Music wins battle over barbarism, if only for a moment

Ruby Rankin
24 March 2006

Joyeux Noël (Merry Christmas, Frohe Weihnachten), written and directed by Christian Carion

Director Christian Carion was inspired to make *Joyeux Noël*, his second feature, after reading references to the fraternisation of soldiers in *Battles of Flanders and Artois 1914-1918* by Yves Buffetaut. In fact, these events compelled Carion to embark on a filmmaking career.

The result is a deeply affecting work and one that canvases a number of important and timely themes: the backwardness and eventual deadly trap of nationalism, the commonality of ordinary people, the complete lack of concern and even open hostility of the ruling elite for "their" own soldiers and the importance of art and culture in human society.

The film builds upon the true story of German opera singer Nikolaus Sprink (Benno Fürmann, the voice of Rolando Villazón). Famous throughout Europe, Sprink was conscripted into the German army and, along with the rest of his generation, subjected to the horrors of trench warfare. On Christmas Eve 1914, he sparked off an extraordinary 24-hour fraternisation between Scottish, French and German soldiers, who laid down their weapons and shared camaraderie and the contents of their Christmas parcels with each other.

By December 1914, the "Great War" had devolved into bitter trench fighting, sometimes no more than four to six metres apart—cold, stinking, vermin infested hellholes where an entire generation of men was slaughtered and maimed, physically and emotionally.

The "war to end all wars" lasted four long years, subjecting men and boys to artillery bombardment, mustard gas poisoning, minefields and repeated virtual suicide charges into direct fire. Men lost their lives, their limbs, their eyes, noses or entire faces as well as their sanity. A small glimpse of how bad the conditions were is provided in this photograph of no-man's land near Lens, where the events portrayed in the movie occurred.

The opening scenes of *Joyeux Noël* feature French, English and German boys of ten-years or so, reciting nationalist propaganda to whip up popular support for the bloodletting. There are calls for the French to seize Alsace for God and country; an English poetic verse cheerfully encourages the extermination of the "Hun"; while a German boy declares, "our land is besieged".

On the front line young French lieutenant Audebert (Guillaume Canet), although worried sick about leaving his pregnant wife and filled with foreboding, shoulders his pack and strides from his quarters with apparent confidence. He tells his men "do what you must then we will all be home for Christmas"—repeating the common misconception at the time that WWI would be over quickly. He leads them over the top towards the German trenches 100 metres away and into direct machine gun fire. A third of his troops are killed within five minutes.

Joyeux Noël is embellished with a love story for dramatic effect. Sprink has a lover, the exquisite Danish soprano Anna Sörensen (Diane Krüger, the voice of Natalie Dessay) who is determined to see him on Christmas Eve. Anna charms the German Crown Prince into authorising a special performance of Sprink and herself at the prince's headquarters, just behind the front lines.

Sprink is outraged by the blatant self-indulgence of the wealthy and powerful in attendance and their indifference to the plight of ordinary people and decides that he must sing for his own comrades in the trenches. When the concert is over he returns to the front line with his angelic diva just in time to hear the Scottish soldiers sing "I'm dreaming of home" accompanied by bagpipes.

Sprink's rich tenor rises over the trenches followed by Sprink himself slowly pacing into the middle of no-man's land. Somewhere up the German command an order had been given for the dispatch of 100,000 Christmas trees to the front and so Sprink holds one of the trees high as a token of peace. The Scots reply with their bagpipes and a musical conversation transpires until they find songs in common to perform together.

Tentatively the men emerge from their respective trenches—this time not to kill or be killed—but to exchange Christmas greetings and to share their food, drink, cigarettes and pictures of their wives and girlfriends. They study each other intently and discover that their demonised opponents are more like their own brothers rather than the monsters they have been told about. They also exchange addresses and promises to visit each other after the war.

Palmer, an Anglican minister from Scotland (Gary Lewis) who followed his flock to war as a stretcher bearer, conducts mass in Latin with all three sides replying in unison in the old lingua franca—recalling the shared history from Roman times when there were no nations and *Pax Romana* dominated the world from the Upper Nile to Hadrian's Wall. At the end of the mass, distant artillery fire reminds everyone of the war and reluctantly they return to their respective trenches.

The impromptu truce continues on Christmas Day in order for each side to bury their dead. A tri-nation football match and card games follow.

© World Socialist Web Site

Audebert and German lieutenant Horstmayer (Daniel Brühl) discover that they could have been good friends in other circumstances. Horstmayer says conversationally, “And well, when we take Paris and it will all be over, well, you can invite me up for a drink to Rue Vavin.” Audebert defiantly replies, “Don’t feel you have to invade Paris to get a drink round my house.”

Back in the trenches again, as the men resume war preparations, Sprink declares, “are you going to shoot them like rabbits after sharing champagne ... to die tomorrow is even more absurd than to have died yesterday.” Horstmayer ventures across no man’s land again, this time to tell the allied troops that the German forces will resume artillery fire on their trenches ... and to invite them to shelter in the German trenches.

Audebert’s father, a general, accuses his son of high treason, declares that there is no excuse for fraternisation and warns him that the penalty is death. (Audebert and his regiment, in fact, are spared from this fate because so many defied their senior commanders.)

Audebert replies, “You are not living the same war as me” and explains that he has more in common with those on the other side of no-man’s land than the wealthy in France. The soldiers had made plans for another truce for a New Years Eve party so that they can “drink to those bastards sitting pretty—who sent us here to slug it out.”

Palmer is reprimanded by his bishop for his role in the fraternisation and ordered back to Scotland. He removes his cross in protest against the bishop’s sermon to replacement troops soon to become cannon fodder.

The bishop harangues the soldiers to “kill every German” because they are in a holy war: “Germans are not like us children of God”. “You are the very defenders of civilisation itself, the forces of good against the forces of evil. The sword of the lord is in your hand. For this war is indeed a crusade to save the freedom of the world.”

Writer/director Carion comes from a part of northern France occupied by German forces during WWI. As a boy on his father’s farm he found shells, rifles and other remains of the men who fought and died. He is also a member of a group called Noël 14 which is documenting the incidents of fraternisation and currently building a different sort of war monument, one to peace, honouring the memory of those who defied their military commanders and made contact with the “enemy”.

Commenting on those who fraternised, Carion says: “At the time, they were considered cowards. For me they were neither cowards nor heroes [but] ... men who accomplished something incredibly human.” “[T]he dividing line was not between the camps,” he noted, “but between those who made war and those who wanted it to be made.”

According to Carion’s research, “Ninety percent of cases of fraternisation came about because people sang, were heard, and acknowledged with applause.... I love the idea that culture, singing and music silenced the cannons,” he said.

Christmas 1914, however, was not the only fraternisation of troops during the four-year slaughter. The political truth—that the rank and file soldiers of the opposing armies had more in common with each other than with “their” generals or governments—broke through the war propaganda on several other occasions. After getting to know their opponents, the soldiers refused to kill each other and these regiments had to be split up and/or relocated. Fresh, more naïve troops were required to recommence the killing.

Moreover, what is true of the soldiers that fought in WWI is also true of many American soldiers in Iraq today. The US military is made up of the poorest and most oppressed section of the population—men and women who face low paid insecure employment, if any, and no prospects for a reasonable living standard in the US. They have more in common with the Iraqi people now bearing the full might of the US-led occupation forces than with the American billionaires ordering them into Iraq to kill and be killed.

Joyeux Noël has been accused of being amateurish, simplistic and overly sentimental. While there may be some truth to these accusations, the film’s subject matter and its dramatisation of one of the most socially potent but little-known events of WWI still speaks to us across the generations, even though it could have been more complex or the themes developed more powerfully.

Most importantly, 33-year-old Carion, a relatively inexperienced director, demonstrates art’s potential to preserve and heighten our humanity. *Joyeux Noël* shows how, on Christmas 1914, the gift of music and the beauty of the human voice in song allowed the degradation of war to temporarily fade into the background. Soldiers could recall life outside the trenches and what was human in them, which had been so brutalised by war, was stirred and lifted. This is a moving and necessary reminder of what is great in the hearts and minds of ordinary people.

Joyeux Noël has some exceptionally beautiful music composed by Philippe Rombe and performed by the Corale Scala and the London Symphony Orchestra. It has won numerous awards in Europe and the US and was nominated for the Academy Award in the Best Foreign Language Film section.

Additional background on the movie, the Noël 14 monument and moving testimonials from the children and grandchildren of WWI soldiers is available at the film’s web site http://www.merrychristmas-themovie.com. Editions Perrin has also published *Frères De Tranchées*, a collective work by European historians Remy Cazals, Olaf Muëller and Malcolm Brown and edited by Marc Ferro about the fraternisations, which has been released in conjunction with *Joyeux Noël*.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site