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Puppetry for a Total War: French and German Puppet Plays in World War I

By Didier Plassard

Abstract: European puppet theaters were deeply involved during World War I, which gave them an opportunity for demonstrating their social utility as a tool of moral and civic education for children. Behind the lines, they took part in the wartime effort in the context of a “total war” leading to a full-time mobilization of the civilian populations.

This mobilization implied many transformations of popular repertoires: the regional characters Guignol and Kasperl had to embody national identities; their traditional laziness, insolence, and reluctance to commands disappeared, so they could become exemplary soldiers; while the representation of these new heroes gave way to some complexity, enemies were more heavily caricatured.

In this context, very different options can nonetheless appear. In German plays, the war-time repertoire for Kasperl is mainly intended to make young audiences laugh at the conflict, and it therefore keeps farcical traits. In Paris, Gaston Cony’s *Guignol de la Guerre*, moralizing and edifying, tries to give a somehow realistic image of the soldiers’ everyday life. But they all agree in ascribing a radical otherness to their enemies, who are racialized or animalized, when they are not denied their humanity.

Based upon a comparison between German or Austrian (Oberndorfer, Renker, Rendlös, Voelckers) and French (Cony, Flesky du Rieux) puppet repertoires composed during or in the aftermath of WWI, this paper examines how these productions took part in the “*bourrage de crânes*” (brainwashing) of public opinions, instilling hatred of other nations in the minds of the youngest.

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, theater and children, World War 1914–1918, theater in propaganda

*War, children, it's just a shot away,
A shot away.*

Mick Jagger & Keith Richards
"Gimme Shelter" (1969)

At the beginning of the 20th century, marionette and puppet theaters were still deeply rooted in regional cultures in many parts of Europe. For a few decades prior, they had also been addressing those who would become their target audience for much of the 20th century: the young. Because of this double positioning, as local entertainment and as children's theater, puppetry is a good example of the dissemination of so-called *bouillage de crânes*, the nationalist propaganda orchestrated by the governments and newspapers during World War I, and its impact upon the whole population. It reveals how much this *bouillage de crânes* had spread into everyday life, for all ages and for all social classes, making a battlefield out of the most harmless entertainment. WWI was not only the first global war: It was also the first total war, meaning that all the strength and all the resources of the fighting nations were mobilized into the service of warfare. Entire populations, both military personnel and civilians, were fully engaged in the conflict.

Puppet and marionette theaters could not stay separate from these events. Puppeteers were called up for military service. Their venues, many of which were located in the frontline zones of Belgium and the North of France, were closed or destroyed. Performances of puppet or shadow theater were often given in the rear lines, military hospitals, and prison camps: sometimes by professional artists, but also by amateurs, with silhouettes cut out of boards or cardboard, heads roughly shaped from clay or carved in limestone or a piece of wood. Regiments from the Lyon area had Guignol's head on their flag, and one of them had even built its own theater booth, which followed it in all his movements along the frontline.

Behind the lines, in public gardens and in the streets, children attended puppet performances in which their familiar heroes donned a uniform and exchanged Guignol's stick for a gun. Just after war was declared between Germany and France in August 1914, the puppeteer Gaston Cony modified the name of his booth in the *Jardin public des Buttes-Chaumont* in Paris: It became the *Guignol de la guerre* (Guignol at War). There, daily performances of Cony's warmongering and patriotic repertoire were given for children and families, including *Guignol dans les tranchées* (Guignol in the Trenches), *Guignol contre les jouets boches* (Guignol against the Fritz Toys), or *L'Espion du Kaiser* (The Kaiser's Spy). Some of his plays were published in *Artistique-Revue*,

a monthly booklet edited by Cony through his association *Nos marionettes*, a professional organization of puppeteers whose patrons were the President of France Raymond Poincaré and the King of Belgium. Through their publication in *Artistique-Revue*, other puppeteers could perform Gaston Cony's plays—even in the trenches. In the Lyon area, plays showing Guignol as a soldier were written and published by the puppeteer Denis Valentin or by the abbot Antoine Grandjean.

In German-speaking countries, the character of Kasperl was also involved in a new repertoire in which he fought the enemies of the Central Powers. The Austrian writer Fritz Oberndorfer and the Germans A. Rendlös, Felix Renkler, Ernst Heinrich Bethge, and Adolf Völcker composed and published plays such as *Kasperl als Rekrut* (Kasper as a Recruit), *Kasperle auf Vorposten* (Kasperle at the Outpost), or *Kasperl und die Metalsammlung* (Kasperl and the Metal Collection).¹

Many more plays for puppets and marionettes were doubtless written and performed in these countries during the war. But very few puppeteers had the chance to publish their plays: Most of them kept only manuscript versions of their works, using, for example, school notebooks, which rarely came down to us. Therefore, the printed books and booklets of the plays of Cony, Valentin, Grandjean, Oberndorfer, Rendlös, Renkler, Bedge, or Völcker previously mentioned are the main documents at our disposal to examine the transformation of puppet dramaturgy during WWI. They must not be considered as representative of “traditional” puppet theater; rather, they belong to a semi-literary repertoire. That is to say, they are fully-written plays, with no room for improvisation, and they model themselves on the actor theater—sometimes, for example, using versified dialogues. But they are not literary plays because their authors were mostly amateur writers, these plays being their only printed works.² From a sociological point of view, these puppeteers and dramatists no longer came from the lower classes, as many of their fellows still did in many parts of Europe, but rather from the middle class.

Standing on the border between popular theater and literary repertoire, these wartime plays for Guignol and Kasperl nonetheless constitute very rich and interesting material. They show us how regional and comic figures can be transformed into national heroes and serve as role models

¹ Thanks to Prof. Beatrix Müller-Kampel (University of Graz) and her students, all these plays are now available online in the *Kasperl-Bibliothek*: lithes.uni-graz.at/texte.html.

² Excepting perhaps Gaston Cony, because of the large amount of his production (more than 40 plays) and of his will to be fully recognized as a writer: He entered the *Société des Auteurs*, the *Société des Gens de Lettres*, and the *Société des Poètes Français*.

for their young audiences—this will be my first point. The second point will be devoted to the different ways they represented the enemy. Lastly, I will examine how these representations were heavily influenced by the racist ideologies of the 19th century.

Local Characters and National Heroes

Throughout the 19th century, puppet and marionette theaters were closely linked to the construction of regional identities, to the point where their main characters were often chosen as local flag-bearers. Paul Fournel could, for example, demonstrate how much the repertoire for Guignol in Lyon, under the influence of the *Académie du Gourquillon* (founded in 1879), was increasingly taken over by linguistic particularities that could not be found in the oldest plays.³ In German-speaking countries, the spread of the Viennese Kasper replaced the former *lustige Figuren* (comic characters) Hanswurst, Harlekin, or Bernardon, but immediately gave birth to many local variations: the Bavarian Kasperl, the Swabian Kasperle, the Hamburger Kasper Putschenelle, among many others. These characters became symbols of regional identities and spokespersons of their dialects.

World War I led the authors of puppet plays to go beyond these local inscriptions, and it gave their protagonists a national destiny. This was the first dramaturgical function of the enemy, through a relationship that was always asymmetrical: While the hero kept his local identity, he had to fight opponents who were representative of entire nations. Guignol of Lyon fought against generic Germans, the Hamburger Kasper Putschenelle fought against Frenchmen, Englishmen, Italians, or Russians, all deterritorialized, quintessential, only defined through the caricatured features which supposedly characterized these nations—“walking abstractions,” we could say, to borrow Alfred Jarry’s words.

Various dramaturgical processes helped to transform Guignol and Kasper into national heroes. One was their loudly expressed patriotic commitment, following a warmongering tradition that ever more nationalist ideologies had already instilled in the puppet and marionette repertoires before the war. But another important process, and a more lasting one, was the transformation of the protagonists’ characterization. Following the examples of the Italian Pulcinella and many popular heroes, Guignol and Kasper had originally been insubordinate and insolent characters, reluctant to align with any form of power or authority. In the final decades of the 19th century, because of the progressive reconversion of puppetry into entertainment for children, they had to

³ See Fournel (1981), 64–68 and 159–73.

become more and more morally acceptable. These former defenders and avengers of the servant against the master, of the poor against the rich, of the weak against the powerful, progressively adopted bourgeois family values in order to be accepted as their children's educators.

Following the declaration of war, this bringing to heel of the two protagonists was accelerated and intensified. Their moral transformation even served as the central theme for some plays. In Rendlős's *Kasperl als Rekrut* (1921), Kasperl is kept under arrest for ten days because of his insubordination. The Austrian Fritz Oberndorfer, when publishing his plays, divided them into three groups. In the first group, Kasperl appears as *leichtsinnig* (carefree), as he traditionally did; in the second group, he becomes *wacker* (valiant) and a good patriot; in the third group, he turns into a *Zauberer* (a magician), the companion of Faust, and in this way a national hero.⁴ The first Kasperl, because he wants to go to the inn and have a drink, tries to get rid of his wife by going to the metal collection office and passing her off as a heap of old iron; the second Kasperl beats defeatists and war-profiteers; and the third Kasperl, flying on a Zeppelin to bomb London, defeats John Bull and Arlekino.

Guignol's transformation was also evident in Gaston Cony's repertoire for his "Guignol de la Guerre." Although the Parisian "Guignolists" had long since erased every reference to Lyon in their shows, Cony innovated in attributing to Guignol a national destiny with heavily underlined chauvinism and Germanophobia. As Jean-Émile Bayard (1918) wrote in *Artistique-Revue*: "From now on, Guignol of Lyon, who has become a Parisian '*titi*,' synthesizes in flesh and blood the French spirit, revised, corrected, augmented and immortalized since August 4, 1914" (4). Another contributor to the journal, Guy de Téraumont (1918), gave the puppet an authentic certificate of Frenchness:

Gaston Cony's Guignol, at the Buttes-Chaumont, has become a warrior.

He is a *poilu*.

But although he has the horizon-blue uniform, and he proudly wears the *képi* on the corner of his ear, he has lost none of his causticity and good humor. He has kept his popular touch, his Gallic verve, adding, however, something more, a patriotic feeling.

And it is the soul of the crowds that continues to speak through his mouth. In the old days, underneath his somewhat emancipated appearance, he already had a sense of his race.

Now, like all his fellow countrymen, he has had a big shock and his cheerful philosophy, a

⁴ Since 1871, Faust has been perceived as a positive character in nationalist circles because he emblemized the need for self-surpassing. See Zechner (2011).

direct inheritance from Rabelais, has been tinged with a strong shade of public-spiritedness. (12) (See Figure 1.)

Even in Lyon, this transformation of a local figure into a national hero could be perceived—for example when Guignol, Gnafron, and Madelon, singing the military march *Le Régiment de Sambre-et-Meuse* in the play *La Fin de la guerre* (The End of War) by Grandjean (1916), identified themselves as “*fiers enfants de la Gaule*” (Proud Children of Gaul) (15).



Figure 1. Luc Mégret. “Guignol Poilu” (1918). Drawing for the book cover of *Artistique-Revue*, 1918. Image in the public domain.

Kasperl and Guignol’s pranks were therefore presented as mere memories, youthful mistakes that they had to deny with the coming of war. In Cony’s *Guignol poilu* (1919), for example, Guignol has to get rid of a judge and two gendarmes who, because they want to put him in jail for his youthful misdemeanors, would prevent him from going to fight the “*Boches*” (the Fritz) in order to rehabilitate himself. On the boundary between these two identities, as a former mischievous kid and a brand-new recruit, but somehow keeping a link to childhood,⁵ the hero acts as a model for the young spectators, a kind of older brother showing them the path they must

⁵ Kasperl often retains his childish traits: In Ernst Heinrich Bethge’s plays (*Seid Ihr alle da?, Kasperle feldgrau* [1918]), he is accompanied by his grandmother and says he will never stay with another woman.

follow him down. When the most insolent commits himself to a common cause, when the most rebellious can find his way into the army, this is the sign that the whole nation has to rise up, “as a single man,”⁶ against the enemy (Völckers 1914, 5).

The Faces of the Enemy

World War I was indeed a war between nations, and not just armies. In fear of being targeted by snipers during the invasion of Belgium in August 1914, the German armies killed several thousand civilians—men, women, and children—and burned down their houses. From the outset, the armed conflict took the form of a war against entire populations, and this was later confirmed by the bombing of towns and the destruction of infrastructure. These abuses, widely commented on and amplified by the newspapers, reinforced the warmongering propaganda that rapped out that warfare was everybody’s duty, in the rear just as on the front line.

The puppet repertoire also spread the idea that entire populations—civilians and military forces—were fighting together. In Felix Renker’s (1918) play *Kasperl zieht in den Krieg* (Kasperl goes to War), Kasperl, as soon as war is declared, launches an attack on three civilians: a Russian trying to go back to his country, a French tailor settled in Germany, and a visiting English tourist. All three of them are roundly thrashed as “enemies.” Neither neighborly relations nor commercial contracts can survive this explosion of xenophobia: “Why are you a Frenchman?” Kasperl asks the tailor at the corner of his street. For this only reason, he does not pay him for the trousers he ordered, and he beats him.

Foreigners settled in the country before the war aroused particular suspicion because their situation was in contradiction with the simplifying categories of nationalist ideology: They could only be traitors, or spies, with an intrinsic duplicity. In Cony’s (1919a) play *Guignol en sentinelle* (Guignol Sentry), the protagonist unmasks a German, his Parisian neighbor who disguised himself as a *poilu* in order to spy on the French troops:

GUIGNOL: [...] What is your name?

THE POILU WITH A STICK: Paul Firmin.

GUIGNOL, *a blow with a stick*: This is untrue. Your name is Ludwig Schwartz.... You lived in Paris for five years, rue du Chat-qui-pêche. I recognized your voice when you said: Victory! And I noticed, although it is a bit dark, that you are blond and have a square-shaped head. Finally, what I could above all recognize is your servant face. Yes, because

⁶ “Aber wie unser Deutschland aufg’sanden ist—wie ein Mann!” (But how did our Germany stand up—as a single man!) (Völckers 1914, 5).

you were a servant of Monsieur Grippardin. I know him, Grippardin! He was my neighbor! Don't you recognize me? (6)

In a play by Paul Wriede (1924), *Kasper in Russia*, Kasper Putschenelle meets a Russian soldier who speaks the dialect of Hamburg because he worked in the shipyards there for five years. This is apparently the reason why this Russian is easily persuaded to surrender, enticed by Kasperl's promise of a good meal, and why he reveals to him that the Grand Duke of Russia is coming.

Most representations of the enemy, however, are much simpler. They can be of three different kinds. In German-speaking repertoires, a single symbolic figure is ordinarily used. Some of these figures already had a long history, for example, John Bull standing for England, or Arlekino for Italy; but others were invented for the occasion, such as Absinth representing France, Beefsteak or Money for England, or Wotki or Wodki for Russia (Völckers 1914). The action is purely allegorical, involving traditional characters of the Kasperl repertoire (the Grandmother, the Devil, the Monster, Death), or the protecting figures of German identity (the Imperial Eagle, the *Deutscher Michel*). Such characters are the same as those used in caricatures, jokes, and satirical newspapers: A single trait, such as imperialist greed for the Englishman, or drunkenness for the Russian, and some accessories (a Scottish kilt and a bag of money, a shapka and a bottle) are enough to denote national types.

French puppeteers and authors, for their part, preferred to put on stage real personalities to personify the enemy—first and foremost Kaiser Wilhelm II and his elder son, Crown Prince Wilhelm von Hohenzollern. In Grandjean's (1916) play *La Fin de la guerre* (The End of War), two military commanders, Alexander von Kluck and Erich von Falkenhayn, come together with the Kaiser and the Crown Prince. They all are harshly beaten and taken prisoner by Guignol, who delivers them to Marshal Joffre.

In Paris, Cony's repertoire makes extensive use of these referential characters: in *Guignol vengeur* (Guignol the Avenger) (Cony and Achille 1919), the hero kills the Kaiser in Holland where he had fled in November 1918. In *Guignol, fantoches et Cie* (Guignol, Fantocci and Co) (Cony and Mégret 1919), the Allied Powers put him in charge of punishing the Kaiser and fourteen war criminals, all precisely named:

GUIGNOL: [...] Oh! Let us act quickly! Still nine to be beaten! (*Reading:*) Major von Bulow! (*This one comes—Guignol beats him immediately.*) You had 50 civilians shot!—Shooting civilians, is this *civilization*? Get out! (*Same action.—Reading.*) General Olsen von Cassel, here! (*This one obeys.*) You gave the orders for the atrocities in Doeritz. (*He beats him.*) Zan!

Yes, this... No time... (*Reading.*) Lieutenant Rudiger, cruelties in Ruhleben. (*This one has just appeared when Guignol knocks him out with a loud blow of his stick.*) Take this! (4)

The third way of representing the enemy is to put ordinary soldiers on stage, anonymous or not. Such a choice moves the puppet theater performance a little closer to the reality of war, and thus brings major dramaturgical changes. The action takes place near the munition depots, in the trenches, in the barracks, or in the hospitals; the hero may be taken prisoner, or he may be wounded; his traditional stick, the “*tavelle*” or “*Pritsche*,” is replaced by a gun and a bayonet, and the enemy is killed, not merely knocked out. In *On les aura!* (We will have them!), a play written by the puppeteer Denis Valentin (1916), Guignol tells his friend Gnafron that he has knocked out a German soldier, and then “finished him” with Rosalie (the nickname of the bayonet) (see Figure 2).

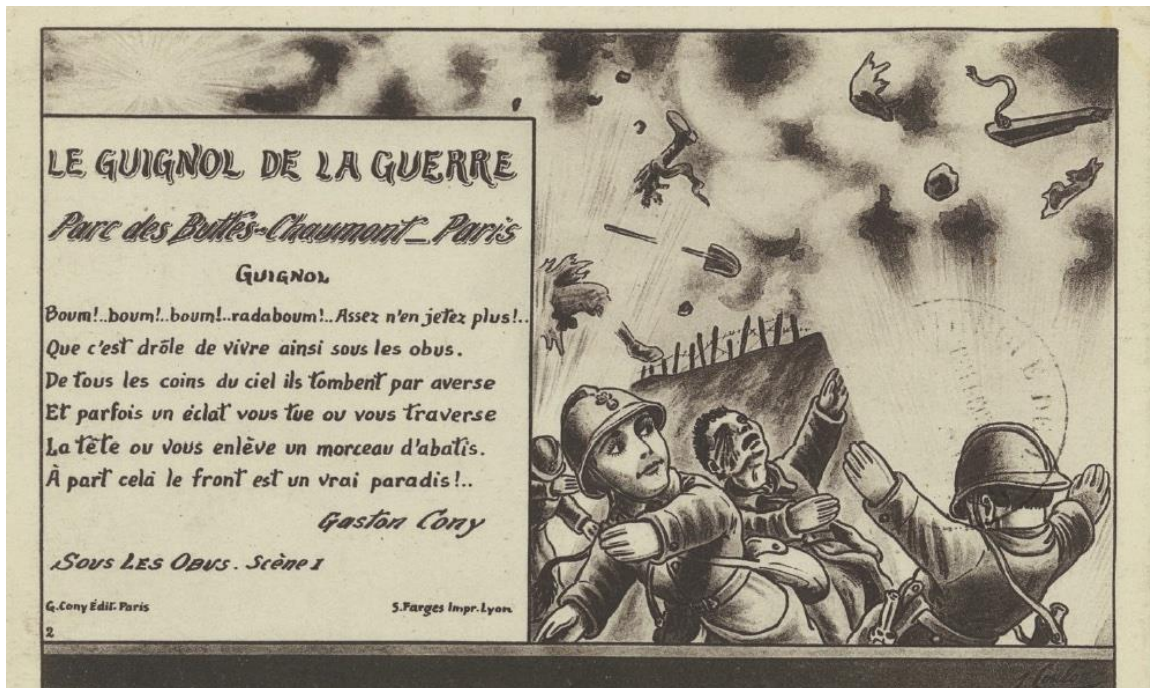


Figure 2. Gaston Cony and Jean Coulon. “Le Guignol de la Guerre” (1914). Postcard published in Lyon during WWI. Image in the public domain.

Such evocations of a brutal death, unusual in puppet dramaturgy (Pulcinella’s or Punch’s murders being de-realized by the abstraction and the stylization of the performance), were largely developed in the French repertoire. They reveal the increasing brutality of the culture of war⁷ and the consequences of the propaganda that called for the physical elimination of all enemies and false patriots. In another of Denis Valentin’s (1919) plays, *Tue-le!* (Kill him!), Guignol uncovers war

⁷ See Mosse (2000).

profiteers by means of a fake announcement that those who loan money to the state will see a 45% profit. In the same play, a man in charge of uniform delivery squeezes money out of soldiers for giving them the correct size, a manufacturer gets rich producing shells for the French armies, and a hospital director overcharges for meals for wounded soldiers. While Guignol beats them all, a *Poilu* on stage, indicating each of the profiteers in turn, shouts “kill him!”—a shout that must then be echoed by the *Poilus* sitting in the audience.

These three misdemeanors are presented as crimes of high treason meriting a death sentence. And, obviously, the culprits could only be stateless people:

GUIGNOL: [...] This is not worthy of a Frenchman. By the way... are you French? This name, Nembusquerr... it sounds Fritz.

NEMBUSQUERR: I am a naturalized Swiss.

GUIGNOL: Naturalized, we know that... I begin to see clearly... I bet that you were born in a barrel of sauerkraut in Berlin or upon a pile of Frankfurter sausages.

NEMBUSQUERR: I was born in a neutral country... in Holland.

A POILU (*enters*): This is Wilhelm taking the cabbage away! Kill him!

GUIGNOL: What! This is Wilhelm leaving Holland.

SOME POILUS (*in the audience*): Kill him! Kill him!

GUIGNOL: Do you hear? These folks are right, after what you did you would deserve to be shot or guillotined.

A POILU: Kill him! (72)

The confusion in the scale of crimes and punishments was obviously the consequence of the suffering endured during the war. But it is difficult not to be afraid of the amalgam made between foreigners, enemies and citizens of neutral countries, and of the immediate and general call for lynching of the suspect, above all in a play that was primarily addressed to children.

The Racialization of War

World War I was also a total war because of the absolutist categorizations drawn by the warmongering propaganda, which radically opposed the “French race” to the “German race,” “Latin genius” to “German Kultur” (with a “K” as a mark of irony), or even “civilization” to “barbary.” War crimes in Belgium and the North of France in the summer of 1914 were immediately used as a pretext to compare the German armies with the hordes of Huns, and Wilhelm II with Attila. They gave birth, for example, to the widespread myth of soldiers cutting off the hands of women and

children, an atrocity that never occurred in the context of WWI but had been systematically used in the Belgian Congo at the end of the 19th century, under the reign of Leopold II. Madelon laments in Grandjean's play *La Fin de la guerre*, "For sure they will cut our throats, cut our wrists or at least they will take us to Germany" (29). In Cony's (Cony and Achille 1919b) *La Fille de Guignol* (Guignol's Daughter), the Crown Prince and an officer named Von Krapul meet Guignolette in the woods and are about to rape her, but her father arrives to rescue her in the nick of time.

The German puppeteers, in their turn, ridiculed these accusations of barbarism. In Paul Wriede's (1924) play *Kasper und der Amerikaner* (Kaspar and the American), an American citizen, after being knocked by Kasper Putschenelle, protests: "Oh! This is inhumanity! I will tell Wilson. You be a Hun!" (232). In *Kasperle zieht in den Krieg* (Kasperle Goes to War), by Felix Renker (1918), the Englishman Beefsteak calls Kasper a "big Barbarian," (7) and various German plays had French officers mocking what they claimed to be their enemies' "lack of culture."

The French and the English armies were symmetrically accused of "barbarism" and "savagery" in the propaganda of the Central Powers because of their mobilization of colonial troops, a human resource that neither Germany nor Austria-Hungary disposed of. This presence of "native" troops on the battlefields of Europe was a recurrent topic in Kasperl plays, to the point that some used an African or Asian soldier as sole representative of the Allied Powers' military forces. Faced with this new situation, German-speaking authors sometimes used highly approximative denominations: Renker (1918), for example, revived the outdated expression "*Leibmohr*" (body-Moor), referring to Black servants in the 17th and 18th centuries, as if the African troops had been engaged to act as valets for French officers (14) (see Figure 3).

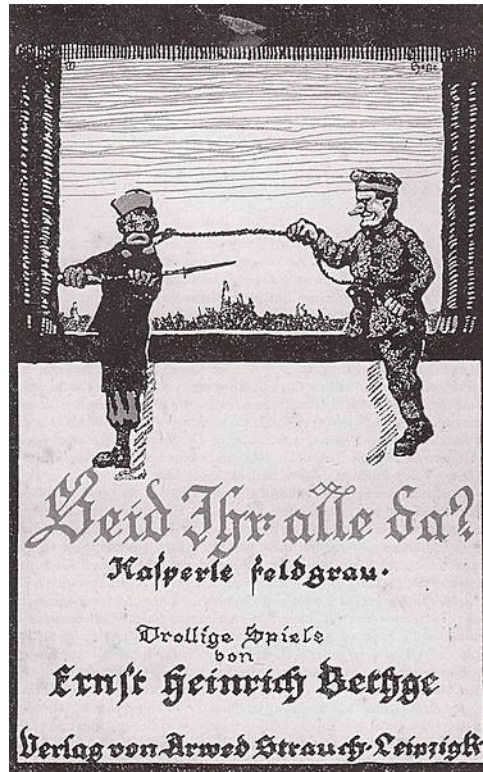


Figure 3. Ernst Heinrich Bethge. *Seid ihr alle da? Kasperle feldgrau* (1918). Book cover. Image in the public domain.

Much more often, though, when representing the Senegalese infantrymen or the Nepalese Gurkha in their Kasperl plays, authors made use of a heavy racist imagery: that of cannibalistic savages, depicted as holding knives in their mouths.⁸ In Ernst Heinrich Bethge's (1918) play *Kaspar auf Urlaub* (Kaspar on Leave), for example, Kaspar sends the Black prisoner Mungo to his Grandmother to help with her gardening. But, being a man-eater, Mungo would have to wear a muzzle (42).

Racist ideologies, which spread across Europe from the 19th century, dehumanized those considered as inferior: These “others,” they claimed—and this was an argument to legitimize slavery and colonization—had not completely developed human characteristics. But, more generally, the simple fact of trying to define “races,” as though mankind were composed of distinct species with different origins, intrinsically implied a process of animalization for all human beings. Just as naturalists did with animals or plants, the promoters of pseudo-scientific racialism, in their *furor classificandi*, strove to divide mankind not only into groups according to skin color, but also into subgroups, then into sub-subgroups. They claimed they could identify an “English race,” an

⁸ See Bethge (1918), “Kaspar auf Patrullje”, *Seid ihr alle da?*, 23–29.

“Italian race,” a “Breton race,” a “Provençal race,” or a “Jewish race,” with the dreadful consequences we all now know. Mistaking socio-political, linguistic, religious, or cultural identities for natural entities, they believed in the biological homogeneity of each of these groups, focused on their physical, moral, and psychologically distinctive features. Thus, they spread the idea that they were “naturally” rivals, enemies, predators and prey, just like animal species.

During WWI, newspapers and propaganda imagery made intensive use of these categorizations, thus naturalizing the conflict and animalizing stakeholders. Expressions of instinctive repulsion, of physical hatred, were commonly used in the *bouffage de crânes* and also found their way into the repertoire composed for Guignol. Guignol states in *La Fin de la guerre*, “We took 300 prisoners who will be sent to the zoological garden with the bear Martin, the cocodrile and the rhinofurious, because they are all faraminous beasts” (Grandjean 1916, 17). In another of Grandjean’s plays, *Guignol cuisitor* (Guignol as a Cook), Germans belong to the class of primates:

THE WARRANT OFFICER: I bring you kids a Fritz prisoner who was starving and surrendered for a tin of *singe* (“monkey”—French for corned-beef).

GUIGNOL: ’tis not surprising, it tasted like family for him. (15).

But more usually, Germans were likened to pigs. In Denis Valentin’s (1916) *On les aura!*, Gnafron explains how he mistreated a prisoner in his cellar: “I tie him up like a sausage and to preserve him I stick him in an old barrel of brine, as one preserves pork giblets” (45).

Gaston Cony was certainly the puppeteer who most violently expressed the racialization and the animalization of the enemy. In his revue for the end of the year 1917, he portrays the Kaiser as a “masked swine” (12). In the second act of his play *Ainsi font, font, font!*, Guignol and his son Nicolas, who have just killed a German soldier, do not know what to do with the corpse:

NICOLAS: [...] Let us throw him away.

GUIGNOL: No...

NICOLAS: Why, ain’t he dead?

GUIGNOL: I don’t want to be splashed with a German!

NICOLAS: Take him this way.

GUIGNOL: No, his head is disgusting!...

NICOLAS: Take his feet.

GUIGNOL: No, they smell like sauerkraut!... (12)

Not only in Gaston Cony’s plays, but also in *Artistique-revue*, war was presented as a conflict

between antagonistic races. Here is, for example, the “*Conseils de l’Oncle Daniel*” (Uncle Daniel’s advice) addressed to children in the October 1918 issue:

When you grow older, do not forget! When the war is over, when the mourning hours have passed, do not forget that the German race *must* stand out of mankind, it deliberately stepped out of it, let it stay there. Do not have any relationship with the cursed race. Never lend your hand to the murderers of your loved ones.

It is written, as you know, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” My little ones, your neighbors are all your brothers in humanity, but the race which has lowered itself below the ferocious beast can no longer be part of mankind, and for that one, no love is possible, no forgiveness can be granted.

Little children, my dear little ones, do not forget. (4)

“Little children, my dear little ones, do not forget”

The use of puppet theater as an ideological weapon certainly did not begin with WWI and did not end with it. This context only saw one of its first systematic mobilizations in a century where wars had to be won not only on the battlefields but also in hearts and minds. The transformation of the protagonist into an older brother acting as a role model for children, the impregnation of plays with nationalist and racist discourse, the echoing of official propaganda had already begun by the end of the 19th century and saw their major developments in the decades following the Great War—for example, under the Nazi regime.⁹

Some differences in the way the two repertoires evolved can be easily explained by the circumstances of war: When Guignol was entirely focused on French-German hostilities, Kasperl had to fight a variety of enemies (French, English, Italian, Russian) who encircled the Central Powers. But other differences are noticeable, among them a stronger rooting of the German-speaking repertoire in the farcical traditions of puppet playwriting, with allegorical characters and fanciful situations, while the French repertoire was trending toward a more realistic description of war, to the point that it sometimes gave up being comical.

The impact of racist ideologies seems also to be different in the two repertoires: German and Austrian authors simply took over the nationalist and colonialist imagery of the 19th century, making use of the most common stereotypes and caricatures, while French authors and puppeteers violently expressed their hatred and their physical disgust toward the enemy. On both sides, however, the conflict was made to appear the result of a natural and spontaneous antagonism

⁹ See Kolland and Puppentheater-Museum (1997).

between “races”: These repertoires negated the diversity of individuals, transformed human groups into warring species, mankind into animality. And, above all, they extended the *bourrage de crânes* to the youngest audiences, inculcating these mental schemas in children: This is the most serious issue we can charge them with.

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