

Playing at War in Modern Europe

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ABSTRACT

War toys, which have been expanding as an industry since the nineteenth century, are both cultural objects and commercial products. In times of war they contribute to the mobilization of civilians, especially children and the young. For a long time, such toys and games were luxury products. As they became more freely available, they helped shape the imagination and served as a symbolic outlet. In times of peace, they have conveyed a historical discourse whose educational potential remains largely untapped, especially since the emergence of video games. As a medium for interpreting wars of the past they have led to criticism, controversy, and issues relating to memory, and today represent a largely unexplored field of study.



Puppet of an Englishman ready for assembly, 1914. © Landesmuseum Stuttgart/Museum der Alltagskultur Schloss Waldenbuch, F. Schreiber collection, VK 1978/50-8156

Since the nineteenth century, manufactured toys, games, imagery, literature—and from the 1970s onwards video games—have conveyed representations of war that are closely linked to the societies in which they were made. In the era of modern wars, they had a potential for mobilizing that stemmed from adults wanting to more closely involve children in hostilities. In times of peace, the production and appropriation of a historical discourse through

these mediums has raised issues relating to memory.

While war toys can be traced back to Antiquity, their industrial production began around 1870, with a number of factors contributing to their rise, including industrialization, the rise of nationalism, the outbreak of multiple wars, and the emergence of educational methods (M. Montessori, C. Freinet, E. Key, W. Stern). An actual industry developed around them: the technique of chromolithography (printing in colour using limestone) enabled the production of brightly coloured board games, colouring books, and alphabet books connected to war, while the prestige of the army was reflected in military figurines made of tin or lead, diorama boxes, and collections of soldiers and replica weapons inspired by military manoeuvres. These toys were simultaneously commercial and cultural objects. Unlike manufactured toys, which were expensive and rarely used, sheets of cut-out soldiers made by the Pellerin (Épinal, 1796) and G. Kühn (Neuruppin, 1791) workshops were available to a broad public. The toy market reflected the growing militarization of European societies, and was dominated by the German industry, which for the most part was oriented toward export, as demonstrated by the brand Otto Maier founded in Ravensburg in 1883, still famous today by the name of Ravensburger. This situation lasted until the Great War, when each belligerent country favoured its own national production. This conflict also represents a central turning point in the history of war toys, at both the quantitative and qualitative levels.

From 1914, toys became part of the increasing cultural mobilization of all groups at the rear, including the very young. The multiple fronts and various aspects of the conflict were represented, with reproductions of trenches and submarines for young boys, and collections of nurses, soldier dolls, and ration card dolls for girls. These toys offered an avenue for release, with shooting targets, “jerry pin” games, puppets, and mechanically transforming books—whose pages were divided into different parts allowing the reader to form hybrid characters by changing the head or the chest—encouraging the infliction of ill treatment on the enemy. Children were not the only consumers, as chess sets for soldiers and transportable pocket-sized playing cards offered new commercial outlets as well as a source of distraction at the front.

War toys were brought up to date during the Second World War but did not enjoy the same rapid growth. Sheets of images and toys with the effigies of Marshall Pétain, Mussolini, and Hitler were sold, and the famous “Elastolin” figurines of the brothers Otto and Max Hausser (Ludwigsburg), which consisted of a composite material made from glue and sawdust, were modelled on Wehrmacht divisions.

For all that, in times of war, toys and games offered more than just mobilizing potential. They were deemed to be subversive by former combatants and pacifists, such as Ernst Friedrich, who founded the Anti-War Museum in Berlin (fig. 3). They were also thought to possess a life-saving quality, as their symbolic space of liberty and release enabled the young to contend with the violence of war by reliving events in their own way and according to their own plot. This therapeutic aspect was even more present in the games invented by children. In German or occupied cities, children played at “bombings” to overcome their trauma. In the “family camp” of Birkenau, they played a game involving sick inmates being beaten when they fainted during roll call, and a game called “gas chambers,” in which a dugout hole represented the place of extermination, and the stones thrown inside those who died in the crematory ovens. The therapeutic virtues of war games, toys, and children’s drawings from the Spanish Civil War onwards have been explored by child psychiatrists, such as the Brauners. After indoctrination by totalitarian regimes, the supervision and education of children and the young became a priority for all peoples.

After the Second World War, the young became a new international preoccupation (in the wake of the creation of UNESCO in 1945 and UNICEF in 1946). This development was seized upon by the toy industry, which grew substantially in scope thanks to the baby boom and the rapid rise in standards of living.

Although the Cold War led to the remilitarization of toys (Soviet soldier-dolls, Action Joe action figures created by CEJI Arbois in France in 1975, based on the American version of GI Joe), education in peace remained the stated

purpose of each camp. For example, figurines representing different peoples in the USSR were sold in the Eastern bloc to celebrate the spirit of understanding and friendship between peoples, an element that was stressed by Soviet propaganda. The toys produced on both sides of the iron curtain were, incidentally, not solely an extension of the ideological confrontation by other means; they also stemmed from reciprocal fascination, as sales in the West of a miniature replica of the Sputnik satellite orbiting a globe (1957) demonstrate the wonder prompted by Soviet technological prowess.

Colonial wars represent another area of memorial propaganda, with puzzles exalting the grandeur of colonial empires, and inexpensive novels emphasizing colonial exoticism (such as *Le Transsaharien* by Tito Topin in France).

Finally, video games, which appeared on the market in the 1970s, were a true novelty. This new cultural media was also at the centre of ethical and memorial issues raised in all countries by the representations of war in video games. For example, the strategy game *Company of Heroes 2* (2013), which takes place on the Eastern front during the Second World War, caused controversy in Russia because it emphasized the crimes of the Red Army and glossed over the suffering of the Soviet people. Other games, which were developed by “independent” programmers preferring to remain anonymous, also raise ethical problems. These include *Sonderkommando Revolt*, whose object is to step into the shoes of deportees—and which was banned even before its planned release in 2011—and the illegally distributed *KZ Manager* (1990), which involves managing an extermination camp.

As tools for cultural and ideological mobilization, and subsequently as mediums for the interpretation of the past, war toys are part of the memorial battlefield within the history of conflicts.

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