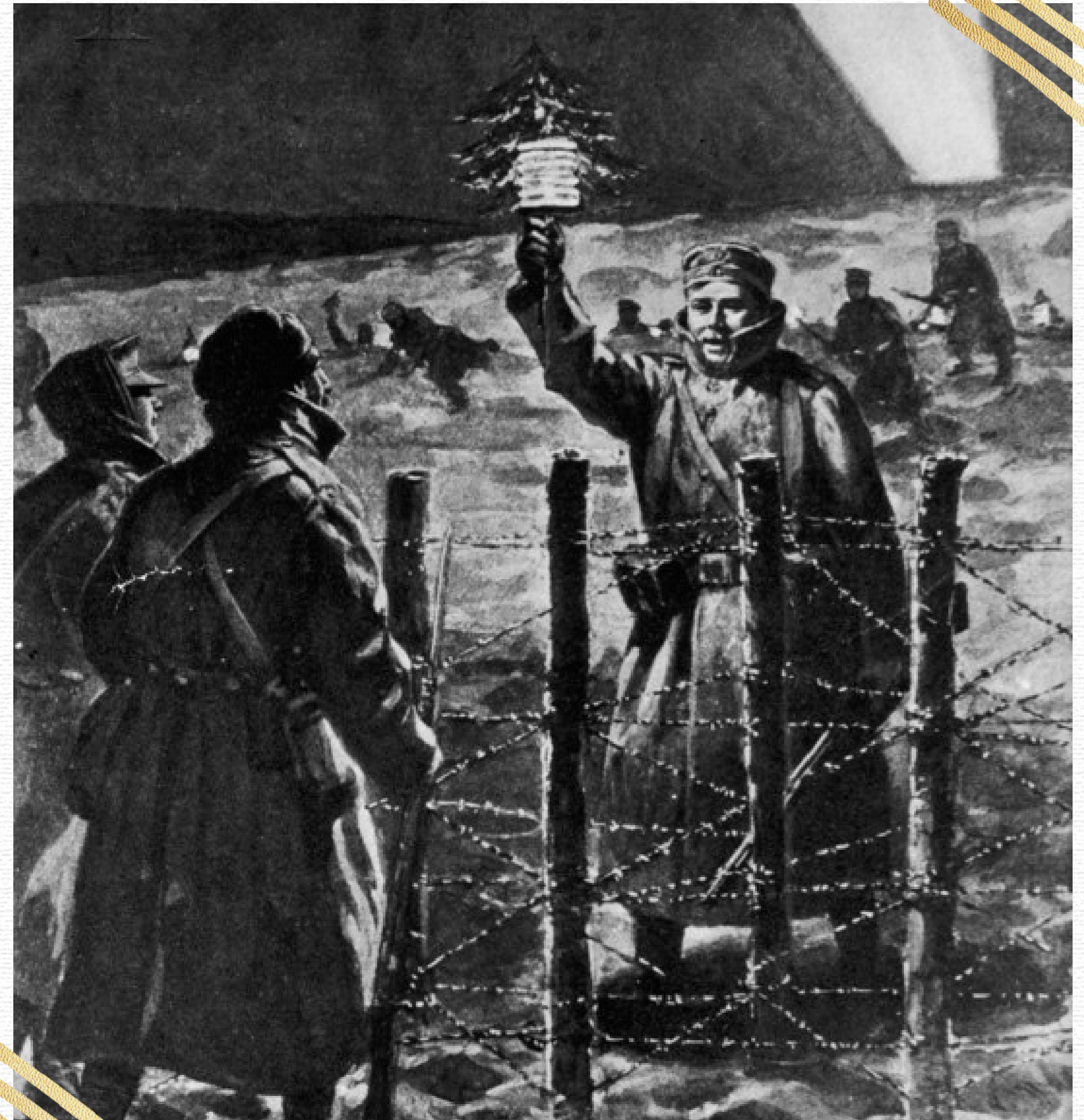




The Christmas Truce was an event that happened during World War I. The war began in the summer of 1914. Within only a few months, hundreds of thousands of soldiers had been killed in heavy fighting. However, in December, in many places along the battle area known as the Western Front, soldiers stopped fighting and celebrated Christmas together. This truce was so unbelievable that many people thought it was a myth.

On 23 December, German soldiers began putting Christmas trees outside their trenches. They sang Christmas carols from their trenches, and the British would sometimes join in. Soldiers from both sides made signs to send greetings to each other. Slowly, some of the soldiers began to leave the trenches and approach the other side. When it was clear that they were not armed, others joined them.

On Christmas Day, throughout the Front, there were joint services to bury the dead. There were also reports of soldiers playing soccer, sharing food and exchanging gifts.



Religious Celebrations



Many Christians around the world attend church services on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. In the village of Bethlehem in the Middle East, where Jesus is said to have been born, special services are held at the Church of the Nativity.

Roman Catholic churches celebrate the first Christmas mass at midnight, and Protestant churches have increasingly held Christmas candlelight services late on the evening of December 24. A special service of “lessons and carols” intertwines Christmas carols with Scripture readings during these celebrations.



Christmas Tree

One of the beloved customs of the holiday is decorating a Christmas tree with strings of lights and ornaments. The Christmas tree is thought to be the combination of two German customs. The 'paradise tree' was a fir tree that was a part of the religious feast day of Adam and Eve, which was celebrated on 24 December. In the same room was a wooden 'Christmas pyramid'. This triangle had shelves that held Christmas figures and was decorated with evergreens, candles and a star.



Christmas Cards

Christmas card, a form of greeting card usually sent by mail as an expression of goodwill at Christmastime. Although many cards display religious symbols or themes, general winter images are equally popular. The practice of sending Christmas cards, which has been followed in all English-speaking countries, is growing in many others. The first Christmas card, as the term is now understood, is believed to have been designed in England in 1843 by John Callcott Horsley.

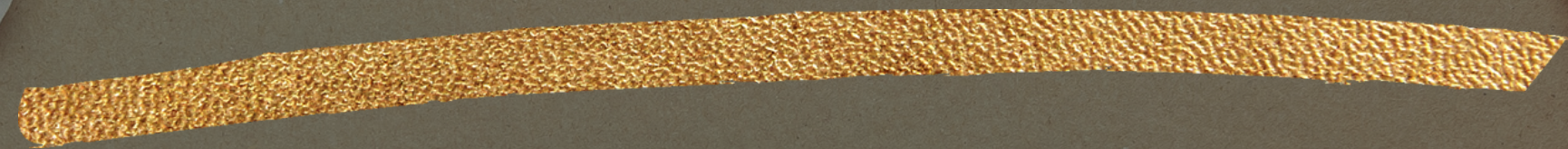


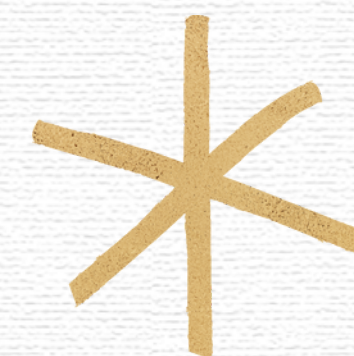
Advent Calendars

The Advent calendar, which provides 24 openings, one to be opened each day beginning December 1. According to tradition, the calendar was created in the 19th century by a Munich housewife who tired of having to continually tell her children when Christmas would come. The first commercial calendars were printed in Germany in 1851.



Santa Claus





Santa Claus is a legendary figure who is said to bring gifts to children during the Christmas season. In the United States he is also known as Santa, Father Christmas or Kriss Kringle. He is also known and Père Noël in France.



Santa is often associated with Saint Nicholas. Nicholas was a person who lived in the ad 300s. Because of the many stories about his kindness, Saint Nicholas became associated with gift giving. In some European countries children received gifts on his feast day, which was in December. Other countries had similar traditions of children receiving presents around Christmas. Europeans brought these traditions with them when they settled the American colonies.

Global Celebrations



European Traditions

In many European countries families exchange gifts on Christmas Eve, 24 December. In Spain and Italy children receive presents on the night of 5 January. Spanish children leave out their shoes, which they believe are filled with gifts by one of the Wise Men.





Christmas in the Southern Hemisphere

In Europe and North America people associate Christmas with cold weather and snow. In Australia and South America, however, 25 December comes during the summer. In Brazil people have outdoor Christmas picnics and fireworks.



Food Around the World

People around the world enjoy eating special Christmas treats. In Britain families make mince pies and Christmas cake. In France people eat a bûche de Noël (Christmas log), a log-shaped sponge cake. People in Mexico like to make buñuelos, fried tortillas covered with syrup and cinnamon sugar.



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