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This entry provides an overview of child labor in Europe from the 16th to early 20th centuries. In this entry, the term *child labor* is used to describe forms of labor carried out by children under 15 years of age in contexts where they were treated as part of a labor force, whether the work is paid or unpaid. First, the controversial character of the issue is noted with a focus on differences between past and present forms of childhood labor. The specific forms of child labor discussed include rural child labor, child labor in poor-relief institutions, industrial child labor, and child labor in urban environment.

Child Labor's History and Surprising Return

In the 1950s, paid child labor in Europe was so marginal and primary school attendance so universal that child workers appeared to belong to the past, except for primary-school age children working on family farms. *The International Labour Review* of the International Labour Organization scanned the issue globally. At the time, nobody could have imagined that paid child labor would return in the West. Its return in the 1980s brought about new scholarship on child labor in Europe in the past and the revival of the controversy over its pros and cons.

Childhood in the past often appears harsher than today. Due to higher mortality, many children lost one or both parents, while many children lost all contact with their parents in turmoil during wars and troubled times. Moreover, the hardships of life resulted in high numbers of abandoned children.

Before school education became the rule, children learned the skills they would need primarily by trying to equal adults around. Many skills, always learned by doing, took years to master. Children's *nimble fingers*, frequently referred to in the context of factory children, were not inborn but an outcome of routines to give children from tender age tasks that trained them in dexterity. Hence people had good knowledge of children's capacity for work and labor at different ages. The age of 7 years was recognized as a turning point by peasants from Spain and France to Scotland, Sweden, and Russia. Other commonly acknowledged ages included 12 years, after which also the division of labor by gender was applied, and 14 or 15 years that generally signified the end of childhood.

Rural Child Labor

Before the 20th century, in Europe, the great majority of children lived in the countryside. Rural childhood changed along with the changing countryside. The development known as the commercialization of agriculture that commenced in the 18th century brought with it labor-intensive novelties that probably increased the use of and demand for child labor. Conversely, in outlying villages, from Greek mountains to northern forests, rural children may not have been burdened with all the labor connected with commercial agriculture.

Children who grew up in the home farm were gradually introduced to the many tasks and skills needed in traditional agriculture, starting with fetching firewood and water, weeding, picking up stones, and digging potatoes. Children were entrusted with poultry and pigs close to the house, but it was risky to entrust them with goats, sheep, and cows grazing far from villages in the wild where wolves roamed. Only past the age of 13 years or so were children robust enough for work that required stamina, such as milking and plowing.

Owing to the widespread poverty that characterized rural Europe, farmers could always get other children prepared for work and labor that their own children shunned. Children of cottagers and underlings were utilized as child minders, shepherds, herders, and helpers to their parents, with or without specific pay. Moreover, many pauper children were part of agricultural labor gangs. In the central Italian countryside, they consisted of men, women, and children; in the English countryside often of women and children.

Two factors increased the demand for children for herding: the privatization of land and the expansion of animal husbandry. Initially in the 17th century during the Thirty Years' War, and for the last time in 1914, children from the Austrian Alps, known as *Schwabenkinder*, walked long distances in the spring, all the way to German Upper Swabia where they were hired for herding, and then in the fall walked back home.

In most of Europe, it was a general practice to farm out abandoned, orphaned, and deprived children to private households, preferably to the countryside. Children worked for their keep, but because growing children consumed more than they produced, receiving households were commonly paid ready money for taking them. This gave the system a mercenary character; as a consequence, farmed-out children may have been overworked. Such non-family children may have had an opportunity to go to school only after effective implementation of compulsory primary education.

Child Labor in Poor-Relief Institutions

In the 16th century, with the expanding beggary, medieval practices concerning the poor gave way to new measures that included the principle that destitute children should maintain themselves by working. The new policy spread in Catholic and Protestant Europe from country to country and reached Orthodox Russia in the 18th century.

Orphanages and foundling homes adopted the practice of obligatory labor by children in their custody. Children might also be placed to work together with adults in workhouses and pauper hospices. Children were set to work with anything considered suitable for children of humble origin, such as spinning, spooling, pin making, card making, button making, tobacco spinning, and the like. Boys were set in weaving, shoemaker work, and garden work, while girls in sewing, embroidery, and knitting stockings. In the best case, at the age of 12 years or so, boys were apprenticed and girls were put out as servants. However, with large numbers of deprived children, pauper boys placed in workshops became just cheap child labor, workhouse boys may have been passed for the navy, as in England, and many children were offered as servants and labor force to anyone, including manufacturers.

Contrary to expectations, closed institutions based on compulsory labor proved costly, mainly because of the low productivity of work and poor quality and salability of products. Moreover, due to poor hygiene conditions in such institutions, children's mortality rates were high, which was another reason for why authorities preferred to farm out pauper children in private households. However, the idea of labor as morally beneficial to poor children persisted: charitable workshops for urban folk-school children who earned meals by working were established in late 19th-century Scandinavia.

Industrial Child Labor

In the past, before machine-made products, all children learned to make useful articles with the help of relatively uncomplicated tools. Such traditional labor was transformed into industrial child labor, when children had to contribute to family subsistence.

Children were engaged in commissioned rural cottage industries as early as in 16th-century Spain and Italy and eventually in many other countries. In early manufactories that applied division of labor, children worked in conditions that contemporaries paralleled with workhouses. Children also worked underground, in England and Belgium in coal mines, in mid-19th-century Spain in a mercury mine. Some boys aged 14 years died in accidents in French mines as late as the 1920s.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, many children, urban and rural, were engaged in poorly paid piecework at home, known as “outwork or putting-out work.” It involved long working hours and was often quite exhausting for children, but it was no concern for contemporaries, no more than child labor out of sight in brickyards, glassworks, and workshops.

In the 19th century, a new phenomenon, factory children, emerged. The harmful working conditions of factory children shocked some contemporaries and were also in due course reported by factory inspectors. However, other contemporaries welcomed factories as an opportunity for needy children to make their living without resorting to poor relief.

The champion of the so-called first industrial revolution was the British textile industry. It applied technology that required large numbers of child workers. The model of British textile mills was followed in many other countries; hence, in the late 19th-century textiles, alone or together with garment industries, were the largest employers of children in at least 10 European countries including Portugal, France, Germany, and Russia. Only a handful of other sectors, varying somewhat from country-to-country, employed notable numbers of children in the decades preceding 1914.

Factory laws and the introduction of compulsory primary education have generally been credited for the decline of industrial child labor. However, industrial child labor declined also in countries with no noteworthy agitation against it and school attendance also increased in countries that had not introduced compulsory education. Another line of reasoning assumes that with more professional assessment of profitability, the demand for children declined due to their low productivity.

Moreover, it should be emphasized that 19th-century reformers strove for the regulation of industrial child labor, not its abolishment. In fact, established industrialists lobbied for stricter child labor laws than reformers, because they needed national laws and international conventions that would shield them from unfair competition. Contrary to received ideas, 19th-century laws were not enacted as first steps toward the abolition of industrial child labor. They began to appear as such only in hindsight.

Child Labor in Urban Environments

Since the 18th century, Europe has witnessed repeated waves of young people leaving the countryside. Many boys signed up to work on ships, but many more left for cities to work in mills, construction sites, backstreet workshops, and as chimney sweeps. Girls left for textile mills, seamstress workshops, and domestic service positions. Most children migrated with parents, but there were also middlemen who supplied masters with children. They traveled around impoverished countryside and purchased children from credulous parents. In the 19th century, Italian children amusing passers-by earned money for their masters in distant St. Petersburg, but St. Petersburg also housed child workers purchased nearby in the Finnish countryside.

The advantages of having school education were very evident in the urban life of the late 19th century. In most of Europe, working-class children as a rule went to school at least for several years. In cities, it was possible to combine school with work. Out of school hours, children delivered newspapers, milk or bread, ran errands, and sold printed matter, flowers, and haberdashery in the streets. Boys did shoe polishing and carried shopping baskets and travelers' suitcases. Girls were engaged in retail-trade shops, in household services, and as maids-of-all-work.

Children making money in the streets may have been truly deprived, but in most cases, they were ordinary working-class children who had homes and went to school. Authorities once viewed these children as a social problem. In the 21st century, they would more likely be viewed as enterprising since such qualities are highly

valued in today's service-oriented, commercial urban economy.

See also [History of Childhood](#); [Working Children](#)

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