

**This Is Your War, Kids:
Selling World War I to American Children**

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Introduction

Adults during World War I took great interest in consciously fashioning a presentation of the war to children. Traditional school curriculum became infused with war-related material. Beyond that many government, service and commercial entities took a keen interest in presenting the war to America's youth. As the twentieth century dawned to a golden age of mass circulation American magazines, adults who would oversee the education of children into the country's cultural values relied as a medium on serials aimed especially at children. Hamilton noted that writing aimed for children "serves as a means by which a society transmits its most cherished ideas, attitudes and values, in the hope that they will be carried on in the child. It is natural then, that during periods of great conflict and change, or national crisis, such as during war, the children's literature, if it is at all responsive to its environment, should reflect these conditions."¹

Editors of these publications had no doubt that they were prime movers in molding opinions, both adults and children. In an argument against a proposed postal rate raise, a house ad in *American Boy* emphasized, "The newspapers and magazines are the chief educational agencies of our country. Widespread opportunity of reading means efficient patriotism."²

Those who sought to fashion this war for children generally wanted more than merely to explain the conflict. They wanted children to respond. They wanted children to believe, to act, to lead, to sacrifice. They wanted children to become part of the war, to "do their bit," even the very youngest. They hoped in this way to imbue children with the presumed virtue and character-building values of military service, in this war and generally. To become quasi-soldiers or, in the case of boys, to learn the ways of the military in preparation for actual service they would be soon expected to face. Children were expressly invited to participate in the culture of war, key players of the future. "Boys," a writer in *St. Nicholas* noted, "your part is not a small one! It is vitally important. The service you can render now in preparing for the service you will surely be

called upon to render in a few years is precious to the nation.”³ “In no other war in all history have children taken so important a part as in the Great War,” declared Mabel Louise Mountsier and Robert DeMain Mountsier, writing in 1917.⁴ But, as observed Gillis and MacCallum-Stewart, “All wars depend on being able to recruit the imagination of the young.”⁵

This effort to draw children to military values and service blurred the line between civilian and military life on the home front, a process of militarization of the child’s world into the “myth of war,” as Mossé explained it.⁶ Audoin-Rouzeau, in his examination of French children during the war, called the process “the framing of childhood into the war.”⁷

Mossé wrote extensively about what he called the war myth, the construction of war as something acceptable, even desirable. The myth underpinned the enthusiasm that initially propelled men to the colors, and their countries’ ability to continue through hideous slaughter and come to terms with its memory after the armistice. The war would be manipulated, sanctified or distorted, noted Mossé, leading to “the cheapening of human life and the mass deaths which have degraded so much of our own century.”⁸

In speaking of the children’s war, Mossé observed that efforts to provide European children with toys depicting wartime themes trivialized the war as a game. Audoin-Rouzeau noted children’s publications celebrated children themselves as war heroes. In Germany, the Boy Scout movement in particular helped to transmit martial values to youth.⁹

The militarization of children through mass media is not new to World War I. But the First World War’s well-organized and thorough uptake of children into a war culture reflected a growing twentieth-century science of mass persuasive techniques through large-circulation mass media that would flower into World War II. By 1939-45, “The child was a foot soldier in a children’s war.”¹⁰

The author in this paper considers these questions, reflecting children and war:

1. How did United States national-circulation periodicals aimed at children during the World War I establish the legitimacy of death and sacrifice?
2. Through this material, what did adults want children to do?
3. How did this material serve to blur the boundary between military values and civilian culture, that is, the militarization of childhood?
4. How did children respond?

To be sure, today still, some opinion leaders and parents believe that transmitting at least some military values to children can build virtuous behavior and encourage good citizenship. Training to obey orders, to be prompt, to wear uniforms, to render selfless service, to work in a team, to show courage and patriotism, can lead a child to become a fine adult, these advocates emphasize. Ideals of a quasi-military nature still today reflect the missions of some American groups promising “values-based learning for children,” notably Scouting, ROTC, some sports, and martial arts. Military academies are still popular places to send children who are presumed to need the character-building training of soldiers.

However, not everyone believes military training is a good thing for children. Mossé noted possibly negative consequences of military training and acceptance of a quasi-military culture. “War experience itself was a great brutalizer, strident tone of officers, passivity of men, rough and ready life of squad—undoing what we call the civilizing process.”¹¹ This researcher makes no value judgment on the virtues or drawbacks of militarizing a child’s world, and presumes there is virtue to be found in the service of a soldier. He does, however, suspect that a culture thoroughly militarized will be less fearful of war, and more likely to presume a military response to a perceived threat. What Mossé called the “domestication of modern war,”¹² its acceptance as natural and perhaps inevitable, has seemed to silence the once powerful pacifist movements of the early years of the last century. Norman Angell’s anti-war argument *The Great*

Illusion (1910) was enormously popular, and peace societies really believed war could be abolished. Pre-war Americans, even children, made powerful arguments in favor of peace and against military values. Today those positions seldom resonate in mainstream United States media. It could be argued that the many wars little and big fought by the United States after World War II might have been less likely had the country not become very highly committed to “preparedness,” not only in men and materiel, but in mood and mentality. Those most impressionable in the formation of such a mentality are children.

Sources

Children’s periodicals offer a little-researched resource to historians considering the values and cultural heritage during other time periods and societies. In fact, collections are difficult to find; Kelly noted, “Children’s periodicals have not been collected regularly by research libraries, and even the Library of Congress has not retained copies of certain types of children’s periodicals.”¹³ He emphasized, however, that editors of these publications made a “highly self-conscious effort to transmit their culture, their world view, to American children who would one day be charged with furthering the nation’s historical destiny.”¹⁴

To consider militarization of childhood during World War I, the researcher was able to locate three important American mass media publications of the era specifically targeted toward youth. The author has chosen these to examine in their entirety during this period, one general interest serial, one targeted to boys, and one targeted to girls. Chosen were *St. Nicholas Magazine for Boys and Girls*, *American Boy*, and *The Rally*.

St. Nicholas, produced by Scribner’s, was chosen as the most important of publications aimed at all children of the era, from the very young—about five—to high school age—about 17.

The magazine, established by well-known author Mary Mapes Dodge in 1873, became one of the oldest and most respected children's magazines by the war.

In addition to this general interest magazine for youth, two more specialized publications were chosen for study. *American Boy*, with a circulation of more than 207,000 by 1917, appealed to a broad spectrum of boys from about age 10 through high school.

The Rally, which was renamed *American Girl* in May 1920, was established shortly after the United States entered the war, October 1917. Juliette Gordon Low, who established Girl Scouts in the United States in 1912, wrote editorials, but the editor of *The Rally* was listed as Gertrude Hill Springer.

All three publications included cover art in full color, and advertising, although advertising in *The Rally* was limited. In excerpts the researcher has retained contemporary spelling. Authors and titles are included in footnotes when available, along with page numbers and publication dates.

U.S. entry into war: establishing the legitimacy of death and sacrifice

American Boy and *St. Nicholas* made little attempt to conceal the cost and devastation of the war in the years before America's entry in 1917. This is obviously in contrast to the experience of children in the principal European belligerents, who were part of the war from the beginning. Knowing that American children were not ignorant of war's evils, how could these publications justify the abrupt change of view they were now expected to make? Children clearly knew this could involve more than inconvenience—their fathers, brothers, or uncles might be killed, and older children soon might be called to serve.

Children themselves as the war came to America wrote to *St. Nicholas* to justify the need to fight. Children emphasized heroic sacrifice, inspiration of battle, noble duty, gratitude for

country. These followed an effort to show the sanctity of war. Beatrice Caldwell (age 13), wrote, “Down from the Ardennes and up from the sea; We appeal to the Highest—O Father of Nations! Onward to victory, onward to Thee.”¹⁵ Readers of the *American Boy*, as reflected in that publication’s writing contests, chose to establish war’s legitimacy by hailing military virtues as a way to prove manliness and build character. Defending military education in January 1917, George Buchanan, age 12, from Illinois, wrote,

Military training develops a boy physically, mentally and morally. Physically by training to right living, clean habits, and definite athletics, such as running, hiking and military maneuvers.¹⁶

These themes as a way to legitimize the war rose from the children first, at least as reflected in these publications, but were soon borrowed and expanded by the publications’ editors and writers. In the first months of the United States as a belligerent, editors legitimized sacrifice by expanding on similar themes as established by earlier children’s writing.

War as a duty

Patriotism—the feeling of gratitude for the country in which one resides—had been an underlying theme of these children’s publications long before the war. In 1873 Mary Mapes Dodge actually specified part of the mission of *St. Nicholas* would be to encourage “love of country,” although she did not approve of simple sermonizing.¹⁷ The ideal American boy as determined by *American Boy* would be patriotic, and so, observed the editor as war became probable, “Remember that your country is in danger, and neglect no opportunity to stand by the flag.”¹⁸ Reader-generated material reflected a similar sentiment. As an editor’s note in *St. Nicholas* said in response to drawing submitted for publication July 1914, “Our young artists seem to be fairly bristling with patriotism, as we all ought to be about this time, and so the editor

wishes for the loyal leaguers a joyous and ‘glorious’ Fourth.”¹⁹ The publications chose to harness this apparent wellspring of natural patriotism as closely associated with establishing legitimacy of sacrifice in World War I.

In explaining its duty to patriotic support of the war, an editorial in *St. Nicholas* reminded “its older readers” that the country had tried to avoid war. “Against deliberate, unprovoked, and outrageous aggression the United States has striven with a patience never equaled by any great commonwealth and for more than two years to avert a conflict. But in vain.”²⁰ The editor emphasized that the duty to the country to support the war fell personally on the shoulders of America’s children. It was not an adult war. It was their own war, a war for the children.

And this, as all boys and girls should know, is peculiarly *their* war—a war waged for the sake of the years to come. Whether long continued or not, it will vitally affect the lives of those now in their teens, who are soon to become citizens of the republic.²¹

To readers of the *American Boy*, an editorial asked, “Why?” “Why should you work for and sacrifice and love your country? First, because it is *your* country—yours. Because it belongs to you as citizens and sharers in it.Because *your* country does more for you than any other country on earth.”²²

But probably the most well-known appeal at the time to children was written originally for *The Rally*. “Why we are at war,” published in *The Rally* February 1918 by Josephine Daskam Bacon, identified as vice commissioner of the girl scout council, was widely reprinted and drew compliments from Theodore Roosevelt and other prominent pro-war leaders.²³ Bacon legitimized the war for children by describing it as a playground dispute:

Suppose that all are busily engaged with their own concerns, when suddenly a great band of older boys, who have passed all their spare time of late in drilling,

exercising, shooting, and collecting suitable stones for their sling shots, rushes across the playground to fight a band of Boy Scouts. Right in their way lies the sand pile of the littlest ones.²⁴

The author ends with a strong call to duty: “We are going to keep it up to the ideals it has been climbing to all these long generations; and if, in keeping it, we must die for these ideals, why, we Scouts have our motto to fit even this last proof of our loyalty: ‘Be Prepared!’”²⁵

The call to duty, as patriotic appeal, was therefore explained through retelling the war using a playground metaphor, or simple recounting of U.S. complaints against German aggression. Making the case for war by describing German attacks and atrocities was, however, uncommon. Only Daskam’s article in *The Rally* did so at any length. Duty instead was presented as an obligation based on patriotism, not argument over reasons. It is possible based on readers’ letters before the war declaration that editors knew few of its subscribers needed much persuasion to accept the legitimacy of war.

Also usually missing from these publications were accounts of German atrocities, or specific criticism of “the Hun” as a beastly enemy. Hatred as a motivational theme was generally absent, from the editors as well as from readers’ articles, and mostly found in advertisements. This is in contrast to children’s literature as analyzed by Audoin-Rouzeau in France, which included repeated descriptions and depictions of the evil *Boche*.²⁶ The limited reliance on this common theme seems to have been a conscious choice of the editors, for such material was widespread in United States publications aimed at adults. It seems to reflect a perception that American children were not motivated by hate, and American editors of children’s publications were not about to encourage it. *American Boy*, for example, seemed to place the war for American boys in the context of an athletic game, the good fight against a respected adversary.²⁷

In an analysis of children's writing about the war in *St. Nicholas*, McKenzie observed, "Children almost always omitted negative rhetoric about the enemy, preferring to focus on heroic qualities."²⁸ Audoin-Rouzeau noted also that while French children received the same hate-themed material widespread in adult publications, they did not respond in the same way; they did not seem to be motivated by anti-German atrocity propaganda, but by stories and scenes of heroic and moral qualities found during war.²⁹

What children were expected to do.

World War I transformed the culture of American childhood. Learning through play, building a sense of individualism, critical thinking, and tolerance were discouraged. Instead children's publications issued demands to work, to join, to accept without question, and to punish those who deviated from a norm based on exhortations of government and other authorities. In a society that traditionally paid homage to individual freedoms, this marked a cultural shift, and these editors worked hard to explain why it was needed. "Children were exhorted to sacrifice individuality for the group and pleasure for work; in essence, to take on the previous 'adult' role of responsible worker."³⁰ Children's publications devoted nearly their entire content most months to considerations of wartime values in children, and how they ought to respond. The editor of *St. Nicholas* explained,

St. Nicholas plans to aid the zealous young patriots who prize its pages by acting as their counselor and friend in all possible ways, and hopes to present in an early issue a plan of organization that may offer direct opportunities for personal service, such as many of its readers are already seeking."³¹

Children could not be exempt from organized war work. "There lies a duty upon every group of citizens, be they young or old, to organize themselves for service, in order that, when

the government has need of them, they may be quickly and conveniently allotted their proper places.”³² Home-front war service was presented as more than a child’s pastime; children were to be drafted into war obligations, a civilian army of minors doing critical service. “Our army is at the front,” explained a writer in *The Rally*. “We must be its soldiers behind the lines!”³³

A September 1918 unsigned editorial in *St. Nicholas* emphasized, “We cannot eat our cake and have it, too! We cannot insist upon eating and dressing and having a good time as before, and expect our government to put up a winning fight.”³⁴

St. Nicholas did not use shame as a motivation. This was a frequent adult propaganda theme, the suggestion that those who did not act would be ashamed to face friends and family. But editors of *American Boy* more directly appealed to this motivation, emphasizing the shame a boy might feel if he did not act to support the war. Recalling the achievement of French and British boys—even German boys—an editorial declared, “They have helped in ways that will be mentioned with pride when the history of this war comes to be written. Do you, American boys, want to be mentioned on that page? Or do you want it to be silent regarding you?”³⁵

In *The Rally*, for girls, writers also argued girls must take action to avoid the shame of the lazy child: “Resolved: To Serve. Your New Year’s resolution is made. No? Oh, yes it is. The World War made it for you. Could you—when the chimes rang out their message of new promise, new hope, new life—could you, as has been your wont, stand complacent in the magnificent white arc of national hope and plan your own little pleasures, your own little joys, your own little life?”³⁶

Children were exhorted to do their bit for the war; it did not matter that they were civilians or minors. But what could they do? Editors of these publications anticipated this question, and responded with an enormous list for every spare instant a child was not asleep or in school.

They could plant gardens. “And this year, millions of boys and girls in America also will have the opportunity to become gardeners and produce the food which the nation will so much need.”³⁷

They could lend money to the government. This opportunity was heavily promoted to children, with programs aimed at accepting amounts as tiny as a twenty-five cents. “You can buy United States Thrift Stamps—little brothers to the War Savings Stamps. They cost 25 cents each.”³⁸

They could prepare to serve. “One thing each of you must do, and that is to keep physically fit. Look after your body. Keep it well, develop your muscles. Train as though you were going into an athletic contest. See to it that the coming years are supplied with more able-bodied men than the present day. Make ready for the day when your country may need *you* on the firing line.”³⁹

They could join groups for boys. “The problem of boy mobilization” could be resolved through a quasi-military reserve for the under-aged: “The United States Department of Labor has formed the ‘Boys Working Reserve, United States of America,’ and is *now* enrolling the names of lads who are willing and able to serve their country along the lines worked out for them by the Department.”⁴⁰

They could join groups for both boys and girls. “Don’t forget that our wounded soldiers must be cared for—their wounds healed, their mangled limbs amputated to save their lives, medicines and the proper food supplied. Join the Junior Red Cross.”⁴¹

They could write letters. “Every reader of the *American Boy* should write a Christmas letter to a soldier this month—a letter that will make the fighting man who receives it feel that the boys at home are with him, and bring good cheer at Christmas time.”⁴² “If he can stand it to live in

a trench and dodge German shells, you ought to be able to bear up under the dangers and hardships of pushing a pen across a sheet of paper.”⁴³

They could knit sweaters. “Carlyle Streit, twelve years old, has knit a regulation sweater for a ‘Sammy’ in France—knit it all by himself. Carlyle is distinguished among them because he is the only boy who ‘got away with it.’”⁴⁴

They could make medical supplies. “All summer long troop after troop has kept hard at work making surgical dressings, comfort bags, knitting all soft woolly comfortables.”⁴⁵

They could save old newspapers. “These papers must be neatly wrapped and addressed to the captain of that company. Twenty papers will answer for one tent. Thus by a little consistent effort a company of men in the cantonment will receive the daily news from home, which does more to keep them happy than anything else that can be given them.”⁴⁶

They could make Christmas gifts. “Such articles as the following are acceptable; letter paper and writing pad and pencil, a pipe (not clay), tobacco or cigarettes, chocolate bars or hard candies easily packed, games such as packs of cards, dominoes, checkers or puzzles.”⁴⁷

They could mail music. “These slackers are a new kind altogether—they are the ‘slacker records,’ and they are being drafted into service by The National Phonograph Records Recruiting Corps, 21 East 40th Street, New York City. A slacker record is one which you have grown tired of playing and which now lies idle, instead of providing entertainment where it is most needed—among our boys in the service.”⁴⁸

They could go fishing. “Come on fellers and fish for Uncle Sam! You want to be a man right now. You want to be big enough to go to the front and fight for Uncle Sam. Here is a way you can fight and be a real help to Uncle Sam—while you are having lots of fun....Bristol steel fishing rods Are patriotic tools.”⁴⁹

They could raise pigeons. “Do not be surprised—a dove may be the emblem of peace, but a carrier pigeon is a messenger of war!”⁵⁰

They could give away their dog. “Suddenly he remembered what Father had said that stay-at-home folk could do for their country. He looked at the flag—and then at his dog. ‘Yes,’ he said, with a brave little smile, ‘Boko may go.’”⁵¹

They could even buy things. “Make your gift to those at home a Kodak, that they in turn may make light hearts and happy faces by sending a continued Kodak story of that home to the brave lads, somewhere in France.”⁵²

Even very young children were not exempt from war work. In *St. Nicholas*’ monthly feature “For very little folk,” Mattie Lee Haugen wrote for the little ones in verse:

“I cannot knit a scarf nor sweater,
 Nor write a soldier boy a letter,
 For I am only five, you know,
 And have not learned to write nor sew.
 I know, though, I must ‘do my bit,’
 So when my mother starts to knit,
 I hold the yard, stretch wide each hand
 And very, very still I stand
 Until she winds it in a ball,
 And never say I’m tired at all!”⁵³

The militarization of childhood

As war-related material dominated these publications, their overarching message became obvious: children were expected to build their lives around wartime values and

activities. The metaphor of children as troops working on the home front aimed to pull children into wartime service. “*St. Nicholas* boys and girls are part of our national army, Soldiers of Service for America.”⁵⁴ To do this, the benefits of a warrior’s way of life were presented by a variety of approaches. Some material tried to capture the child’s natural draw to action and adventure, while others tried to make war a less terrifying, almost acceptable, everyday part of life.

War as heroic, war as adventure.

This theme built upon familiar material in a publication aimed at boys. “Good healthy stories of adventure” should be a staple of boys’ publications, noted *Boys’ Life* publisher George S. Barton.⁵⁵ War stories almost by definition claim all the notes to attract the adventurous boy, and so *American Boy* lost no time in setting forth serialized war adventure stories, some based on real people, but clearly fictionalized. In an advertisement the publication promised “Great war stories. Heroes of battles in the air, in the trenches, on the sea, will tell the wonderful stories of their thrilling adventures in the *American Boy* in the coming year.”⁵⁶

St. Nicholas did not emphasize the adventurous nature of war as vividly as *American Boy*, but did not ignore the theme. In that publication, while aviators become the familiar knights of the air, the adventure of sailors was not to be ignored, as German submarines had put the glamour back into seafaring: “Not since the days of the clipper-ships, when America bred a race of Vikings, has the sea called so strongly to the boys of the United States as it does to-day.”⁵⁷

The Rally for girls mostly ignored the call to war as an adventure, and seldom published heroic accounts of military action common in the other two publications. Instead its pages were heavily laden with calls to duty and obligation. *St. Nicholas* as a publication tailored to youth of both sexes, emphasized the heroic lives of warriors, often recounting the heroism and adventure

of military service. An explanation of why *The Rally* may not have reflected this theme, however, could be found in a *St. Nicholas* article explaining the female experience in a National Service School, Chevy Chase, Maryland.

You know that women and war have always been widely separated, except in suffering; and most people will admit that inactive suffering is harder to bear than that accompanied by shot and shell, music and glory..... There was no manual of arms, as militarism was not the idea of the camp, but *universal service*. This is borne out by the courses we took; first aid, hygiene and home nursing, dietetics, surgical dressing, knitting and sewing, wireless and Morse telegraphy, and signaling; all of which are most useful in any condition of life.⁵⁸

War heroism reflected in the pages of *American Boy* emphasized the appeal to spirit of great leaders, past and present. George Washington is depicted in a cover illustration of a young soldier in uniform looking at a fireplace mantle on which hang pictures of Washington and Pershing. The title: “Ready for his turn.”⁵⁹ In *American Boy* heroism is seldom portrayed independently; it is tied to loss. Writers asked boys to imagine themselves in the trenches: “Look up. Daring men, like the young Captain Guynemer and our own Freddie Zinn, sail through the skies, observing enemy positions, attaching enemy planes, battling against odds—doing their dangerous part to keep the Germans back.”⁶⁰ As readers knew well soldiers could die, heroic material presented the case that should a soldier make the supreme sacrifice, he did so knowing his heroism is assured.

War as virtue

Mossé noted that values in Europe by the twentieth century had turned soldiering from a relatively disreputable career choice to a noble calling, the “glory” of war, “the thought that war

gives new meaning to life and makes it worthwhile.”⁶¹ War could offer regeneration, freedom from the strictures of a pedestrian civilian world, an opportunity to become a man, to learn values of character and virtue. In Europe this was often explicitly tied to Christianity and its Bible-based stories of suffering as a way to demonstrate virtuous character. But the American publications examined here did not use religion to bring the war into the lives of children. These were, of course, secular publications, in a secular country. Suffering as a virtue was presented under a calling to liberty, freedom, and patriotism. Children themselves considered its cleansing virtue. “The Price of Liberty By Ruth Sargent (Age 13).” “‘Come, Mother,’ said the old man, ‘we have given our boy. He is all we have and he is given freely to his country. It is the price of liberty.’”⁶²

The war could offer character-building inspiration in a wide variety of secular roles evoked to inspire enthusiasm both from children and their parents. The manly virtues of war-making in particular found repeated favor. The editor of *American Boy* wrote in 1918, “A young man said to us the other day—and he wore a uniform and was leaving the next day for France—‘the only feeling I have about going over there is that I’m dog-gone sorry for you fellow who have to stay at home.’ He had the right idea.”⁶³ The editor noted that among American troops he met, “There was not a whiner, not a quitter. We hoped and we believed that Americans were of that mould. Now we *know* it.”⁶⁴

Reputed character-building virtues of military life went beyond those who actually fought, based on material presented here. Children at the home front could benefit as well. Thinking like soldiers could offer attractive virtue to children such as “Jack:” “‘Slip off your jacket. There! Now assume the position of a soldier,’ commanded the captain. “‘What! My nephew and namesake doesn’t know what that is? Well, I’ll be demoted! This is it—the position of a soldier at attention,’ he said, rattling off the words:

“Heels on the same line, and as near each other as the conformation of the man permits.”⁶⁵

Promoting the war as a call to duty for patriotism saw repeated use in these children’s publications, reflecting the value of nationalism so influential in Western nations during this period. But values of militarism beyond a proof of manliness, or the positive feelings of duty, could bring many opportunities to American children, as reflected in these publications.

War could make money. “The bond buyer does himself a service, too, because the money saved is invested in the safest security known and will some day be returned with a goodly amount of interest added.”⁶⁶

War could improve speech. “Patriotic Resolution for Girls and Boys. ‘I love the United States of America. I love my country’s flag. I love my country’s language. I promise: 1. That I will not dishonor my country’s speech by leaving off the last letters or sounds of words. 2. That I will say a good American ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in place of an Indian grunt (‘un-hum’ or nup-um’) or a foreign ‘ya’ or ‘yeh’ and ‘nope.’”⁶⁷

War could offer formal education. “They are given technical instruction and taught the three R’s and this academic instruction is continued aboard ship except when military duties make it impossible.”⁶⁸

War could encourage obedience. “Try now to think like men. For this space of time, remember that the truest patriotism you can offer is to refrain from being a drag and a responsibility on your elders.”⁶⁹

War could encourage a work ethic. Joining the U.S. Department of Labor’s Boys’ Working Reserve “means boys who are not afraid to a blistered hand or a sunburned nose, who don’t mind honest toil for a living wage, even if it is not in the direction of the life work for which they want to fit themselves.”⁷⁰

War could improve health. “Famous physicians work with government experts in guarding the health of our soldiers. In the instructions they give the new men of the army are bits of wisdom which every boy should have.”⁷¹

War could build a fighting character. “When you get to your business of life remember that you’ve got to fight every fight through to a finish just as you have in war. The successful man is the one who doesn’t know when he is licked, but sticks to it till he has made his deal or put through the sale, or achieved his point.”⁷²

War as daily life in the child’s world

As these publications repeatedly issued formal calls to duty, patriotism and moral responsibility, the fact of war itself was marbled throughout the child’s culture through its appropriation into common childhood games and toys. Making war into a game or a sporting match could make it seem less scary, and so more acceptable. Merchants took advantage of a militarized childhood by offering products encouraging children, mostly boys, to think as warriors. Most of these advertisements appeared in *American Boy*. A toothpaste company advertised, “You know how soldiers and sailors benefit from good teeth, and that they must have good teeth in order to pass the physical examination. The twice-a-day use of Colgate’s Ribbon Dental Cream and the twice-a-year visit to your dentist will keep your teeth in good condition.”⁷³

Advertisements for toys and games frequently favored war themes. A wide variety of war-themed toys and games were offered, including airplane and train models, air rifles, building blocks, toy soldiers, sporting goods, fishing rods, tires, bicycles, exercising machines, and Milton Bradley Company’s Big Dick, shooting wooden bullets “as fast as you can turn the firing crank....If you are a real live American boy, you will want me.”⁷⁴ Advertising copy for the Gilbert Machine Gun (firing wooden bullets) expressly emphasized how important toys were to

war training: “You can get up the machine gun squad yourself and be its corporal. Every boy ought to learn military tactics so that he will have experience and be ready if his country has to call him.”⁷⁵

Editorial content did not promote commercially produced toys and games, but did encourage athletic endeavor and camp life, and contests for military goals. “When the girls’ camps opened, they were fuller than ever, and every one was committed to a program that included war-time activities, besides the regular schedule of work and play, and which, in spirit at least, was not far behind the army camps.”⁷⁶ An illustration, “Athletics’ Aid to War,” depicted a football player throwing a football next to a soldier, in gas mask, throwing a grenade.⁷⁷ In an accompanying article, Walter K. Towers argued good soldiers must have endurance, power applied, discipline, teamwork, on guard against stratagems, and courage, all part of athletics. “The schools and colleges should continue their athletic activities.”⁷⁸

Another author believed athletic training made American soldiers superior to their German adversaries. “There is a marked similarity between the field formations of a football coach and the manner in which a general distributes his forces in war. There is, also a very close similarity in the manner in which the men are prepared for the two games; for war is nothing more than a game played for the greatest stake in the world—life itself.”⁷⁹

While athletic games and as well as toys could help children become more comfortable and familiar with war as part of their everyday lives, an emphasis in favor of teamwork in both sport and school could build camaraderie and cooperation toward wartime values, and so make war less alien. Working in the spirit of a common goal began with common core values of nationalism. Were these core values so common? President Wilson feared they were not. Theodore Roosevelt believed war training could encourage them.⁸⁰ Editors encouraged children to think with one spirit, one mind, one leader—Uncle Sam—and a single goal. Conversely,

diversity was discouraged, and those who thought or acted outside the norm were harassed and put under suspicion. Most obvious target were the foreign born, and children were encouraged to correct behavior considered to be un-American. The Girl Scouts joined an “America First” campaign: “By subscribing to it Girl Scouts have pledged themselves to co-operate in every possible way to promote the unqualified allegiance of each foreign-born citizen to the United States; to nationalize the use of the English language; to induce the 3,000,000 non-English speaking immigrants to attend evening school.”⁸¹ Possibly disloyal immigrants saw the light in fiction, such as traitorous “Uncle Heinie,” who changed his mind after reading of German atrocities: “From dis day on earth iss but one country for me, und only one flag. Der United States iss mein country, und yonder iss der flag.”⁸²

The editor of *American Boy* emphasized,

An order is to be obeyed, discipline is to be observed. That is something we are learning from the war. If you are under the command of a man or of an organization either in this war or in a peaceful occupation, it is not for you to ask if an order be right, or if you want to obey it, or if it is beneath your dignity to do the thing.⁸³

No middle ground of opinion could be allowed. “In this country there are just two kinds of people—Americans and traitors. You’ve got to be with one or the other. If you are back of your country with every ounce of your energy and with your whole heart; if you are willing to work and sacrifice to bring victory to her in this just cause, then you are an American. If you are not you are a traitor.”⁸⁴

As conformism became a virtue, war became part of nearly every part of the child’s world that could be influenced by adults. School was viewed as excellent preparation for soldiers. “We hope we will not only defeat Germany, but will make future wars impossible.

However, there may be another war—and *you* may be called to serve. Now is the time to get ready. Study. Develop your intelligence. That’s what school is for. Just say that every hour of study is an hour of real service to your country—and that the good student is the good patriot.”⁸⁵ Young children far removed from formal war training could still learn military values in play, as reflected in poetry for *St. Nicholas*’ youngest readers:

Shoulder arm! Forward march! Hep—hep—Halt!

Mark time—forward march—Hep—hep—Halt!

Toodle-oot—Boom! Boom! Soldiers brave are we!

Toodle-oot—Boom! Boom! Neighbors out to see!

Daddy send a telegram to the President;

Tell him we are ready to go when we are sent!⁸⁶

How children responded

As Audoin-Rouzeau noted, it is difficult to find honest portrayals of responses from children to war propaganda. Particularly from younger children, published material tends to reflect what authorities expected to see. Both *St. Nicholas* and *American Boy* offered significant space to writing from its readers, as noted above, and most of this writing did reflect themes similar to those presented by the editors. Earl London, aged 14 from Iowa, won first prize in an *American Boy* letter-writing contest: “If I were old enough I would be over there, but I am only fourteen and pretty small at that. I am a Boy Scout and am patrol leader. I have bought and paid for two Liberty Bonds myself and I am going to send some money to the Belgian children.”⁸⁷

Similar to editorial material, children’s writing seldom reflected themes of hate or atrocity. Unlike the editorial material, a few children asked for God’s help to soldiers, “to protect

you, guide you, lead you from all temptation, and return you to your home and people after you have served your country faithfully, a cleaner, bigger, better man.”⁸⁸

This published work, though, probably does not tell the whole story of how American children responded to the war. While stern themes of duty and patriotism apparently pleased editors of children’s publications, day-to-day truth may also be found in observing children more informally. Writing in 1919, Florence Woolston offered her own observations of how children around her responded to the war. Everyone was involved, she wrote. “Even the children under five years have an organization known as the Khaki Babes. These infants in uniform assemble, kindergarten fashion and solemnly snip for the Red Cross.”⁸⁹ She describes her 12-year-old nephew’s fascination with the war:

No one has got quite so much fun out of the war as Billy and his inseparable companions, Fritters, George and Bean-Pole Ross. Clad in the khaki uniform of the Boy Scouts, with United War Campaign, Red Cross, War Saving, first, second, third and fourth Liberty Loan buttons, small American flags and service pins spread across their chests, they have lived the war from morning until night.

To these children, war was another exciting game, the author noted. Children responded to stern calls to sacrifice and patriotism by perceiving them as part of the play. “Billy’s attitude is that going to war is part of the game; when you’re a little boy you have to go to school; when you’re older, you draw your number and are called to camp—it’s all in a day’s work.” As for the calls to food conservation, “He does not readily respond to the sacrifice of sugar.”

Conclusion

War on a nation-wide scale rivets a society’s attention. Editors recognize their readers’ voracious appetites for war-related material. Editors of publications trying to attract readership of

young people would know the same applies to them. But presenting war-related material is one thing; the kind of war-related material presented is another, and editors who prepared material for children were particularly interested in the values they were reflecting on their pages. World War I was the first war in which children were aggressively encouraged to think, and to act. These children's publications clearly valued action above thought, offering a long list of things children of all ages could do for the home front. But editors also encouraged children to think, as long as the thinking went the right way. This was, as editors pointed out, *their* war, a war fought for the children. Gratitude for and duty to country should motivate children as it could motivate adults, although children's publications generally did not justify war through graphic atrocity stories that outraged adults and contributed to American support for the allies. Children's publication editors tried instead to explain the war in metaphors of childhood, such as a playground or athletic competition. Military values could serve to guide boys, and girls perhaps, on a proper path to adulthood. Children could live out the values of duty, obedience, good health, sacrifice, thrift, clear thinking, responsibility, and in fact most virtues, through quasi-military service.

Values not emphasized through military service were independence, pacifism and toleration. In fact, material in these publications advocated intolerance for non-native English speakers, and for those "slackers" who didn't buy government bonds, learn English, conserve food and fuel, or work at something for the war effort. This assured that children became part of this war no less than adults on the home front, the militarization of childhood. Editors did not completely ignore the terrible consequences of war; descriptions of wounds sometimes were fairly graphic. But they were always made in the context of noble sacrifice for a fight against an enemy that must be stopped, the bullies on the playground trampling the rights of the younger and the weaker.

Children responded as they were instructed to respond, with industrious commitment to war-related jobs, at least as reflected in those who wrote to these publications. But that was not the whole story. Clearly some children found it more appealing to make socks and sell war bonds than to attend school. Repeated admonitions reminded children that the war didn't mean skipping class. The editor of the *American Boy* reminded his readers, "In our opinion a boy who *can* go to school and won't go to school, or a boy who *can* master his studies and doesn't master them, is as much of a slacker as the man who tries to dodge the draft."⁹⁰ Disruption and excitement of a country at war can be a fun to a child not directly involved, an entertaining break in the more drab routine of becoming an adult. While the United States certainly sacrificed lives to the war, more than 100,000, it did not sacrifice as European belligerents sacrificed, and so it was likely most American children did not experience the personal loss of a loved one. War could be amusing and exciting, and painful mostly in the abstract. Such a hope has been the motivation for many 17- and 18-year-olds who choose to follow the colors.

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³ Edward N. Teall, "A Letter to the Boys of America," *St. Nicholas*, October 1917, 1,066.

⁴ "Three Loyal Children of France" *St. Nicholas*, July 1917, 780.

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⁹ Jürgen Reulecke, "Männerbund Versus the Family: Middle-Class Youth Movements and the Family in Germany in the Period of the First World War," in *The Upheaval of War. Family, Work and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, ed. Richard Wall and Jay Winter (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), 446.

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- ¹⁶ *American Boy*, January 1917, 28.
- ¹⁷ Hamilton, 4.
- ¹⁸ *American Boy*, March 1917, 3.
- ¹⁹ *St. Nicholas*, July 1914, 849.
- ²⁰ *St. Nicholas*, July 1917, 771.
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- ²² *American Boy*, June 1917, 3.
- ²³ *The Rally*, March 1918, 6.
- ²⁴ *The Rally*, February 1918, 1.
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- ²⁹ Audoin-Rouzeau, 247.
- ³⁰ McKenzie, 96.
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- ³³ "Save food and serve humanity. Written for *The Rally* by Mary Stevick, at the request of Mrs. Herbert Hoover," *The Rally*, March 1918, 6.
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- ³⁵ *American Boy*, June 1917, 3.
- ³⁶ Ruth G. Bowman, *The Rally*, January 1918, 4.
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- ³⁹ "Another Duty," editorial, *American Boy*, June 1917, 3.
- ⁴⁰ C.H. Claudy, "Will You Do Your Bit? Here's the Way," *American Boy*, June 1917, 9.
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