

# Children and Childhood (France)

By [Manon Pignot](#)

## Summary

The Great War was unique in that it provoked an immediate, massive effort to mobilize the childhood masses. An often brutal war discourse specifically adapted for young audiences permeated through all spheres of life. Children were as such a vital component in efforts to mobilize adults, but they were also stand alone actors on the home front and so also have their own experience of the war. We will address the experiences of French youth based on three main spheres: at home (the family and emotional sphere), on the home front (the sphere of patriotic indoctrination), and at the front (under the occupation).

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## Introduction

The Great War was a major turning point in the military history of Europe and it also marked a cultural shift in practices and representations of the violence of war, a shift that included a new focus on children. Indeed, one of the specificities of the First World War is the immediate, massive and deliberate effort that was put into mobilizing the childhood masses. In all spheres of life, an often brutal war discourse developed that was specifically adapted to young audiences, both in how it was disseminated and in its demands. [Children](#) were an essential discursive element in efforts to mobilize adults. Numerous posters for different war

loans are proof of this: the “innocent child” figure was as such used to encourage men to fulfil their duty to protect – a duty for which they could be held to account after the war. And yet children were also stand alone actors on the home front. By children, we mean the age group between the start of mandatory schooling (age six in [France](#)) and the minimum age to begin working legally (age thirteen), which mostly concerned the working classes. Under the age of six, children were not spared from the [propaganda](#) – they had [war-themed rattles](#), [wooden cubes and cloth books](#) – but it is virtually impossible to assess their point of view on the war given their insufficient ability to express themselves.

Despite the fact that they were mostly non-combatant – although there were cases of early enlistment in all countries – childhood experiences of the First World War were nonetheless experiences of war. Two types of sources can be used to address this topic: firstly, documents produced by adults, written about or for children, which mainly provide insight into the social and cultural contexts experienced by youth; these include, for example, numerous educational books, all school materials and the great array of [children’s literature](#) from the period. Second, documents produced by children themselves which place us on an individual and private level, based on their own war experience. Above all, this includes [letters](#) since the onset of war led to an immediate turn to writing and, sometimes for the first time, fathers and children began intensively and intensely writing to each other, expressing their feelings and fears in a manner that was often entirely new. Historians interested in childhood experiences of war can also look at diaries and drawings which constitute an alternative means of expression, notably for the youngest children.<sup>1</sup> The two latter source documents are remarkable for two reasons: while children obviously drew and wrote before the war, the wartime context saw a great intensification in their production that was largely encouraged and sometimes even orchestrated by adults both in the home and at school.

Whether in terms of family upheaval caused by the mobilization of men, material deprivation or indoctrination at school, we cannot really talk about national specificities: many of the situations experienced by French children were, in reality, shared by other European and North American childhood populations<sup>2</sup>. The differences observed from one country to another can actually be better understood in terms of how intensely the violence of war was experienced rather than based on “national culture”: bombed cities vs. spared rural areas, [occupied zone](#) vs. free zone, etc. On an individual level, geographical location and proximity to the front line also played an important role in how the conflict was understood, thus making the experience of an adolescent in occupied France more similar to that of a young German from East Prussia than to that of a compatriot from the South of France. In the French case we can nonetheless look for “national” explanations behind the vigour and relative efficiency of the war discourse directed at children; in doing so, we must keep in

mind the major role played by the French public school system in the patriotic acculturation of young people.<sup>3</sup> As a group, French children were indeed probably more affected by the war: [the occupation experience](#), the massive conscription of married men and fathers which led to a great number of orphaned children, as further highlighted by the creation in 1917 of a new “war orphan” status (“*pupilles de la nation*”).<sup>4</sup>

Here, we will take a threefold approach to the experiences of French children by looking at three “spheres”: firstly, at home – where the childhood experience was mainly characterized by emotional and material shortages; then, on the home front, meaning all of the mechanisms at work in patriotic mobilization whose actual efficiency we would like to examine; and, finally, at the front, where two types of childhood experiences exist: the most widespread, that of the occupation and, much more rarely, that of combat.

## At Home, Living with Less

For French children, the war began at the start of the summer holidays. While diaries and childhood memoirs show that rumours about the impending war had sometimes been overheard by young city-dwellers, the declaration of war announced by the sound of the tocsin came nonetheless as a shock. During that same month of August in the country’s North, children watched convoys of [refugees arriving from Belgium](#), before being themselves forced to flee. The exodus of populations from the North was quite short-lived, but it had a profound impact on the youngest and shaped their experience of the war to come.

### Emotional Deprivation

Very quickly, children saw the men in their families depart: fathers and brothers, cousins and uncles, neighbours and teachers. These massive departures set the stage for an unusual display: tears shed in public, by both men and women. The upheaval of families was thus firstly emotional. Separation itself was not necessarily something new: in the bourgeoisie, children were sometimes sent to boarding school around the age of ten; in the working classes, very young children were occasionally still left with wet nurses, although the practice was beginning to wane. Nonetheless, by creating an abrupt and prolonged separation, the start of the war undeniably created an emotional void that the millions of letters and packages sent each day attempted to fill before military leave was set up in July 1915.

Letters truly acted like a “family bloodline”<sup>5</sup>, particularly between soldier-fathers and children who often wrote to each other for the first time. Men wrote to exist: naturally as family heads, but also as fathers, thus expressing affection and tenderness as they likely never had before. There are letters from illiterate men, others addressed to new born babies and others still with posthumous value; all provide insight into a new facet of paternity. Children responded

massively in return, both in writing and with drawings from the youngest. In many respects, the children's letters are perfectly in tune with those from their fathers: they are a place to express their worries, affection and loneliness. The fathers appear less as untouchable heroes than as men whose sensitivity and fragility need protecting.

[Daily life](#) was as such marked by waiting, anticipating the arrival of news from the absent men, and from fathers more particularly. For some, this absence became eternal within the first months of the war. The extent of mourning is a well-known phenomenon: the estimates given by Olivier Faron state that there were about 1,100,000 French orphans. As a practice and as an emotion, mourning was intrinsically connected to the childhood experience of war; in addition to personal despair, the collective mourning of the national community was closely observed and reproduced by children, notably in their drawings. These drawings show just how much children were surrounded by death, whose omnipresence led to forms of trivialization, meaning habituation – or even indifference – regarding the fatality of loss in a time of war.

### Material Deprivation

The sudden absence of men at a time of year when the [countryside](#) most needed labour led, starting in August 1914, to changes in the family structure. Women were forced to work more and were often required to spend more time outside of the home, thus *de facto* granting children greater independence. School absenteeism, particularly in the countryside, affected older children who were often put to work before the end of mandatory schooling. In cities, mothers' responsibility in the rise of petty crime among youth became a common topic in legal literature. Military allowances were too small to offset the loss of paternal revenues, thus frequently resulting in the pauperization of families. No distinction was made between girls and boys, and both were put to work to help the family: in the countryside, they helped with the upkeep of gardens and farmyards; in cities, their job was often to go to the distribution of municipal relief and to queue in front of stores with ration cards (starting in the winter of 1916 in Paris).

While material shortages were not as serious in France as they were in [Germany](#), they are nonetheless very prominent in the childhood sources since such shortages further restricted children's social opportunities to the domestic sphere and its issues. For the same reason, young city dwellers, especially in Paris, were particularly sensitive to bombing, which they experienced as a veritable irruption of the war's violence into their everyday lives. Even more than food, the cold was a major concern for most children: the occupation of Northern France deprived the country of coal. Children's responsibility for finding the daily firewood supply was thus compounded by a very understandable sense of fear, particularly during the harsh

winters of 1916 and 1917. The situation was even harder in cities than in the countryside, and more difficult among the working classes than among the wealthier classes; nonetheless, no social group appears to have been spared from physically experiencing the cold.

## On the Home Front, Limited Success in Mobilizing Children

The intense discourse of mobilization aimed at children right from the start of the war was not unique to France, since all of the countries at war undertook similar methods, albeit to varying degrees of intensity. Far from dissipating them, the context of war greatly reinforced social and cultural norms. The discourse of war directed at children helped to clearly strengthen gender barriers and exhort childhood morality. It was indeed based on a few very clear themes: the “obsessive topic of a war ‘for children’”<sup>6</sup> was at the centre of the discursive approach. Soldiers were defending their homeland but also and above all, their families and their children: they were sacrificing their lives for the next generation.

### Sacrifice, Patriotism and Germanophobia

It is obvious that guilt was the main driver behind this war discourse: children were asked to be worthy of the supreme sacrifice being made in their name. The demands made by adults appeared unlimited: teachers, parents, [writers](#): everyone called on young people to be devoted and make sacrifices “at their level”. The arguments upon which this sacrificial context was built rested on two main pillars: republican and patriotic glorification, and hatred of the enemy. Children were by no means spared from the violence of words and images; they were deliberately exposed to a very real climate of war. The war was explained, justified and idealized: it was Good fighting Evil, Civilization against Barbarism. Yet idealized does not mean that it was sugar-coated: the war discourse aimed at children was often brutal and could be extremely violent – particularly in children’s literature. The enemy was violently stigmatized in its military attitude, of course, but also in its values, customs and even physically: cowardly, pillaging, violent, traitors, the Germans were also voracious and foul smelling.

[School](#) and leisure activities were the two main vectors for childhood mobilization. From the start of the school year in October 1914, the war was a substratum of teaching, and school work became a patriotic duty for each pupil. All disciplines and all educational tools were as such used to engage youth with the conflict and its stakes: from history lessons to mathematics, without overlooking art classes. The latter were the focus of fundraising efforts from the start of the war, in France and in other countries.<sup>7</sup> And yet this integration was not only intellectual and moral. It was accompanied by a financial and material component that

was not insignificant: childhood labour was requisitioned to make packages to send to wounded soldiers (*"filleuls de guerre"*) and for organized appeals made in the context of national "Days", like *"Poilu Day"* for example. Girls were particularly solicited for help, from kindergarten to university: in the younger classes, they made English lint whereas the older girls knitted and sewed. While the active participation of children was at first the product of teachers' and ministerial orders, children quickly moved beyond the obligation and appear to have interiorized their role. Games, toys, literature and the press were also on board and adapted, like schools, to the new context of war. The old Game of the Goose was thus re-popularized and renamed *"Victory Game"* or the *"Renewed Boche Goose Step Game"*, and Christmas catalogues offered new toys: e.g., tanks, canons and outfits that were exact replicas of adult uniforms. The full spectrum of youth was affected.

### **The Limits of Childhood Mobilization**

The real question is whether this mobilization was effective, i.e. whether children were receptive to such sacrificial and patriotic summoning. In consulting the childhood sources, we can see important differences tied to both social background (in terms of access to leisure activities, notably) and geographical criteria, with distance from the front lines leading to a mechanical distance from the war and its direct effects, particularly in the countryside. The mobilization of children was at first largely encouraged and orchestrated by adults. But there was an interiorization of propaganda at the individual level as well. Diaries, in which the news of the day is juxtaposed with news from the front lines, are a good indicator of the degree to which the topics of mobilization were "absorbed". The massive and omnipresent nature of war discourse also led to autonomous types of mobilization which, while they were not truly spontaneous, really illustrate how the idea of sacrifice was interiorized by children. These include acts of voluntarily deprivation – seemingly insignificant but nonetheless highly symbolic.

It is nevertheless important to nuance the idea of children's systematic sense of guilt. The sources also point up signs of indifference, lassitude and even rejection shown by children. The trivialization of violence that was characteristic of the Great War most likely explains the rise in childhood indifference as the conflict dragged on. Indeed, the varying opinions towards the war expressed in childhood sources are also tied to the duration of the conflict: witnessing the effects of the violence on men worked to temper the enthusiasm of children after 1915. Discovering the "real" war, far removed from the heroic vision promoted in class and in the press, also played an important role in this shift: the spectacle of wounded soldiers, or that of prisoners of war employed as farm labourers, may have led children to change the way they viewed the conflict.

## At the Front: The Occupied Zone and Adolescent Combatants

Some categories of children were nonetheless more radically confronted with the violence of war and the enemy. This was the case above all in the occupied zone, where children experienced the paroxysmal nature of war and the drastic upending of their universe, now marked by the near daily sound of cannon fire.

### Resistance and Fraternization in the Occupied Zone

As mentioned above, the invasion of the North and East of the country provoked an initial exodus which also spurred numerous rumours, including the most famous myth of the “severed hands” which directly involved children.<sup>8</sup> The circulation of these tales of amputation – which were actually fictitious – played a major role in the scenes of panic described in the childhood sources. After the initial invasion, which was also a time of unbridled violence, came a period of arbitrariness and the descent into a regime of terror for the civilian population. Children were both targets and privileged observers to the pillaging, requisitions and, perhaps even more so, restrictions on what they could eat and on their freedom of movement. In this context, material deprivation took on a humiliating dimension of which children were perfectly aware. They were extremely attentive to all forms of despoiling, acts which take centre stage both in war diaries written daily and in accounts from the immediate post-war period. Children kept precise count of stolen objects, confiscated staples and damaged furniture. Girls seem to have been particularly sensitive to this dispossessing experience, most likely because the home – the sphere to which they were more attached than boys – became an alternative to the battlefield under the occupation. The domestic sphere became a new battleground with the enemy – and women were the new combatants. Girls carefully recorded in their journals all types of attacks on the female body suffered by themselves and their mothers: from bedrooms covered in excrement to young women forcibly harnessed to a plough in the place of work animals. The occupied zone was thus an area in which childhood experiences differed according to gender – surely much more so than in the free zone.

Children were also subject to [forced labour](#). Picking berries, destroying weeds that could damage crops, gathering chestnuts or wood and maintaining paths were all chores imposed on school children by the occupier, to the detriment of class time. These requisitions were an occasion for displays of symbolic patriotism: children sang the Marseillaise en route or expressed their disobedience by destroying crops. More generally, the childhood sources point up a whole series of actions presented as acts of “resistance”: mockery, insults, poaching and even petty crime were their weapons. The occupation context spurred a radical

upending of values (notably pedagogical and scholarly), in which disrespect for (German) orders was actually approved and sometimes even encouraged by parents and teachers. Conversely, numerous sources mention the ties that often formed between these same children and occupying soldiers. Many underscore the kindness and even affection that German soldiers showed towards young children. The latter treated officers passing through differently from soldiers who lived among them and who, in one way or another, became part of an almost familial configuration. Acts of resistance and examples of getting along were as such not mutually exclusive: they simply confirm the complexity of social and human relationships in this zone, thus forcing the historian to move away from a monolithic view of the occupation.

### The Unlawful Enlistment of Adolescents

Sustained, daily cohabitation with the enemy placed children in a unique situation that was extremely different from those behind the lines. The same is true for adolescents who managed, despite the laws of war, to reach the front lines. In 1914-1915, there was indeed a phenomenon of young voluntary enlistment, although this was less common in France than in other countries (e.g. in North America or [Russia](#)). While they were legally still minors, these very young combatants were no longer children. Ranging from twelve to sixteen years of age, they managed to avoid several obstacles, including the legal age for voluntary enlistment (the draft age was set at twenty, but voluntary enlistment before call-up was possible starting at seventeen, on condition of parental consent). If they were able to elude the recruitment offices, then they must no longer have looked like children. The social reality of 1914 is telling: in France, the age of thirteen was the age of “discernment” for criminal liability, the end of mandatory schooling and the minimum age for legal employment. The term “child-soldiers” is thus obviously inappropriate for designating these in-between youth, adolescents who played on a moral and physical ambiguity to enlist. Instead of using the trendy term “child soldiers”, we will instead call them “teen-combatants”; less striking perhaps, the latter term surely better describes the reality of this experience unique to the Great War which is a still nascent field in historical research.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

The great responsibility placed on children in the discourse of the war did not end with the armistice; for many, the return to the norms of peacetime did not equate to a return to normality. Thus, the return of fathers was not experienced uniformly by all: for the most part long awaited and generally experienced as a happy family moment, it could also be a moment of drama or simply of incomprehension and “*méconnaissance*.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the elaboration of a commemorative discourse worked to slow the young generation’s escape

from the war by assigning it a fundamental duty: to carry the memory of war and, in doing so, the memory of its dead.

While there was indeed a “Great War generation”, it is likely more a European than strictly national generation given the inter-related nature of the different childhood experiences. The armistice and post-war period, however, drew out national specificities and clearly distinguished between the experiences of children depending on whether they were from a victorious or defeated country, particularly for the generation of adolescents who were too young to fight but old enough to be touched by nationalist discourse.

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## Notes

1. Pignot, Manon (ed.): *La guerre des crayons. Quand les petits Parisiens dessinaient la Grande Guerre*, Paris 2004. [↑](#)
2. See Goebel, Stefan: “Schools”, in: Winter, Jay and Robert, Jean-Louis (eds.): *Capital Cities at War. Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919*, volume 2, Cambridge 2007, pp. 188-234. See also Pignot, Manon: “Children”, in Winter, Jay (ed.): *Cambridge History of the First World War*, volume 3 *Civil Society at war*, forthcoming 2013. [↑](#)
3. Siegel, Mona: *The Moral Disarmament of France: Education, Pacifism and Patriotism 1914-1940*, New York 2004. [↑](#)
4. Faron, Olivier: *Les enfants du deuil. Orphelins et pupilles de la nation de la Première Guerre mondiale*, Paris 2001. [↑](#)
5. Perrot, Michelle: *Le journal intime de Caroline B.*, Paris 1985, p. 140. [↑](#)
6. Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane: *La guerre des enfants. 1914-1918, Essai d’histoire culturelle*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1993 (2004). [↑](#)
7. In France: Association Vieux Montmartre: *La France de demain, la vie à Montmartre pendant la guerre racontée et dessinée par les écoliers montmartrois de l’école Saint-Isaure, n°18. Année scolaire 1914-1915*, in: *Bulletin de guerre du Vieux Montmartre, #88* (sp. ed.), 1914-1915. In Germany: Kik, Colectin (ed.): *Kriegszeichnungen des Knaben und Mädchen*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie, Heft 12, Leipzig, Ed. Ambrosius Barth, 1915. [↑](#)
8. Horne, John and Kramer, Alan: *German Atrocities, 1914. A History of Denial*, New Haven/London 2001. [↑](#)
9. Pignot, Manon: *Entrer en guerre, sortir de l’enfance? Les “ado-combattants” de la Grande Guerre*, in: Idem (ed.): *L’enfant soldat. XIXe-XXIe siècle. Une approche critique*, Paris 2012, pp. 69-89. [↑](#)

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- [Goebel, Stefan: \*\*Schools\*\*, in: Winter, Jay / Robert, Jean-Louis \(eds.\): \*\*Capital cities at war\*\*. Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919, vol. 2, Cambridge; New York 1997 Cambridge University Press.](#)
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- [Niget, David: \*\*La naissance du tribunal pour enfants. Une comparaison France-Québec, 1912-1945\*\*, Rennes, 2009: Presses universitaires de Rennes.](#)
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- [Siegel, Mona L.: \*\*The moral disarmament of France. Education, pacifism, and patriotism, 1914-1940\*\*, Cambridge; New York, 2004: Cambridge University Press.](#)

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## External Links

- [Audoin-Rouzeau, Stéphane: Die mobilisierten Kinder: Die Erziehung zum Krieg an französischen Schulen \(Clio-online\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Gillis, Stacy / Short, Emma: Children's experiences of World War One, 29 January 2014 \(British Library\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Hellé, André: Alphabet de la grande guerre, 1914-1916 pour les enfants de nos soldats, Paris 1917 \(Wolfsonian-Florida International University\) \(Book\)](#)
- [La guerre des enfants \(Bibliothèque nationale de France\) \(Online Exhibition\)](#)
- [Les Trois Couleurs, 1914 - 1917, comic books \(Cité Internationale de la Bande Dessinée et de l'Image\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Refugees from villages on the Cambrai front, 1918 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)

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