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Children's Literature

By [Berenice Zunino](#)

Extracurricular mobilization of children through literature took place between 1914 and 1918 on the home front of most belligerent countries. Propaganda for children depended on the war's effects on the book market and featured violent glorification, merry caricatures and more serious images. As the war progressed, however, war themes decreased somewhat.

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War Effects on the Book Market

Share of War Books in Total Production of Children's Literature

Although war literature existed in England, France and Germany before the war, the supply changed quantitatively and qualitatively after its outbreak. World War I caused an overall decrease in the production of children's and youth literature. However, 1914 already saw a marked increase in the production of children's books. Even in the war years of 1915 and 1916 – the peak years for such books – they constituted a significant part of published children's literature.

Publishing Houses Progressively Adjusted to the Conflict

The war had both devastating and favorable effects on publishing houses. Some stopped their production for the duration of the war or disappeared completely, while others succeeded economically. Publishers for whom military themes were already an important business before the war focused their portfolio on patriotic children's books even further. Other publishers began producing war books during the war out of opportunism.

Already in September 1914, German magazines such as *Der gute Kamerad* or *Das Kränzchen* were already writing about the war. French children's magazines such as *Fillette* and *Cri-Cri* also focused on the war, while war themes were less prevalent in British periodicals like *Chums* and *Young England*. Other French and German magazines like *Diabolo Journal* and *Auerbachs deutscher Kinder-Kalender*, however, hardly covered the events.

Unlike magazines, children's book publishers adjusted to the war more slowly, due to longer production times and higher commercial risks. In Germany, the first war books were announced in late October 1914 in the specialized magazine *Börsenblatt des deutschen Buchhandels*. Just as in the overall German book market, the production of such children's books boomed before Christmas 1914.^[1]

Historicizing and Glorifying in the War Discourse

Old-fashioned Images in a Modern War

The “war cultures” for children did not simply emerge during the first weeks of August: publishers began to produce war books as they adapted to a prolonged war. Paradoxically, they produced old-fashioned images of a war of movement, a stark contrast to the dreary war of attrition on the Western Front. Borrowing from the history painting genre, images of the pre-war period were reproduced. Keen cavalry charges, rapid attacks, heroic deaths, and exalting images of political-military leaders contributed to the glorification of war.

Praising Violence

The violent war discourse was prominent in war penny dreadfuls (*Kriegsschundschriften*), which accustomed youth who were enthralled by war and extreme violence, exposing them to the so-called “secondary brutalization”.^[2] Adults’ growing fears about a moral decline of the youth, exacerbated by the war, drove authorities to ban some war penny dreadfuls. Hence, such patriotic literature paradoxically became a symbol of filial disobedience. Despite the war propaganda, the intention was also to shield children and adolescents from the war.

Children’s heroes from 1914 to 1918 reflected the historicization of the war. German child war heroes, particularly [Rosa Zenoch \(1910?-1914\)](#), who was severely wounded in 1914, were successors of the maiden heroines of the Napoleonic Wars, such as [Johanna Stegen \(1793-1842\)](#). In France, the tradition of child war heroes reached back to the French Revolution, for example child martyrs Bara (1779-1793) and Viala (1780-1793), who fought in the French Revolutionary Army. Propaganda organs declared thirteen-year-old [Emile Desprès \(1901-1914\)](#), who was sentenced to death, a victim of the “hereditary enemy” Germany.

In both countries, references to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 played a key role. In France, although the reconquest of the lost provinces did not drive the country into the war, children’s books (such as the albums *Hansi’s* and *La petite fille de Thann*) dealt with revanchist ideas and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine. Unlike French propaganda, British literature was characterized by a less stark anti-German sentiment. The honour of Britain’s army and the contributions of soldiers from the Empire and Dominions were more significant. With these historic and heroic war discourses, adults expected children to prove themselves worthy of their great-grandfathers and to understand that they were growing up in a “Great Age.”

The Idyllic War for all children

War Fairy Tales and picture books

As a counterpart to antiquated war images, small children were shown a colourful, idealized world. Fairy tales and children’s books were adapted to the war. In [Charles Moreau-Vauthier’s \(1857-1924\)](#) and [Guy Arnoux’s \(1886-1951\)](#) *Histoire du Petit Chaperon rouge. Conte patriotique*, French Little Red Riding Hood was attacked by the bad German wolf “Boche”. Illustrated by famous caricaturist [Arpad Schmidhammer \(1857-1921\)](#), the picture book *Hans und Pierre. Eine lustige Schützengraben-Geschichte*, alluding to the pre-war children’s book *Hans und Peter*, trivialized trench warfare, a usually underrepresented theme. Just as in *Der Kriegsstruwelpeter*, the illustrations, mostly caricatures, ridiculed the enemy and played down the brutality of war.

Picture and ABC books with war themes for young children, such as *Alphabet de la Grande Guerre 1914-1916*, *ABCDARIO di guerra*, *ABC for Baby Patriots* and war colouring books, including *Bochinades-Peintures* and *Kleine Kriegsbilder. Ein Malbüchlein* were also products of the war. The hostilities were often transferred to the world of children, as for example in *Lustiges Kriegsbilderbuch* and *Il bambino nella storia*, to explain the war’s causes and goals to young

children. These albums were less important in Britain, where war books were written mostly for teenagers.

A War for Boys and Girls

Pedagogical journals recommended these books to both boys and girls as young as three. It is questionable, however, if such young children really understood the contents. Many war books explained [war aims](#) to teenagers and were also written for a mixed readership, as titles like *The War 1914-15 for Boys and Girls* prove. However, gender specificities also characterized children's war literatures in most countries. *Bécassine chez les Alliés* and, *Else Ury's Nesthäckchen und der Erste Weltkrieg* were both war adaptations specially written for girls. The war nurse figure served as a female role model. In France and Britain, books were published in remembrance of the heroine and martyr [Edith Cavell \(1865-1915\)](#). German books like *Majors Einzige im Kriegsjahr* taught young women to accept the death of their husbands at war.

The War at the Home Front

New Themes Arise as War Proceeds

Beginning in 1915, children's propaganda was overtaken by the reality of war. More serious themes, like activities of children on the home front (making small gifts, knitting for soldiers, war loans at school), prisoner transports, and even the death of children's fathers now appeared. Especially in Catholic and Protestant books, prayer became a child's strongest weapon. As the war became more global, some children's books, as for example in Austria-Hungary and Germany, were published by so-called war-aid agencies (*Kriegshilfebüro*) and patriotic associations. While literature for children up to the age of ten to twelve hardly adjusted to modern warfare, youth novels featured more and more technological themes. In addition to aerial warfare, naval and submarine warfare played a major role, seen in titles like *How We Kept the Sea* and *The Navy Shown to the Children* highlight.

Weakening War Discourse

By early 1917, war themes in children's books and magazines had started to decrease. Particularly in Germany and Austria, war weariness and paper shortages affected the book market. Rising prices significantly reduced the production of children's books. War books from the first phase of the war, however, were republished. As a result, euphoric propaganda from the beginning of the war remained in the public sphere until 1918.

Although the effect of the literary mobilization of children is not measurable, it is possible to speculate. When looking at circulation numbers, dissemination seemed to be very different depending on the age of the readers and the countries. German picture books for young children were not very widespread: 12,000 copies of the children's book *Für unser Kriegskind* were

produced in 1916. The [Red Cross](#) published the book *Des Kindes Kriegsbilderbuch* in 1915. Of 4,000 published copies, 700 were still unsold in 1918. Compared to the production of other picture books at that time, these numbers were relatively high. The circulation numbers of youth literature were higher than picture books: more than 50,000 copies of the war novel for girls *Ohne den Vater* were produced in 1915.^[3] In France, copies of children's war books like *Nos alliés les Américains* (1917) reached up to 100,000 copies.^[4]

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Notes

1. ↑ Relating the German book market in First World War I, see also: Natter, Wolfgang, *Literature at War, 1914-1940: Representing the "Time of Greatness" in Germany*, New Haven 1999.
2. ↑ Mosse, George: *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memory of the world wars*, Oxford 1990; Weinrich, Arndt: *Der Weltkrieg als Erzieher. Jugend zwischen Weimarer Republik und Nationalsozialismus*, Essen 2013.
3. ↑ Binder, Hans-Otto: *Zum Opfern bereit: Kriegsliteratur von Frauen*, in: Hirschfeld, Gerhard et al. (eds.): *Kriegserfahrungen. Studien zur Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*, Essen 1997, pp. 107–128.
4. ↑ Gilles, Benjamin: *Lectures de poilus 1914-1918. Livres et journaux dans les tranchées*, Paris 2013: Autrement.

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