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## PLAYING ON UNCLE SAM'S TEAM: AMERICAN CHILDHOODS DURING WORLD WAR I

If World War I has interested historians of the United States considerably less than other major wars, it is also true that children rank among the most neglected actors in the literature that exists on the topic. This essay challenges this limited understanding of the roles children and adolescents played in this transformative period by highlighting their importance in three different realms. It shows how childhood emerged as a contested resource in prewar debates over militarist versus pacifist education; examines the affective power of images of children—American as well as foreign—in U.S. wartime propaganda; and maps various social arenas in which the young engaged with the war on their own account. While constructions of childhood and youth as universally valid physical and developmental categories gained greater currency in the early twentieth century, investigations of young people in wartime reveal how much the realities of childhood and youth differed according to gender, class, race, region, and age.

On October 18, 1917, a shot rang out in the Wilmote home at Pulvers Corner in Poughkeepsie, New York. Eight-year-old Wilber Wilmote had told his thirteen-year-old sister Mary to be a German soldier, and that he would drive her out of the trenches. Wilber then ran to the corner of the kitchen; grabbed his father's shotgun, which he thought was unloaded, and pulled the trigger. Mary, who stood just ten feet away, was hit in the chest and died four hours later.<sup>1</sup> Poughkeepsie was no exception. Judging by several newspaper reports, accidental shootings in the United States spiked in the months following the country's entry into World War I. Many of these shootings involved children. As an increasing number of war games between minors turned deadly, they posed hard questions that contemporary Americans were reluctant to ponder. What does it take for a young person growing up in times of war to become a killer? Can a child be enthusiastic about war and remain innocent at the same time?

When we are confronted with images of children devastated by war and the cultures of violence it breeds, our hearts go out to them. The extent to which human beings are inherently disposed or culturally programmed to empathize with children is perhaps impossible to determine. But there is little doubt that the civilian casualties caused by modern warfare have solidified the notion of children as archetypal victims. The figure of the child brutalized by armed conflict ranks among the most powerful and emotionally charged tropes of our time.

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Children die, lose their homes, and are separated from their families in war. And yet, this narrative obscures as much as it reveals. Children's responses to war were far more complex than the association of childhood and victimhood suggests. The young did not remain passive bystanders; they absorbed the politics that led to war, exploited the sometimes jarring freedoms offered in wartime, and made the experience of war their own.<sup>2</sup> Given the lack of children's voices in historical sources, the quest to ascribe agency to young people can be taxing and treacherous, and focusing exclusively on instances of resistance can lead historians into what Mona Gleason called the "agency trap."<sup>3</sup> To avoid this trap, Susan Miller suggested that we think of children's actions as moving on a continuum "from opposition to assent."<sup>4</sup> War makes for a particularly fertile site to test this continuum and identify the points at which the interests of children aligned with or departed from adult agendas.

Using America's role in World War I as an example, this article examines the demographic and symbolic capital modern societies attached to children in war.<sup>5</sup> Too often historians have seemed unwilling to reflect on the tremendous power vested in children. This reluctance might stem from the perceived "softness" of childhood studies, which dissuades scholars from making big claims about children and youth. Studying children, however, is not about counting dolls and diapers. Fusing the histories of war and childhood can help us appreciate the multiple and diverse roles played by society's youngest members in wartime. It can provide fresh insights into how interacting with children in times of national crisis prompted adults to reaffirm the norms and ideals to which they, consciously or subconsciously, adhered. And it can raise awareness of how children functioned as "innocent weapons," enabling actors of varied persuasions to impose moral clarity on a messy reality.<sup>6</sup>

Let me clarify my use of terminology. This article defines childhood broadly. It seeks to include the lives of young people from toddlerhood through adolescence as they acquired visibility and meaning in a world at war. This wide lens allows us to see how war pushed societies to rethink the relationship of age and citizenship and renegotiate transition points on the developmental trajectory from childhood to adulthood. Early twentieth-century associations of youth with vitality and dynamism set adolescents apart from children, yet both childhood and youth became powerful metaphors that connected references to an idyllic past with visions of either glorious or gloomy national and international futures.

The historian Tara Zahra astutely called childhood a "deceptively universal concept."<sup>7</sup> It is universal in the sense that we draw certainty about what constitutes childhood from the biological fact that everybody is conditioned to grow from infancy to adulthood. At the same time, individual experiences of childhood, as well as the question who counted as a child, depended heavily on age, gender, class, race, religion, and state politics, but also on when and where a person was young. Given their geographical distance from and the late entry of the United States into the war, American children were never impacted to the same degree as their European peers. Disruption of home life and schooling, absent fathers, hunger, and the deaths of family and friends in combat and through starvation remained less frequent. And yet, there are important lessons to be learned from how American children of various backgrounds moved—sometimes playfully, sometimes fearfully—on the shifting terrains of nation, war, and international engagement.

When pondering these lessons, it is equally important to reflect on how representations of children were complicit in shaping adult attitudes toward the war.

No analysis of the intergenerational spaces occupied by American children and their adult supervisors during World War I would be fully satisfying without surveying prewar conditions. This is why the following section offers an overview of the contested role of war in early twentieth-century children's upbringing. It focuses in particular on the rise of peace education initiatives in Europe and North America that sought to reverse the tendency in schools to indoctrinate youth into a militarized nationalism. After this prelude, the article turns to the affective power of U.S.-produced war posters published after 1914 that depicted childhood suffering and youthful patriotism, which served to discredit the pacifist notion that initiating children into the world of war was utterly immoral. The third section then delves into children's involvement in the U.S. war effort. Rather than making young Americans appear as passive subordinates, this part reveals that the children's actions in support of (or opposition to) the war reflected larger social divisions as well as conflicting expectations with regard to the proper place of children in times of war.

#### EDUCATION IN PEACE AND WAR

By November 1914, the reformer and peace educator Fannie Fern Andrews had given up hope that America's children could be shielded from the bloodshed that proceeded apace on the other side of the Atlantic. Having toured classrooms all over the country, Andrews found the war to be "the subject of supreme moment." Like their elders, "the children ... eagerly watch the newspapers, scan the war maps, listen to heated discussions, and form what may or may not be correct opinions." As the founder of the American School Peace League, which had begun to circulate pacifist literature for high school students in concert with the U.S. Bureau of Education as early as 1912, Andrews dreaded the barbarizing impact of war on young minds. But she also saw its inescapability as an opportunity to advance her cause. Instead of fanning the flames of partisanship, America's teachers should lead "every boy and girl" to "look upon this spectacle of human suffering and devastation with horror" and take "an interest in the movement which shall bring about the reign of law in place of the reign of the sword."<sup>8</sup>

Split over how to respond to an international crisis that had descended into carnage, Andrews and her compatriots were also struggling over the kind of civic virtues that should guide the education of young people growing up in a world at war. Tensions over the best way to prepare children for future conflict while preserving childhood innocence were especially evident in clashes between war pedagogues and peace educators after 1900. These clashes played out transnationally but assumed a peculiar character in the United States, where the Prussian model of mass conscription was absent and invasion fears were ephemeral due to the country's geographical location. Peace educators thrived in an environment that regarded schools as the principal means to advocate social justice at home and international understanding abroad. Progressive Era reformers such as Jane Addams and John Dewey joined Andrews in challenging traditional curricula that celebrated martial valor and sacrifice. Teaching children to avoid war, according to Dewey, was the pinnacle of democratic citizenship since it reconciled instilling in the young "national loyalty" and "patriotism" with "superior devotion to the things which unite men ... irrespective of national political boundaries."<sup>9</sup>

With the expansion of the public school system in early twentieth-century America, schoolteachers assumed new importance when it came to convincing the young of the righteousness, or alternatively the folly, of war. As Susan Zeiger has argued, the fact that female teachers were overrepresented in Progressive Era campaigns to merge civic and peace education proved to be at once a blessing and a curse.<sup>10</sup> Organizations such as the American School Peace League (ASPL), founded in Boston in 1908, strengthened the ties between white middle-class teachers-turned-reformers working in the fields of education, pacifism, and women's suffrage and added to their public visibility. Unlike their Victorian Era predecessors, female activist teachers claimed to protect children from the horrors of war as public servants, not as mothers. In guiding children toward peace and brotherhood, however, these pedagogues faced accusations from conservative educators that by replacing stories of hypermasculine warriors with those of empathetic and nurturing men and women, they were creating feminized boys, not better citizens. The pressure for political conformity mounted in the aftermath of the U.S. declaration of war in April 1917. Denounced by their own students, pacifist teachers were harassed and fired. Acting out of self-preservation, Andrews and her coworker Ella Lyman Cabot called on like-minded teachers to shift gears and impart lessons of Anglo-American moral superiority.<sup>11</sup>

When objecting to raising the nation's children to admire soldiers and generals, peace educators were battling a tendency, not so much a state-sponsored scheme. War pedagogy did not exist in the United States as a formalized movement as it did in wartime Germany, but was rather the aggregate of a diverse set of cultural traditions, social experiments, and local grassroots initiatives.<sup>12</sup> In a society that cared more about solving the problems caused by industrialization, urbanization, and mass immigration than national security issues, official efforts to militarize youth were limited. School cadet corps and boys' drill companies, which were promoted by members of the armed forces since the late nineteenth century, failed to catch on beyond a few high schools and universities. In places where volunteer military training camps attracted adolescent boys and college-aged young men, the daily routines of marching long hours and preparing for imaginary attacks bred boredom. Many boys left without graduating.<sup>13</sup> The proponents of national preparedness, who reached a wider audience after the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, also accomplished relatively little in terms of persuading young Americans to acquaint themselves with the basics of military training. Although Theodore Roosevelt and Leonard Wood—to name just two leading advocates of preparedness—argued that their movement infused patriotism in youths of all classes and backgrounds, its white middle-class orientation bore little resemblance to the experiences of children brought up outside the social confines of that group.<sup>14</sup>

It would be fallacious, however, to mistake the ineffectiveness of top-down militarization schemes for the absence of military values in American children's lives prior to 1917. The nation's popular culture was awash with references to past examples of martial glory. Learning about America's war heroes from George Washington and Andrew Jackson to Theodore Roosevelt, saluting the flag, and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of each school day became mandatory parts in the instruction of young Americans. Even educators who might have felt uneasy about teaching students that the paramount duty of a citizen was to fight for his country were likely convinced that they were inculcating proper gender ideals. Boys in particular were expected to act out

aggressive impulses in team sports, get rough and dirty in the outdoors, and read juvenile novels with a healthy dose of frontier violence to offset the potentially feminizing influences of church and home.<sup>15</sup> In addition, newer theories of adolescence and masculinity, which arose from fears that young American males influenced by women and the comforts of modernity would grow up soft and weak, inspired a host of patriotic youth organizations that wanted to help boys acquire manly character and self-reliance. Preparing boys for social leadership roles was the stated rationale of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). One of the more successful masculinization endeavors of the time, the Boy Scouts appealed primarily to boys and men from white, middle-class, and Protestant backgrounds and drew the support of a broad coalition of business, military, and political leaders. Though advertised as a nonmilitary venture, the BSA introduced army-style ranks, grouped boys into "troops," made them wear uniforms, and taught them to honor the Stars and Stripes.<sup>16</sup>

The ambivalent attitude of the BSA toward war exemplified broader uncertainties about the extent to which American children and adolescents should be raised as citizen-soldiers. While peace educators may have overstated the dangers of formal military instruction, they knew that a romantic understanding of war could always lurk behind the virtues of obedience, service, courage and loyalty that pervaded children's culture in the early twentieth century, especially (but not exclusively) in its white middle-class variant. The United States, thus, approached World War I with a bifurcated image of the child: one that radiated precious innocence and vulnerability but also embodied an archaic will to fight.

#### CHILDREN IN WAR PROPAGANDA

While the battlefields of World War I were trembling under the detonation of shells and grenades, the societies involved in the conflict witnessed an explosion of visual culture. Photography and motion film epitomized the modernity of the war, yet it was the poster that became the favored propaganda tool of the period. Easy to produce and easier to distribute, war posters reached masses of people in every major combatant nation. Posters drawn up by advertisers and government officials were glued to factory walls, shop windows, streetcars, bus stops, schools, and were reproduced in newspapers as part of a larger effort to mobilize civilian populations and meld them into an imagined home front. Images of children figured regularly in that effort.

Civic organizations such as the Red Cross or the YMCA recruited artists to produce patriotic posters of their own, yet their output was miniscule compared to the muscle the U.S. government put behind distributing what they considered a proven visual method with the help of some of the nation's finest illustrators. By the end of the war, the War Department alone had printed more than four million posters.<sup>17</sup> Leading the effort was George Creel's Committee on Public Information (CPI), installed by President Wilson in April 1917 to sway public opinion in favor of the war. "People might choose not to attend meetings or to watch motion pictures," Creel allegedly said, "but the billboard was something that caught even the most indifferent eye."<sup>18</sup> Cognizant of childhood's sentimental power, Creel had made his mark in the early 1910s as a crusader against child labor and abuse.<sup>19</sup> Responding to Wilson's call to arms, Creel partnered with the most famous American illustrator of the period, Charles Dana Gibson, to sell

key messages about the war. This included playing on understandings of children as embodiments of pure morality and of undeserved suffering.

My analysis of the visual rhetoric of childhood in U.S. propaganda during World War I is based on a digitized sample of 774 posters made available through the Library of Congress (LoC). Of these 774 posters, roughly one-tenth, that is, 71, foreground children in various war-related contexts. In general terms, these representations can be subsumed under the rubric of one (or a mixture) of two pictorial types—the figure of the *victimized* and the *patriotic* child.<sup>20</sup> A detailed reading of three posters included in the LoC collection will highlight major themes and contexts—from long-distance empathy to the mobilizing power of exemplary conduct—where the propagandistic use of children had the biggest effect.

What was the purpose of posters that cast children as the quintessential victims of war? How was that victimhood depicted? One poster, issued in May 1917 by the American Red Cross on behalf of the American Fund for French Wounded, an organization run by American women living overseas to aid wounded Allied soldiers, shows a nurse surrounded by destitute young children, some with French flags, as a woman on her knees hands the nurse an infant. The poster's caption "Motherless, Fatherless, Starving—How Much to Save These Little Lives?" is a poignant call for intervention on behalf of the suffering children of one of America's key allies.<sup>21</sup> Together with a host of other posters that center on imperiled French, Belgian, and Serbian children, the illustration blends the discourses of child saving and humanitarianism. It taps into what gender studies scholar Laura Briggs called "the visual iconography of rescue," one that provided a corridor for adult Americans to imagine the problems of the needy and position themselves as their champion.<sup>22</sup> In focusing on age rather than gender, the poster portrays violence against children as the ultimate crime. By extension, it confers a special kind of nobility to those willing to punish the enemy for his transgressions against the helpless. Righteous anger over the mistreatment of foreign children forged transatlantic bonds of affection and became a crucial emotional corollary to presenting the war against Germany as a conflict between civilization and barbarism.

Like all sensations, anger can be a fleeting emotion that needs constant jolts and shocks to transform momentary irritation into a prolonged sense of indignation. A chief function of war propaganda was to trigger such impulses, to intensify one's identification with the ongoing war effort, and to stun the public with evermore frightening representations of the enemy's capacity for evil. As the anti-German propaganda campaign escalated in the United States, the depictions of children brutalized by the German war machine became more gruesome. An unsparingly gory image first shown in a 1915 edition of the weekly magazine *Life* reappeared at the height of the Third Liberty Loan Campaign in April 1918: it depicted a German soldier parading with toddlers and babies impaled on his bloodied bayonet.<sup>23</sup> It is probably impossible to know whether such illustrations made any difference in terms of swaying more Americans to open their wallets for the war effort, but it is equally conceivable that the constant barrage of violent images had the contradictory effect of desensitizing their intended audience to the horrors of warfare.

A far less grisly poster created by the illustrator Herbert Andrew Paus, who was a member of the CPI-led Division of Pictorial Publicity, and published in early 1918 by the U.S. Treasury Department suggested that the war also posed a threat to America's children. Urging citizens to buy war saving stamps, the poster depicts a nude child

standing next to the arm of the Statue of Liberty. The accompanying caption reads "Save Your Child from Poverty and Autocracy."<sup>24</sup> The figure of the naked child serves as an allegory for the vulnerable nation. Ensuring the survival of children, it seemed to say, was a responsibility to be shouldered by soldiers and parents alike. Child-centered propaganda resonated with pronatalist discourses, which held that the nation's biological survival demanded producing and protecting innocent children. Making the world safe for democracy and a safe place for children to grow up appeared as identical priorities.

Representations of *patriotic* children were just as commonly used to rally Americans behind the war effort. Remarkably, no child was found too young to play on Uncle Sam's Team. As one poster commissioned by the U.S. Food Administration in May 1917 and completed by the Massachusetts-born painter Charles Cushman Parker implied, even toddlers were supposed to "do [their] bit" by eating oatmeal and saving wheat for the soldiers.<sup>25</sup> Food and patriotism also converged in posters that encouraged children and adolescents to join voluntary youth organizations such as the Junior Red Cross, the Boy Scouts, and the U.S. School Garden Army. These illustrations spoke to minors as much as they did to adults. The idea was that if kids could lend their time and enthusiasm to winning the war, so could the grown-ups.

In addition to presenting children as model citizens, these posters are interesting for the countervailing tendencies they reveal. One major tension concerns the paradox of childhood in the age of total war, a time when societies claimed to uphold the ideal of childhood as a sheltered space of existence even as they accepted the need to mobilize children for war. World War I Americans grappling with this paradox responded by paying greater attention to age, especially by slicing up childhood and youth into smaller cohorts to define age- and gender-appropriate spheres of involvement. Proper home-front activities ranged from eating properly for preschoolers and saving quarters for war stamps for elementary schoolchildren to gardening for older girls and premilitary training for adolescent boys.

At the same time, these images tell us a lot about the universalist pretensions of Western constructions of childhood, and the ways in which these constructions denied difference. Of all 71 posters in my pool, only one shows a child of a darker complexion. Even those posters that highlight youngsters in regions of the world where whites were in the minority cast their protagonists in Caucasian features. The artists may have felt this was the best way to foster feelings of solidarity between a white middle-class viewership and their objects. Yet this mode of representation also solidified whiteness as the norm of what it meant to be young and endangered in times of war. The motif of the white child inserted a biopolitical as well as moral component into official U.S. war propaganda: it hid the nation's white supremacist past, present, and possible future behind a racialized notion of childhood innocence while projecting vice and guilt on its adversaries.<sup>26</sup>

Lest there be any misunderstanding, the whitening of war childhoods was not consciously rooted in a viciously racist plot. For many internationally minded Americans of the World War I period, universalizing the trope of the endangered white child constituted a critical link connecting domestic Progressive Era discourses of child saving to the nascent field of international child rescue. The Near East Relief program, which coordinated American efforts to provide food and shelter for survivors of the Armenian genocide, illustrates this. The prewar advertising industry had already conditioned Americans to see white, big-eyed children as epitomes of beauty and purity when representations of

surprisingly light-skinned Armenian boys and girls were tugging at the heartstrings of potential donors.<sup>27</sup> Protestant missionaries and philanthropists who formed the backbone of the Near East Relief prompted the country to action by emphasizing the religious identity of the Armenians as “ancient Christians.” At the same time, they made sure that contemporary racializations of the latter that grouped them as either part of the Caucasian or Oriental “races” would tip in the direction of the former collective.<sup>28</sup>

The men and women who ran the fundraising operations campaigns by the Near East Relief and similar humanitarian campaigns certainly understood the selfish elements that drove national and international politics. Yet they were equally adept at using children to convey the notion that America wielded its power for spiritual and moral fulfillment. These ideological projections, of course, were not about children “as they were,” or the multiple ways in which young Americans engaged with the war on their terms. The following section offers a glimpse into how the politics of gender, age, class, and race shaped U.S. children’s responses to the war, individually as well as collectively.

#### CHILDREN AS ACTORS

Despite their sloganesque nature, displays of youthful jingoism accessed a simple reality: American children did turn out in throngs to support the war. They promoted War Saving Stamps and Liberty Bond programs, collected scrap metals and other materials that could be used for the war effort, participated in patriotic gatherings, and cheered the soldiers as they departed for Europe. To march behind the “martial music,” one Boy Scout remarked in October 1918, was “a grand and glorious feeling” and “made us feel like really and truly soldiers.”<sup>29</sup> Parents and teachers who were quick to recognize that the young greeted Uncle Sam’s call to arms with fervor equal to that of their elders met the children halfway. Youth organizations in particular, many of which expanded in the superpatriotic climate of 1917 and 1918, rendered visible and gave structure to young people’s desire to become involved while promising that children and youths would act within larger adult-formulated paradigms.

The concurrent growth of the BSA and their female counterparts, the Girl Scouts of America (GSA), suggests the manifold ways in which Americans, not unlike their European contemporaries, had come to accept the potency of children mobilized for war.<sup>30</sup> To be sure, this faith in the semi-military and political productivity of the young was heavily inflected by gender. Not only did the BSA and GSA remain strictly separate organizations; their respective ideals of young masculinity and femininity also circumscribed the war-related tasks performed by their members. In the case of the Girl Scouts, the emphasis on asserting a girl’s right to participate in public affairs while teaching them traditional domestic skills pushed young females toward a particular set of activities. By plowing victory gardens, assisting overworked nurses, and volunteering at Red Cross sewing rooms, girls could show their patriotism without facing charges of crossing gender lines and “imitating” boys.<sup>31</sup> Fears that the instability of war might destabilize the gender order surfaced in Boy Scouting as well. If making boys into men involved the possibility of making soldiers, it seemed only plausible that the BSA adapted to wartime exigencies by developing something akin to a premilitary apprenticeship program. Unlike girls, boys in scout uniforms served as dispatch bearers, organized patrols to watch for enemy ships, burned German-language newspapers, and followed



orders to look for treasonous conduct in their communities. A scheme to have Boy Scouts tend gardens similar to the one developed by the GSA met with less enthusiasm, probably because boys longed for more manly assignments.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond swelling the ranks of organized youth groups, the war put an indelible stamp on children's culture. Two months after the Armistice, journalist Florence Woolston published an article in which she describes how the war had changed her then twelve-year-old nephew Billy, who grew up in a "one hundred percent patriotic" suburb of New York. With his friends, Billy participated in several scrap drives and fundraising efforts but also stood at street corners to monitor the traffic on gasoline-less Sundays, throwing pebbles and yelling "O you Slacker!" at drivers whose cars did not brandish a doctor's or military sign. Hurling the insult "You Kaiser!" at another boy was enough to start a schoolyard brawl, and the games Billy and his friends played were interspersed with military vocabulary: they called their school "the trench," they went "over the top," they waged mock battles in dugouts, "carried kits, ate mess, and had elaborate systems of wig-wagging and passwords." When his parents intervened and called him back home, Billy threw up his hands and cried, "I surrender!" Much of Billy's war diet, Woolston, speculates, must have come from watching anti-German movies such as *Wolves of Kultur* (1918) or weekly newsreels where actual battle scenes were shown.<sup>33</sup>

One can justifiably question whether the mobilization of children had any discernible effect on the nation's fighting power, yet opinion makers and political leaders never grew tired of underlining the value of the young as symbols of untainted patriotism. Woodrow Wilson, for one, extolled the BSA for setting a splendid example of how to train the nation's boys to assume the responsibility of maintaining America's "ideals, her standards and her influence in the world."<sup>34</sup> Just below the surface of this high idealism, however, lurked concerns that Americans shared with other advanced nations at war. With fathers joining the army and the disintegration of prewar family routines, anxieties about juvenile delinquency rose sharply. Images of street ruffians and vagabond kids became more frequent in newspapers, as did reports about spikes in youth crime. More girls were caught shoplifting, while boys were brought into court for stealing food and clothing from railroad cars. Sexual morals loosened, much to the chagrin of one Chicago judge, who attributed the "increase in immorality" largely to the "adoration in which young girls hold soldiers and sailors."<sup>35</sup> As the sociologist Winthrop D. Lane soberly concluded in the summer of 1917, "already probation officers in New York City are reporting an increase in the number of juvenile offenders ... and this is attributed by the officers themselves to the unsettlement of life and thought caused by the war."<sup>36</sup> Clearly, where some praised the young as model warriors, others warned that the breakdown of peacetime restraints generated opportunities for misapplied energy.

War work for underage Americans served the dual tasks of inspiring adults and disciplining the young. Admittedly, this statement is painted with a rather broad brush, and every analysis has to be mindful of the local circumstances that decided whether children wound up as willing executioners of adult designs or as subversive actors. Generally, through, young people refused to be mere pawns in the hands of their elders. If adults were not worried about adolescent recalcitrance, they expressed astonishment at just how aggressive the youngest members of society could be in coping with the situation that their country had gone to war through improvised play (at times with deadly

results, as the case of the Wilmote children shows). A burgeoning war toy industry opened up new possibilities for children looking for ways to process their confusion and release their anger—to the chagrin of progressive educators who regarded the war as a bad influence on impressionable young minds. “The boys who were killing now were seven, eight, nine, and ten then,” explained the American psychologist A. A. Brill, who was grappling with the mounting homicide rates of the postwar period. “They waged mimic wars with tin soldiers and they chose for hero-worship the man who had brought down 15 enemy planes, who had bayoneted 20 foemen in a bull rush across to the waiting trench. One inhibition was swept away. . . .”<sup>37</sup>

Young people’s dreams of achieving glory coexisted uneasily with the rules and restrictions imposed upon them in other places as well. Just two weeks after the United States had declared war on Germany, two rivaling American Scout organizations—the BSA and a much smaller and short-lived association that called itself the “United States Boy Scouts”—found themselves at the center of a national debate over the ethics of child mobilization in a democracy. Parents and educators were outraged after reading reports that a contingent of United States Boy Scouts in Bridgeport, Connecticut, had been patrolling the streets of their community armed with rifles. BSA organizers scrambled to repair the damage, stating that their program did “not put the idea of killing into the minds of [our boys] . . . Uncle Sam does not want boy soldiers.”<sup>38</sup> While adult leaders in the Boy Scouts of America were busy fending off charges of militarism, the boys responded quite differently to the situation. After being told to continue their drills with wooden poles instead of guns, the enthusiasm of a BSA troop in Memphis, Tennessee, waned. “That kind of put a damper on it,” one of the boys remembered, “We didn’t like it because [people] called us wooden soldiers.”<sup>39</sup> The rifle controversy shows that the ambitions of young and old with regard to the place of minors in war did not always march in lockstep. In fact, it suggests that the same sense of service that adults wanted to spark in children proved the most difficult to control, especially in circumstances when young people “acted up” or treated the war as a fast track to the privileges of adulthood.

Underage soldiering was the most glaring, yet least talked about, manifestation of how children defied the rules of the adult world when it came to their roles in war. The U.S. Army and Navy pledged that they would enforce their minimum age requirements of eighteen, but (though there are no reliable figures how many) a number of boys were eager to join the fight—so eager that they lied about their age. One youngster who was accepted into service was fourteen-year-old Mike Mansfield, who later represented Montana in the U.S. Senate. The 5-foot, 4-inch tall Mansfield ran away from home, altered his birth certificate, and went on several transatlantic escort missions with the *USS Minneapolis*.<sup>40</sup> The existence of boy soldiers like Mansfield was riddled with ambivalence—for some, they reflected an older ideal of heroic sacrifice; for others, they represented the failure of the state to defend the modern ideal of a protected childhood.

Expectations with regard to a proper wartime childhood were bypassed in yet another way during a parade that took place in New York on July 28, 1917. There were no loud cheers, no patriotic banners, only muffled drumbeats to be heard at this “silent parade.” Black activists headed a procession of up to ten thousand African Americans who, instead of voicing their support for the war, had come out to protest lynching and anti-

black violence. A few hundred black children had joined the march, clad in white and carrying signs reading "Mother, do lynchers go to heaven?" and "Mr. President, why not make America safe for democracy?"<sup>41</sup> It is unlikely that these children had turned their bodies into sites of political dissent entirely of their own volition, yet their presence added an increased sense of urgency to the protest. Leading off with children was an act of demographic resistance, allowing the African Americans to highlight their vulnerability as well as their determination to survive as a race. Moreover, by applying Wilson's famous slogan to U.S. race relations, the protesters exposed the double standard of a society that empathized with foreign children tormented by German militarism while failing to speak out when black children had become the victims of colonialism and racism. Why play on Uncle Sam's Team if Uncle Sam wasn't playing for you? African American youths, too, had enlisted in a war, but it was a war fought with different weapons against a different enemy.

Survival and adaptation also became the watchwords for young Americans whose background marked them as suspicious, if not outright hostile, in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon mainstream. Despite their age, children who identified with their parents' German American heritage found themselves subject to reproof by civic actors and state authorities. This may come as no surprise, but the anti-German passions of 1917 and 1918 that, among other things, led to the prohibition of teaching German in schools left German American children potentially traumatized, demonstrating that the realities of wartime childhood were divided by not just by gender, race, and class, but by ethnicity as well. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while some youths refused to disown their culture at their own peril, others suffered from the irresponsible behavior of their parents who were willing to put their children at risk as they resisted wartime Americanization efforts. In Illinois, one seventeen-year-old German American girl was kicked out of school because she would not stand up and sing "America the Beautiful." Reportedly, she had followed the advice of her parents.<sup>42</sup> A Bohemian-born mother of five in Chicago deflected criticism that she was not loyal to the Stars and Stripes by pointing to the patriotic service of her children, true or not.<sup>43</sup> Even as the attacks on children in the United States never reached the atrocious levels common to war zones in Europe and the Near East, they indicate just how selectively ideals and ideas about childhood were applied in times of war. With the model of a protected childhood available to only a certain segment of the nation's youngest citizens, the U.S. entry into World War I deepened, rather than healed, existing cleavages within American society.

## CONCLUSION

The historian Joseph Hawes once said that childhood is "the place where we can catch a culture in high relief."<sup>44</sup> This is especially true of war, which gives historians access to the lives of children that peacetime rarely offers. Though far removed from the fighting, American children and youths of various ages were called upon to contribute to the war effort in ways small and large. In reflecting on these contributions, we can find traces of an intergenerational tug-of-war over the meaning of childhood that played out simultaneously to the actual war. Children were two things—undervalued historical actors and a cultural lens through which societies viewed themselves and others. At the very least, historians should note that children were actively engaged in the construction of

their childhoods, and that the boundaries of what it meant to grow up in times of war were drawn and redrawn through dynamic, contested, and locally specific exchanges involving young and old people alike. Just as the lives of children were diverse, childhood never existed in the singular. More than victims, children and youths were seen as future citizens, as future defenders, as one of the objects about which wars were fought, and as one of the resources for fighting them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Kills His Sister in Playing War,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 19, 1917. For similar incidents, see “Girl Playing War Shot in Eye with Air Gun,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 19, 1917; “Vermont Boy and New York Girl Killed Playing War,” *Boston Daily Globe*, Oct. 1917; “Brockton Boy Shot While Playing War with Chum,” *ibid.*, Dec. 29, 1917; “Youth Kills Baby Brother,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 27, 1918.

<sup>2</sup>Examples of the emerging field of research on the history of childhood and war are James Marten, ed., *Children and War: An Anthology* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Elizabeth Goodenough and Andrea Immel, eds., *Under Fire: Childhood in the Shadow of War* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008); and Mischa Honeck and James Marten, eds., *War and Childhood in the Era of the Two World Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). For works focused on the United States, see William M. Tuttle, *Daddy’s Gone To War: The Second World War in the Lives of America’s Children* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and James Marten, ed., *Children and Youth during the Civil War Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup>Mona Gleason, “Avoiding the Agency Trap: Caveats for Historians of Children, Youth, and Education,” *Journal of the History of Education* 45:4 (2016): 446–59.

<sup>4</sup>Susan A. Miller, “Assent as Agency in the Early Years of the Children of the American Revolution,” *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9:1 (Winter 2016): 49.

<sup>5</sup>For works on children in World War I dealing with other national contexts, see Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *La guerre des enfants (1914–1918). Essai d’histoire culturelle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1993); Christa Hämmerle, ed., *Kindheit im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1993); Andrew Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land: Pedagogy, Authority, and Nationalism in Germany, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); and Rosie Kennedy, *The Children’s War, Britain 1914–1918* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>6</sup>Margaret E. Peacock, *Innocent Weapons: The American and Soviet Politics of Childhood in the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup>Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe’s Families after World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>8</sup>Fannie Fern Andrews, *The War: What Should be Said About it in the Schools?* (Boston: American School Peace League, 1914), 4, 6.

<sup>9</sup>John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 94.

<sup>10</sup>Susan Zeiger, “The Schoolhouse vs. the Armory: U.S. Teachers and the Campaign against Militarism in the Schools, 1914–1918,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15:2 (Summer 2003): 150–79.

<sup>11</sup>Ella Lyman Cabot, Fannie Fern Andrews et al., eds., *A Course in Citizenship and Patriotism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918, revised version), iii.

<sup>12</sup>On “war pedagogy” in World War I Germany, see Andrew Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>13</sup>See David I. MacLeod, “Socializing American Youth to Be Citizen-Soldiers” in *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914*, eds. Manfred F. Boerneke, Roger Chickering, and Stig Förster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 143–46.

<sup>14</sup>See John A. Thompson, *Reformers and War: American Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 139.

<sup>15</sup>MacLeod, “Socializing American Youth,” 147–56.

<sup>16</sup>On the Anglo-American origins of the Boy Scouts, see Benjamin R. Jordan, *Modern Manhood and the Boy Scouts of America: Citizenship, Race, and the Environment, 1910–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of

North Carolina Press, 2016), 17–43; and Mischa Honeck, *Our Frontier is the World: The Boy Scouts in the Age of American Ascendancy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>17</sup>Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>18</sup>George Creel quoted in Eric Van Schaak, “The Division of Pictorial Publicity in World War I,” *Design Issues* 22:1 (Winter 2006): 33.

<sup>19</sup>Edwin Markham, Benjamin Barr Lindsey, George Creel et al., *Children in Bondage: A Complete and Careful Presentation of the Anxious Problem of Child Labor* (New York: Hearst's International Library, 1914).

<sup>20</sup>My distinction of the victimized and patriotic child is loosely based on Donson, “Children and Youth” in *International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 1914–1918*, [http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/children\\_and\\_youth](http://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/children_and_youth) (accessed June 1, 2017).

<sup>21</sup>“Motherless, Fatherless, Starving—How Much to Save These Little Lives” (May 1917), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/wwipos/item/2002708932/> (accessed June 6, 2017).

<sup>22</sup>Laura Briggs, “Mother, Child, Race, Nation: The Visual Iconography of Rescue and the Politics of Transnational and Transracial Adoption,” *Gender & History* 15:2 (Aug. 2003): 179–200.

<sup>23</sup>This image was first printed in the July 25, 1915, edition of *Life*.

<sup>24</sup>U.S. Treasury Department, “Save Your Child from Autocracy and Poverty: Buy War Saving Stamps” (probably early 1918), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/wwipos/item/94513692/> (accessed June 6, 2017).

<sup>25</sup>U.S. Food Administration, “Little Americans, Do Your Bit: Eat Oatmeal” (May 1917), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/wwipos/item/2002712335/> (accessed June 6, 2017).

<sup>26</sup>On the importance of race in the evolution of modern concepts of childhood innocence, see Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, U.S. Committee on Public Information, “Lest We Perish: Campaign for \$30,000,000, American Committee for Relief in the Near East” (undated, probably 1918), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/wwipos/item/98503175/> (accessed June 6, 2017).

<sup>28</sup>See Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 249–51; and Sarah Miglio, “America's Sacred Duty: Near East Relief and the Armenian Crisis, 1915–1930” in *Rockefeller Archive Center Research Reports Online* (2009), eds. Ken Rose and Erwin Levold, <http://rockarch.org/publications/resrep/miglio.pdf> (accessed June 6, 2017).

<sup>29</sup>Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and Their Forerunners, 1870–1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 253, 376.

<sup>30</sup>For the BSA in World War I, see Jordan, *Modern Manhood*, 105–7. On the growth of Girl Scouting in the same period, see Tammy M. Proctor, *Scouting for Girls: A Century of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO/Praeger, 2009), 28–32.

<sup>31</sup>See Kathryn R. Kent, *Making Girls into Women: American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 111–13.

<sup>32</sup>On burning newspapers, see the photograph “Anti-German Feeling in US: Boy Scouts Burning the German Newspaper, Wächter&Anzeiger, in Brooklyn, Cleveland, Ohio,” 165-WW-68D-3, *American Unofficial Collection of World War I Photographs*, Record Group 165, National Archives, College Park, Maryland. On adults asking children to expose disloyal teachers, see Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You*, 99. On the BSA's war garden program, see MacLeod, “Socializing American Youth,” 163.

<sup>33</sup>Florence Woolston, “Billy and the World War,” *New Republic* 17 (Jan. 1919): 369–70.

<sup>34</sup>“By the President of the United States: A Proclamation,” *Boys' Life* (June 1919): 3.

<sup>35</sup>U.S. Department of Labor, *Reports of the Department of Labor, 1918* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1919), 189–90.

<sup>36</sup>Winthrop D. Lane, “Making the War Safe for Childhood: Delinquency in Wartime,” *The Survey* 41, Mar. 29, 1919, 452.

<sup>37</sup>Brill quoted in H.C. Engelbrecht, *Revolt Against War* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1937), 190.

<sup>38</sup>“Controversy of Boy Scouts Is Explained,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, Apr. 20, 1917.

<sup>39</sup>Scout quoted in Robert W. Peterson, *The Boy Scouts: An American Adventure* (New York: American Heritage, 1984), 85.

<sup>40</sup>See Don Oberdorfer, *Senator Mansfield: The Extraordinary Life of a Great American Statesman and Diplomat* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 26.

<sup>41</sup>See David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009), 352.

<sup>42</sup>See Carl Wittke, *German-Americans and the World War: With Special Emphasis on Ohio's German-Language Press* (Columbus, OH: J. S. Ozer, 1936), 145.

<sup>43</sup>See Katja Wüstenbecker, *Deutsch-Amerikaner im Ersten Weltkrieg: US-Politik und nationale Identitäten im Mittleren Westen* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007), 207.

<sup>44</sup>Hawes quoted in Dale Russakoff, "On Campus, It's the Children's Hour," *Washington Post*, Nov. 13, 1998.