

War Toys

By [Sonja Levsen](#)

Summary

In the First World War, war toys were regarded as a means to strengthen children's identification with the war effort. Production and consumption of war toys in 1914 to 1915 reached heights never seen before, but then lost pace because of a shortage of materials as well as public disillusionment.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Production of War Toys](#)
- [3 Demise of the Toy Industry](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

The late 19th and first half of the 20th century was the heyday of war toys due to three developments: the increasingly close connection between military and society in European countries; the new importance accorded to [children](#) and their education in European culture; and the advent of mass production during the last decades of the 19th century. In 1914 and 1915, the production and consumption of military toys all over Europe reached heights never seen before. Manufacturers produced toy soldiers, cannons, [airplanes](#), battleships, [tanks](#) (after 1916), and a wide range of board games directly relating to specific battles. Children in this war became, more than in any previous war, the target of [propaganda](#); apart from [children's books](#) and journals, toys were seen as one means to strengthen their identification with the nation's war effort. War toys were gendered objects and primarily produced for boys, but autobiographical evidence suggests that girls played with their brothers' toy soldiers, and not only with dolls clad as nurses.

Production of War Toys

Until the First World War, [Germany](#) had been the world's most important producer of children's toys, exporting military and non-military toys to most European countries and the [United States](#). The war interrupted this practice, and countries such as [France](#) and [Britain](#) strove to quickly build up their own toy industries. Being able to provide children with toys in

wartime was seen as an essential marker of national success. Toy soldiers, toy [weapons](#), and even board games were regarded better when they were “realistic”, i.e. correct in the technical details of guns and in the colour of uniforms. Department stores in Britain, France, and Germany set up large battle scenes in their window displays, which claimed to represent battles “realistically” in terms of the intricacies of trench construction, [artillery](#), soldiers’ uniforms, etc. While the combatant nations tended to celebrate both such representations and the production of war toys in their own country as sign of a healthy patriotism, they criticised the enemy nations for the very same actions. The Germans and the French, for example, accused each other of barbarizing their children by providing them with the most gruesome battle scenes.

Demise of the Toy Industry

The middle of the war marked both the high point and the beginning of the demise of the toy industry. During the latter part of the war, due to shortages of metal and the growing demands of the [weapons industry](#), toy production declined considerably. By the end of 1916 toy producers noted that the demand for military toys lost pace, a symptom of a growing disenchantment with the war. After the war, military toys were largely but not completely out of fashion in most European countries, with Nazi Germany in the 1930s being the first European country to remilitarize children’s play.

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Selected Bibliography

- [Ganaway, Bryan: **Toys, consumption, and middle-class childhood in imperial Germany, 1871-1918**, Oxford; New York, 2009: Peter Lang.](#)
- [Hoffmann, Heike: '**Schwarzer Peter im Weltkrieg**'. **Die deutsche Spielwarenindustrie 1914-18**, in: Hirschfeld, Gerhard \(ed.\): **Kriegserfahrungen. Studien zur Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs**, Essen 1997 Klartext Verlag.](#)

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External Links

- [Cooke, Ian: World War One. Children's Experiences and Propaganda, January 29, 2014 \(British Library\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Hoffmann, Heike: "Schwarzer Peter im Weltkrieg": Die deutsche Spielwarenindustrie 1914-18 \(Clio-online\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Photo - Miniaturkartenspiel vom Grenzwächter Hans Beck / Card game of border guard Hans Beck, 1914-1918, Europeana \(Article\)](#)
- [The Children's War, warmuseum.ca \(Article\)](#)
- [The Strand War Game, Rules and Layout, bottom of the page, quadibloc.com \(Article\)](#)

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Regional Section(s)

[Central Europe](#) > [Germany](#)

[Western Europe](#) > [France](#)

[Western Europe](#) > [Great Britain and Ireland](#) > [Great Britain](#)

Thematic Section(s)

[Home Front](#)

[Media](#)

Subjects

[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Education](#)

[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Sports and leisure time](#)

[Society](#) > [Family, generation](#) > [Children and youth](#)

[The media](#) > [Propaganda](#) > [Propaganda, domestic](#)

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