

# Children and Youth

By [Andrew Donson](#)

**Mass conscription recast relationships in families, raised minors' potential as wage earners, and decreased supervision over them. War ravaged the health of young people in Central Europe while improving it in Great Britain, although children everywhere suffered the trauma due to separation from and sometimes death of fathers serving in the military. In all countries it infused children's play and dominated juvenile literature as a topic. On the continent, children had a central place in the mobilization of civilians for war propaganda and voluntary war work. A key legacy of the war was the expansion of state welfare for children.**

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## Introduction

The history of youth and childhood during the First World War was a mostly neglected topic until twenty years ago, when interest rose in the history of everyday life and the cultural history of warfare, and [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau](#) and [Christa Hämmerle](#) published the pioneering studies.<sup>[1]</sup> As the history of childhood and youth has since flourished as a general field, scholarship on the First World War specifically has grown large enough to draw broad conclusions about how the lives of young people changed after 1914 across the combatant states. The literature is most thorough on the topics of schooling, juvenile delinquency, children in [propaganda](#), and adolescent and [children's literature](#). Monographs published in the last ten years have been especially sophisticated in their scope and methodology, such as using primary sources authored by children themselves. However, considerable gaps remain. The social history of working youth in [France](#), the [United States](#), and the British dominions is underdeveloped. There is little scholarship at all in western European languages on any aspect of youth or childhood in eastern or southern Europe.<sup>[2]</sup>

This article focuses on how youth and childhood was comparable and how and why they diverged across the following combatant states: [Germany](#), [Austria-Hungary](#), [France](#), [Italy](#), [Great Britain](#), the United States, and the British dominions of

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[Australia](#), [Canada](#), and [New Zealand](#). More specifically, it discusses how the absence or death of fathers shaped family dynamics on the home front. A critical subject of inquiry is how civilians mobilized young people for the war, both practically and ideologically, through organized recreational associations, juvenile war literature, and [war toys](#). Schools arguably played the major role in this patriotic mobilization. Their development is evaluated not here but in the entry "[Schools and Universities](#)." This article discusses how the war transformed children's play. It connects the rise in working youths' wages to the discourses on juvenile delinquency and youths' involvement in strikes and political protest. Comparison of the effects of the war on children's health demonstrates how the experience of war in the allied states radically diverged from that in Central Europe and the regions the Central Powers occupied, where catastrophic hunger, cold, and disease were primary experiences of the war. Finally, this article discusses the central place that children had in war propaganda.

Much of the analysis depends on the definition of childhood and youth. These terms have historically been elastic in common discourse. However, from a social-scientific standpoint, age fourteen, the school-leaving age in the era of the First World War in most countries, marked the end of childhood and the beginning of youth for most people in Europe. At age fourteen, the vast majority of young people began their working lives as wage laborers, domestic servants, or apprentices. In countries like Germany with advanced school systems, less than 10 percent of male teenagers continued on to a secondary school, and only around one third of these graduated. Just a handful of female teenagers ever continued their education past elementary school.<sup>[3]</sup> In poorer regions of Europe, the number of children attending secondary school was even lower. The age at which youth ended was more ambiguous. For boys and girls before the war, it could extend as far as the age of marriage. This article assumes that, for boys during the war, youth ended with entry or conscription into the military, usually at age eighteen.

## Significance and Comparative Histories

From the standpoint of demographics, youth and children played a more critical role in the First World War than historians have earlier recognized. Because of the high birthrates on the eve of the war, the combatant states had populations disproportionately young. The conscription of tens of millions of men shifted the demographics even further, so that close to half of the civilians on the home fronts in nations like France and Germany were eighteen years old and under. In a [total war](#) where the military had an insatiable demand for food and [labor](#), how to allocate resources to children and youth, as well as exploit their productive potential, was thus significant in overall military strategy. The militaries were not directly involved in youth policy, but they benefited when the civilian [governments](#) mobilized school children to collect recyclables, sell war bonds, and work on farms. They also benefited from forcing schools to make do without the hundreds of thousands of conscripted teachers (see "[Schools and Universities](#)"). Under the authority of teachers, schoolchildren were the civilians who came in most contact with state officials. Thus, they played a key role in being nodes for the patriotic mobilizations organized by states. Finally, as the analysis below shows, the propaganda value of children and youth cannot be underestimated.

The degree that the war influenced childhood and youth depended to a large extent on the percentage of men who served in the military in each combatant state. The more a country took men into the military, the more it upended families, schools, workplaces, and organized leisure. How much childhood and youth changed also depended on how far the patriotic mobilization reached into civilian life. Whether led by ordinary citizens or state officials, the mobilization brought a "[culture of war](#)"<sup>[4]</sup> into the institutions for young people, albeit to highly varying degrees. The upheaval to childhood and youth was directly related to the availability of food, clothing, and coal for civilians, as shortages undermined schooling, organized leisure, and family life.

In the United States and the British dominions, proportionately fewer men served than elsewhere, and [food](#) and coal remained plentiful. Thus, while the culture of war infiltrated schools and juvenile literature in these places, the social consequences of wartime were not comparable to what happened in Europe. In contrast to the rest of the English-speaking world, the changes in childhood and youth during the war ran deeper in Great Britain, where about one quarter of the male adult population was in the military at its peak.<sup>[5]</sup> The culture of war was particularly pronounced in juvenile literature. But because Great Britain proportionally mobilized far fewer adult men than the continental nations, youth and childhood in Great Britain was less upended. Furthermore, because many British believed [nationalism](#) in Germany was the cause of the war, they were skeptical about appearing chauvinist in mobilizing young people. Such an attitude was a brake on efforts to introduce into the school curricula anything that could be construed as remotely jingoist.

The war had the most radical effect on youth and childhood on the continent. In France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy, between one third and half of the male adult population served in the military, and the patriotic mobilization and culture of war

reached deep into schools, organized leisure, and juvenile literature. With access to food and material from North America and the British dominions, the western Allies did not suffer serious shortages in regions they still controlled. By contrast, in Central Europe, the blockade of German ports by the British Navy not only ravaged the health of youth and children but also destabilized schools, devastated organized leisure, and burdened families with extensive labor to survive the era of scarcity.

Even more catastrophic was the experience of children and youth in the war zones and in German-controlled areas of [France](#), [Belgium](#), and [Russia](#). These young people not only faced the same deprivations as their counterparts in Germany and Austria-Hungary but often also saw their homes destroyed or expropriated. Those near the war zones had to sleep with the constant sound of gunfire. Many witnessed civilians subjected to violence and even pets executed arbitrarily by the Germans. Others were separated from their parents who had fled to non-occupied France or had been conscripted to labor for the German army. The youth and children themselves were often required to work for the occupiers.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Absent Fathers

In the main combatant nations, approximately one third of children - more in France and the other continental states and less in the English-speaking states - had fathers in the military. Separation on this scale was unprecedented in the history of the West, and for those families affected, it recast relationships profoundly. The most immediate consequence was economic. Because public assistance for mothers with husbands in the military was usually insufficient, another family member had to work to replace a father's lost income if the family wanted to stay out of poverty. Most often this was the mother. In some cases, she had worked before the war assembling goods at home at a piece rate (homework) and supervising her children but now took a better-paying job in a factory. In other cases, she took a job for the first time, sometimes working in factories and doing piece rate homework. As the new breadwinner, her status rose in the family, leading children to depict her in their school drawings with a new, man-like strength. If a mother worked, she sometimes found replacement caregivers for her children among extended family and neighbors. When an uncle or a grandfather of the children stepped in, he generally asserted the patriarchal authority vacated by the father. Lacking extended family to help, a mother often delegated an older daughter to supervise the younger siblings. Sometimes these daughters were school age, and their frequent long absences were noted by teachers.<sup>[7]</sup>

Another strategy was for a mother to stay home and have one of her children earn money. This person was usually a teenage son who forewent an apprenticeship and took on unskilled wage work. In the war industries, he could earn a man's wage. This income elevated his status in the family, where he sometimes achieved the level of a patriarch, a position reinforced by letters from his father telling him he was the new head of the household. As his status rose, his sisters remarked that he demanded to be treated like his father and burdened them with house chores that in peacetime he had done himself.<sup>[8]</sup> The possibility for such new configurations was not limited to industrial cities. In Great Britain, rural and small-town children as young as twelve were given exemptions to compulsory attendance of school to work on farms, raising their economic value in the family. Although none of the other combatant states issued such a blanket policy, throughout [rural Europe](#), teenage boys and girls did the heavy work like ploughing that had earlier been done by men.<sup>[9]</sup>

Less commonly, mothers sent their teenage daughters to work in factories to supplement family income. Many times these girls took on work normally done by male youths. In these cases, the daughter's status rose in the family. The experience may have fostered a feeling of independence among these female youths, who became primed to assume the role of the so-called new woman after the war.<sup>[10]</sup>

A last scenario for a mother was to take on wage work and simply let her children go unsupervised, as comprehensive schemes to provide daycare for working mothers never came to fruition. The poor supervision was exacerbated by the reduction of schooling to half and even one-third day, particularly in Central Europe. Supervision was even worse when food shortages in Central Europe required that children or mothers spend long hours in queues or roaming the countryside to get food.<sup>[11]</sup>

Although not physically present, an absent father continued to profess his love for his children and assert his authority through [mail correspondences](#). Such an epistolary relationship between children and fathers was in most cases totally new, though far from a complete reconfiguration of fatherhood. In their letters, fathers demanded politeness from their children. They scolded them sometimes and rewarded them other times with items like postcards. Children were inclined to comfort their fathers by promising their continued diligence in school and good behavior. Expecting a life together after the war, fathers and children discussed future projects like making repairs to the house. But in a nation like France, where over the course of the war 15

percent of mobilized soldiers died and 73 percent were casualties, anxiety that a father could be killed any day underlay the letters on both ends of the correspondences. Indeed, the fathers of about 5 percent of children died during the war in Germany and France. The letters accordingly revealed a father more fragile and sensitive than the one in person. Such divulgence of a father's inner emotions was particularly powerful in the letters fathers wrote directly to their children, unmediated by mothers. The father in letters was in this way unlike the one in person. Many fathers were physically wounded or [emotionally traumatized](#). When they returned, they were often not the man their children knew. Children were then often shocked by the authority he exerted over their everyday lives when he returned.<sup>[12]</sup>

Letters also reveal the constant fear of children that their fathers would not survive the war. The long silences between letters exacerbated the agony, but even a period of a few weeks between correspondences could be devastating, as in this letter by the young French boy Albert Despés:

We are worrying a lot because since the 27<sup>th</sup> we haven't had any of news from you, my sweet little father...We are very very worried and today I was at mass to pray to the good Lord that you will return quickly to us and that this cursed war will end.<sup>[13]</sup>

The moment of separation often remained an ingrained, painful memory, as in the essay of a thirteen-year-old German girl:

At the farewell he shook our hands and hugged us in his arms. At this moment we shed bitter tears because it was a painful hour. The eyes of my father did not remain dry either... I couldn't look on when my father said goodbye to my mother. It was time that my father had to go. But he continued to hold her tight. Because of the pain she could no longer cry; it was an agonizing farewell. Finally, my father tore himself loose, and he went with a heavy heart. I tried with all my strength to comfort my mother. But it wasn't useful. She was sad and cried a lot.<sup>[14]</sup>

Teachers reported being overwhelmed in dealing with the grief of schoolchildren who were separated from their fathers or had one who already died in the war. Many historians have been skeptical of using psychoanalytic theory in explaining this emotional deprivation of children during the war. Nevertheless, even a skeptic would be hard-pressed to deny that fear and separation had a profound psychological effect on this cohort who experienced the war in their youth or childhood.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Organized Recreation

The patriotic mobilization of children — that is, getting them to support the war ideologically and volunteer for so-called war work — was largely carried out by schools [see entry "[Schools and Universities](#)"]. But organized youth recreational associations, particularly those with nationalist leanings, also played a major role in Germany and the English-speaking combatant states. (The Catholic [Church](#) long put up resistance against secular youth groups, whose numbers were small in France, Italy, and much of Austria-Hungary.)<sup>[16]</sup> In the English-speaking states, the most prominent of these were the Boy Scouts and the Girl Guides. Immediately at the outbreak of the war, their members volunteered for war work en masse. In England the Boy Scouts worked closely with the army, making bandages for hospitals, moving furniture in barracks, painting huts and fences, and delivering laundry and mail.<sup>[17]</sup> Later they volunteered to man air-raid warning stations, help with the harvest, serve as messengers, and recruit men to enlist. The Girl Guides, the Scout's sister organization, engaged in tasks deemed more appropriate for their gender like volunteering in hospitals. Scout and Guide membership rose quickly during the first years of the war.<sup>[18]</sup> The development of the smaller scout organizations in Italy followed a similar development to those in Great Britain during the war.<sup>[19]</sup>

The Boy Scouts in the United States had a more frontier-oriented, less nationalist outlook before 1917, with some in the organization even calling for [pacifism](#). But after the entry of the United States into the war, the Scouts and the Girl Guides embraced war work, particularly by planting victory gardens, selling war bonds, passing out millions of pro-war flyers, and marching in parades to recruit soldiers. Girl Guides also knit items and made medical supplies. Membership in both organizations rose steeply.<sup>[20]</sup>

On the eve of the war, Germany had ten to twenty times as many children and youth in organized recreational groups as the other combatant states. They also had a far wider variety of organizations. Finally, Prussia had 50,000 part-time social workers whose sole duty was to lead and coordinate the tens of thousands of youth organizations. With this institutional foundation

cooperating with schools, the German-speaking states were better able mobilize children and youth for the war at its outbreak than the other combatants [see “[Schools and Universities](#)”]. In addition to selling war bonds, volunteering in hospitals, knitting items for soldiers, and bringing in the harvest, millions of children and youth in Central Europe worked in collection drives, gathering metal, acorns, glass, leaves, paper, wool, and even hair, among dozens of other items.<sup>[21]</sup> The youth associations also organized millions of teenage boys into so-called pre-military training companies. While the English-speaking combatants energized the drill marches for boys in school, the voluntary companies in the German-speaking states were made up of sixteen to eighteen year olds and focused on drumming up enthusiasm for combat, particularly through mass war games. There was no equivalent to such organizations at this scale in the other combatant states. Some historians have cited the pre-military training companies in Germany as evidence of militarism and harbingers of [fascism](#).<sup>[22]</sup>

Whereas membership in the Boy Scouts rose during the war in the English-speaking states, membership in male youth associations in Central Europe fell precipitously as the military conscripted tens of thousands of leaders. However, middle-class women in Central Europe, in their drive to volunteer for the war effort, founded new associations for female youth, and membership of female youth rose.<sup>[23]</sup>

## Juvenile War Literature

Together with schools and youth associations, juvenile war literature was a third major way that adults drummed up the enthusiasm of young people for the war. The war was an immensely popular subject among young people. To be commercially successful, authors had to integrate it into genres as mundane as animal stories and ABC books. Authors also felt it was their patriotic duty to get young people to support their nation’s cause. French- and English-language children’s authors accordingly emphasized how Germany had violated [Belgium’s neutrality](#), committed [atrocities](#) against the Belgian people, and undertaken a war of aggression for territorial expansion. French authors stressed France’s role as the savior of civilization and the guarantor of freedom and humanity. British authors highlighted Germany’s [militarism](#) and culture of blind obedience, the opposite of the *pax Britannia* and long tradition of limited government and free individuals.<sup>[24]</sup>

Much of the war [literature](#) was simply a recasting of the pre-war genre of adventure stories. Instead of fighting tigers and surviving shipwrecks, the protagonists now became accidental war heroes. The narratives were formulaic. In one variant for school-age children, a boy found himself behind enemy lines, where he discovered and then delivered critical military intelligence by making a daring escape. Disguises, special missions, car chases, escapes from castle prisons, and meetings with top generals were regular elements of these fictions. When authors discovered a female audience for these stories, they drew upon the legends of female child war heroes in occupied France and Austro-Hungarian ones in Galicia and [Serbia](#). In these stories, a girl in the battle zone warned soldiers about enemy positions or helped officers escape danger. The most dominant formula for adolescent readers focused on a boy from an elite high school (public school, *lycée*, or Gymnasium) who volunteered, found himself immersed in battle, broke through enemy lines or achieved some other spectacular military feat, and emerged unscathed. Whether in German, French, or English, these novels distorted the reality of an ugly, tedious [war of attrition](#). The aim was to make the war seem fun. When such depictions grew unbelievable as the horrors of trench warfare became widely known, authors turned to the air and the sea wars. These theaters were more conducive to narratives that suggested war was chivalrous. Children’s authors also turned to fantasy, with young characters winning the day through super-[weapons](#) like a “Vortex gun.”<sup>[25]</sup>

While girls were sometimes the protagonists in the war adventures, they were more often the subject in novels about friendship and growing up on the home front. In these stories, the girls matured by volunteering for the war effort and embracing thrift and personal sacrifice to help their country and families. The stories often ended with the protagonist marrying a soldier. Both of these plot developments confirmed dominant conceptions of femininity.<sup>[26]</sup>

Juvenile war literature differed in the combatant states more in style and political message than in narrative structure. Though much is open to interpretation, German war adventures tended to be more graphic in their violence than French or British ones, particularly in depicting the fierce soldier as the [masculine ideal](#). Whereas French and British stories emphasized the cruelty of the German soldier, German stories highlighted the cowardice of the British. While the French and British justified the war as a defense of republican or liberal institutions, the Germans suggested that their enemies had denied Germany its right to be a world power. Finally, war literature in Germany had a much more didactic realism than in France or the English-speaking states

— that is, in Germany, the war novels aimed to teach the young readers about the actual events of the war.<sup>[27]</sup>

## Toys and Play

In all the combatant states, commercial toys and games were a way that middle-class parents mobilized their children patriotically and brought a culture of war into their lives. Most popular were soldier figurines and models of trenches. Toy [tanks](#), [submarines](#), [zeppelins](#), and [airplanes](#) were also hot sellers. For younger children, parents bought puzzles and coloring books related to the war. Manufacturers sold board games about submarine and cruiser missions. The verisimilitude of the violence was sometimes extraordinary. In the United States, Milton Bradley sold “Big Dick,” a toy machine gun that shot thirty-six wooden bullets. A Leipzig manufacturer sold a toy hand grenade made of two screws on a long threaded nut; filled with gunpowder, it exploded on impact.<sup>[28]</sup>

By almost all accounts, the war dominated children’s play in all of the combatant states. Games like cops and robbers and cowboys and Indians transformed overnight into the battles of France or Great Britain against Germany and other contests. These games were encouraged by teachers, parents, and even government agencies such as the National School Service in the United States, but the children usually directed them without adult interference. Confirming dominant conceptions of femininity, girls took part in this war play as nurses in field hospitals and cooks in mobile kitchens. However, some girls dismissed such gender norms and participated on an equal level with the boys. The twelve-year-old German Elfriede Kuhr wrote in her diary in September 1914, for example, how she led the neighboring children:

I have bought myself a little yellow book that contains all the drill regulations for infantry officers, all the words of command and even little illustrations of the way in which the infantrymen must handle their rifles, bayonets, etc... . We practiced all the body movements – “Stand at ease!” “Easy!” “Quick march!” “Get down!”.... When I asked the children who should be the lieutenant, they all shouted “You!” I would myself rather have been a private.<sup>[29]</sup>

Over the course of the war, such simple drill marches evolved into more elaborate play involving sometimes dozens of children and a vast array of accoutrements ingeniously and sometimes illegally acquired. Props included uniforms, helmets, [barbed wire](#), toy guns, and gas masks while the action involved [spying](#), marching, saluting, going on patrols, digging trenches, and taking prisoners. As the war continued, adults remarked that the war play became rougher and often downright violent.<sup>[30]</sup>

## Work and Delinquency

During the first months of the war, employers released millions of youths who worked in industries like textiles and luxury goods that collapsed in the transition to a war economy. However, as demand for munitions and other military supplies skyrocketed, and millions of former workers were now in the military, all the combatant states faced severe shortages of labor. Employers responded by rationalizing production, making skill less valuable than youthful endurance. They also took advantage of the suspension of some or all of peacetime workplace regulations that limited the daily and weekly number of hours minors were allowed work. In Germany and Great Britain, work shifts for youths could now be as long as fifteen hours per day. Employers filled their vacancies by offering an adult’s wage to working youths. The higher wages enticed millions of apprentices to break their contracts and work in factories as unskilled laborers. Even in industries outside war production, employers paid youths higher salaries and gave them more responsibility than before 1914.<sup>[31]</sup>

The rise in youth wages was steeper for working boys than girls because employers were biased in favor of male physical strength. They also rarely allowed female youths to work alongside men in individual production processes, and the tasks for women almost always paid less. Nevertheless, wages for working female youths rose fast enough to entice hundreds of thousands of rural-born domestic servants to leave their positions for wage work in factories. This transformation in youth labor happened in all the combatant states, but its degree varied according to the proportion of former workers in the military. The rise in wages was accordingly steeper in Germany than in the English-speaking combatant states. However, in Great Britain, hundreds of thousands of teenage boys and girls moved out of their homes and lived semi-independently, supervised by so-called advisory committees on juvenile employment. By contrast, in continental Europe, most working youths continued to live with their families.<sup>[32]</sup>

Working alongside adults in factories, many working youths became active in labor and socialist politics. The participation of

youths in strikes for better wages and working conditions accordingly rose. Angry that their older peers were being taken into the army, and fearful that they too would soon join them, young workers in Italy were on the vanguard of organizing strikes against conscription.<sup>[33]</sup> In Germany, about ten thousand working youths were involved in distributing *Youth International*, the longest running underground antiwar publication during the war. They also organized over a dozen large antiwar demonstrations in a country where, save for the April 1917 and January 1918 strikes, hardly any adults publicly protested the war at all.<sup>[34]</sup>

In addition to raising their status in families as breadwinners, the higher wages opened the world of consumer pleasures to working youths. Teachers, jurists, policemen, and social workers decried how teenagers flush with cash splurged on tobacco, alcohol, gambling, fancy clothes, and the cinema. These habits allegedly corrupted health and moral character. Because of the independence from families that higher wages provided, male youths spent more free time unsupervised, often loitering on the street. Implicit in many of these accusations was a suggestion that young people were prematurely sexually active. Such a view was particularly prominent in England, where female youths allegedly fawned over soldiers in an outburst of "khaki fever." For male youths who gave up apprenticeships, wage work allowed an escape from the watchful eye over their non-work life earlier provided by a master craftsmen or other supervisor. Likewise, independence from the female head of the household was one of the main reasons why female domestic servants left their employer to work in factories. In all the combatant states, some municipal and county governments issued curfews on teenagers, banned their consumption of alcohol and tobacco, limited their attendance of the cinema, or introduced compulsory savings plans, although such practices were far from universal.<sup>[35]</sup>

The urge to regulate youth behavior came from the perception, true or not true, that juvenile delinquency was on the rise. The evidence most often cited was rising crime rates: by 1918, youth crime increased by 50 percent in Great Britain and Italy and 400 percent in Germany over pre-war levels. In Great Britain, birching of schoolchildren increased by 150 percent, and more youths were sent to reformatories and industrial schools than ever before. Whether the statistics reflected a reality of rising misbehavior is difficult to determine. On the one hand, historical crime statistics are notorious for their inaccuracy. Furthermore, the war arguably made prosecutors more vigilant in enforcing laws. In a society at war, civilians were also more aware of nonconformist, unpatriotic behavior. On the other hand, the crime rates could have been lower than reported because law enforcement agencies were understaffed. They lacked the personnel to make arrests and carry through convictions. Many officials also did not have the heart to convict juvenile offenders if their fathers were serving in the military.<sup>[36]</sup>

Real or not, the rise in juvenile delinquency had multiple causes, according to teachers, jurists, policemen, and social workers. In addition to the allegedly corrupting influence of tobacco, alcohol, gambling, and the cinema, the fierce competition among employers for young workers in Germany allowed the teenagers to leave jobs and find new ones as they pleased. This gave them wide latitude to disobey their work supervisors. Youths who were not fortunate to land a high-wage job allegedly stole items to maintain a lifestyle that matched their better-paid peers. Some claimed that the images of the war, particularly in juvenile literature that elevated schoolboys to war heroes, incited mischief. In all the combatant states, absent fathers and weak mothers were the most common reasons cited for the rise in juvenile delinquency. However, in Great Britain, several commissions determined that little evidence supported that the absence of fathers or attendance of the cinema were causes. They alleged that the problem was poor supervision by mothers, particularly those who sought work in the war industries. According to one commission, after 1916 the rise in delinquency was also due to inadequate financial support to mothers of conscripted fathers. Indeed, in Central Europe, most of the rise in youth crime can be explained by rising poverty. For millions of youths, it was now necessary to steal food or break laws on rationing to survive the deprivation. It was not uncommon to see gangs of prepubescent boys break into depots to steal coal and food.<sup>[37]</sup>

## Health and Welfare

The changes in the health of youth and children constituted the most dramatic difference among the combatant states. In Central Europe, by any measure, the health of young people declined rapidly due to the British blockade of food into German ports. According to one study in Vienna in 1918, the mortality rate of schoolchildren, not accounting for the [influenza epidemic](#), increased by one third over prewar levels. 88 percent of children were underweight, and there was an epidemic of bedwetting. A study in Munich in 1917 of 800 schoolchildren determined that they were four to eight pounds lighter for their age than before the war. The health of schoolchildren in Belgium and occupied France was as bad, if not worse. In diaries, autobiographies, and oral histories from Central Europe and [urban regions](#) occupied by Germany, hunger was the single most acute memory.<sup>[38]</sup>

By contrast, the health of schoolchildren in non-occupied France changed little during the war. In Great Britain, schoolchildren's health improved substantially. Public health agencies became more attentive because officials feared that the declining birth rate and the mortality of soldiers undermined national security. The general discourse on post-war reconstruction and so-called national efficiency also focused attention on the health of Great Britain's future workers. Despite cuts to most other social services, school health efforts expanded during the war. The government continued to make sanitary improvements in cities. Most importantly, rising wages increased the standard of living of the British working class, giving their children access to better nutrition.<sup>[39]</sup>

The British policy on the health was just one example of a more general expansion of the welfare state for youth and children in Europe. While the Central European governments did not succeed in maintaining the health of youth and children, that was not for lack of effort. Schools vastly expanded their lunch programs, and municipalities set up so-called war kitchens for poor families. Another example of the drive to expand welfare was the National Child Welfare Conference in 1918, where social workers and state officials from all over Germany convened to plan a unified bureaucracy responsible for all aspects of care for minors of all ages, from nutrition to schooling to vocational training.<sup>[40]</sup> The other European combatant states also made progress founding programs and agencies that took over functions previously done by families. Great Britain expanded visits of social workers to the homes of troubled youth and made plans to found so-called Juvenile Organization Committees in all towns with over 5,000 residents.<sup>[41]</sup> Italian schoolteachers worked with the state to found childcare programs, recreational clubs, summer camps, and preschool programs.<sup>[42]</sup> In Germany, schools and charities organized an operation that sent 1 million children to the countryside, where food was more available than in cities, for stays of one to five months with host families.<sup>[43]</sup> In all the combatant states, the public assistance of families with fathers in the military constituted one of the largest new welfare expenditures in the history of state formation. Whereas charities before the war usually took care of orphaned children, states now took on the long term responsibility of ensuring that the estimated 6 million war orphans received the care that the public deemed they deserved, given that their fathers died for their nation.<sup>[44]</sup>

## Representations in Propaganda

All the combatant states used children instrumentally in various forms of war propaganda. The representations drew upon one or both of two main forms: the innocent child and the heroic child. In images in postcards and war-bonds posters or in live events like singing at military hospitals, the innocent child represented the reason for which the nation was fighting, the future of the country. The propaganda was often linked to pronatalist discourses, as the future security of the nation demanded producing, caring for, and protecting innocent children. A whole set of postcards invoked dry humor in getting across this message by depicting soldiers and patriotic women watering gardens where children were the plants. The innocent child was often cast as a victim of war to transform pathos into patriotism. Such was the purpose of having orphans participate in ceremonies honoring fallen soldiers. The intent was also in photographs of orphans receiving assistance or in postcards showing a boy as the new head of the family. The idea was that if children could make these sacrifices to win the war, so could adults.<sup>[45]</sup>

The representation of heroic children was the more common way to mobilize adults. On postcards, war-bond posters, and even commercial advertisements, heroic children appeared as patriots, often in uniform or waving the national flag. The child was also the focus of patriotic spectacles, such marches in parades by the Boy Scouts that encouraged men to enlist. When schoolchildren in Central Europe went door to door selling war bonds and collecting recyclables, the value that they produced was as much economic as ideological. The same could be said for the young patriots in Australia who offered their services to neighbors, friends, and family in return for small donations to war charities.<sup>[46]</sup>

## Conclusion

Historians have identified much evidence that the patriotic mobilization was successful in getting youth and children to absorb the culture of war. For example, in their school essays, children regularly employed the nationalist language of the patriotic mobilization and demonstrated their deep knowledge of the war. They recognized the sacrifice that the adult world asked them to make to win the war. They also used the common patriotic slurs to denigrate their nation's enemies. This culture of war was not simply induced by their teachers. In the private diaries of children and letters to their fathers, they regularly used the same language.<sup>[47]</sup>



One of the more peculiar consequences of the war for youth and children was that it increased conformity and independence simultaneously. On the one hand, when schools mobilized youth in favor of the war and got them to volunteer for war work, they stifled dissent already silenced in the civilian population at large. On the other hand, as school days shortened, and fathers were conscripted, the supervision of children declined. The independence of teenage boys from familial control also rose if their fathers were conscripted, and left an apprenticeship to earn a man's wage in the war industries. Whatever the cause for the rise in youth crime, the discourse about it reflected anxiety about the decline in adult authority. Such a paradox was particularly prominent in how the war shaped the gender of girls. On the one hand, wartime femininity stressed that female youth and children needed to make more sacrifices than ever for their families and countries. On the other hand, new opportunities to work and join recreational organizations offered independence from their assigned domestic role.

Growing up in wartime produced more distinct generational experiences within specific social milieus. For example, a working-class boy born in 1900 had the experience of earning high wages and being socially elevated as a teenager that someone born in 1905 did not. The significance of this generational experience has not been subject to study across the combatant states. Conclusions based on psychoanalysis about the long-term consequences of the decline of children's health in Central Europe have been criticized as speculation. However, several scholars have argued that in Germany, experiences in wartime, particularly through schooling, socialist youth organizations, and military youth companies, explains why the war youth generation was disproportionately attracted to fascism and radical communism.<sup>[48]</sup>

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## Notes

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2. ↑ This article focuses solely on the literature available in the English, French, German, and Italian languages.
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