

LITTLE SOLDIERS OF THE GREAT WAR



INTRODUCTION

In August 1914, both the military leaders and the civil populations of the countries at war thought the conflict would be “short and sweet”. Toy manufacturers were quick to react and launched a series of toys reflecting these events. But the war did not end in 1914 ...

The centenary of World War I is being commemorated in 2014-2018. The exhibition “Little Soldiers of the Great War” traces the conflict through contemporary children’s toys. In 1914 a real war culture developed, one aspect of which was the large number of children’s toys and illustrations produced. The more than 1000 objects in the exhibition, the majority coming from a private collection, give a unique insight into this important period of the 20th century.

Enjoy your visit!



THE ATTRACTION OF TOY SOLDIERS

In the first half of the 19th century, toys were quite rare, and were usually commissioned by the well-off from individual toymakers. Toys then began to be increasingly popular with middle-class families. There were many military themes to choose from, as the army was part of daily life at the time. There were barracks in every town. The soldier was a very popular figure in the public imagination and was the subject of intense patriotic propaganda. Children were therefore naturally accustomed to soldiers, and many toys allowed them to reproduce war in miniature.

THE MANUFACTURE OF TOY SOLDIERS

The end of the 19th century coincided with the significant development of toy soldiers in different countries. Most were made of tin, using slate moulds into which a thin layer of the metal was poured, leaving a flat figurine with engraved details.

But soon new techniques enabled the production of hollow lead soldiers. By increasing production and reducing the cost of the raw materials, manufacturers were at last able to produce toys at competitive prices accessible to a larger number of children. From the 1870s, toys also moved from the market stall and the ironmonger to the more upmarket shelves of department stores such as Innovation and Bon Marché in Brussels.



WAR IS DECLARED AND BELGIUM IS INVADED

In August 1914, Belgium refused to allow the passage of German troops through the country. Infuriated by this unexpected resistance, the invaders' reactions were merciless. Towns such as Andenne, Namur, Dinant, Dendermonde and Leuven were destroyed and the local populations massacred. The Belgian army, led by King Albert I, managed to retain a sliver of territory beyond the banks of the Yser.

PARADE UNIFORMS MORE SUITABLE FOR TOYS

By 1915, most armies had cast aside their handsomely-brocaded uniforms dating from the previous century. They opted instead for darker colours that matched the mud of the trenches. But some toys kept the more attractively-coloured parade uniforms.



IMMOBILISATION OF FRONTS AND TRENCH WARFARE

By the end of 1914, major offensives were being fought over distances of only a few kilometres. Attempts to break through the front seemed hopeless for both sides. Once the fronts bogged down, the soldiers sheltered in trenches becoming more and more sophisticated. Sometimes mines and barbed wire were placed along the trenches in order to prevent surprise attacks and blocking, towards the end of the war the first tanks' assaults launched into the glaxis. Daily life in the trenches followed an organised routine and sentries were posted to watch out for enemy attacks.

MINIATURE TRENCHES

During the war toy manufacturers did not produce many miniature trenches, as they represented a horrific and cruel situation. An "exploding" trench on springs was sold in Britain, but it certainly didn't turn out to be a success. Maybe it was even discreetly withdrawn from the catalogue.

In the interwar period, many toy manufacturers offered rather basic wooden trenches as backgrounds for figurines.

In 1950 small firms also produced camouflaged wooden trenches.



PATRIOTIC MOVEMENTS OF TOY MANUFACTURERS

While injured men started to flood the hospitals from the first days of the war, women began to organise and set up associations to assist the wounded. Against this background new toy brands emerged. They offered work for wounded soldiers and were sold to raise money for war orphans. The new brands bore names such as “Jouet Belge”, “Jouet Liégeois”, “Fa-be-jo” and “Remdeo”.

THE BRUSSELS EXHIBITION OF 1916

An exhibition of distribution companies and toy manufacturers, organised by the patriotic movements, was held in 1916 at the no longer existing Palais des Sports in Schaerbeek. Illustrated press articles and a visitors' book show the importance of the event. The aim was to collect money in order to purchase Saint-Nicolas gifts for Belgian children and orphanages. The German occupying forces allowed it to go ahead on condition that nothing recalled too closely the military and political reality of the time.



TYPICAL BELGIAN TOYS

After the war, the nationally-themed factory produced toys were able to rival the German toy industry, which dominated the industrialised world. German manufacturers were very active and omnipresent on the market in lead soldiers, and before 1914 exported over 80% of their production.

The subjects of these Belgian toys reflected a peaceful existence: fairs, towns, farms etc., designed to make the public forget a war that had forced the entire population to make all kinds of sacrifices.

THE DESIGNS OF AMÉDÉE LYNEN

These toys were based on the designs of famous Belgian artists such as Jeanne Hovine, Ramah or Fox. The painter and illustrator Amédée Lynen worked for the charity "l'oeuvre belge du Jouet". He created the army on paper before it went into industrial production .

Amédée Lynen, (Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, 1852 - 1938), is best known for his landscapes of Brabant and drawings of the alleys and monuments of Brussels, Bruges and Ghent. A street in Brussels is named after him.



THE VICTORY PARADE

1918 marked the end of hostilities. The impression of the parades which took place in the months following the war is solemn, reflecting a desire for dignity in commemorating the victims. Huddled behind the flag, the soldiers are now the heroes of a military adventure that was supposed to be the war to end all wars. "Never again", it was said. The armistice of 1918 marked a pause in the folly of men, but unfortunately not the end of it.

MILITARY TOYS AFTER 1918

After the Great War toy soldiers waned in popularity as they were a reminder of terrible suffering at a time the mood was in favour of peace. Germany was forbidden to produce military toys. But it was not long before manufacturers began once again to offer toy soldiers and military vehicles of the new German army, itself "forbidden".

Nowadays, when video games and all sorts of war games have replaced toy soldiers, the discussion is far from over. Should war games provide an outlet for violence or do they carry within them the seeds of war?



ARMIES AT WAR

Every manufacturer produced both national and foreign armies. When playing war games, an enemy is needed. Sometimes a change of colours or headgear was sufficient to vary the range in the catalogue. The same body with the same equipment could be used for soldiers in different armies. Ammunition belts, rucksacks, rifles, boots, were identical, although that was not the case in reality. But then toy manufacturers were targeting children and not adults, collectors or pedants!

CHANGING UNIFORMS

At the start of the war most armies wore uniforms dating from the previous century. Cavalrymen wearing cuirasses, plumed helmets and coloured uniforms, were still the norm. Soldiers went to war as they would to parade. The armies of the German Empire, which were better prepared, had opted for less visible colours. Nevertheless, at the start of operations, the Prussians still wore pointed helmets made of boiled leather.

The realities of the war quickly forced the chiefs of staff to issue their men with more robust helmets, less beautiful but affording better protection and less colourful uniforms more suited to the battlefield.

However the manufacturers did not always adapt their toy soldiers to reality. The most popular series were usually those based on uniforms worn at parades, musical ceremonies and other colourful processions.



THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN ARMY

The Austro-Hungarian Empire was a state of Central Europe from 1867 to 1918. Its army was very diverse because of the number of different nationalities it comprised.



THE GERMAN ARMY

Of all the protagonists, the army of the German Empire was without any doubt the one best prepared for the events. The German Reich, recently unified, now had a structured army. The dark blue uniform was replaced by a green one. The leather pointed helmet, introduced in German principalities in 1842, was replaced by the “Stahlhelm” or steel helmet, in 1916.



THE FRENCH ARMY

Madder red trousers were worn by French infantry soldiers between 1870 and 1915. Deemed too bright, during the war they were replaced by a blue-grey uniform. But the uniform with red trousers remained in the toy manufacturers' catalogues for a long time, as youngsters preferred brightly-coloured soldiers to those in camouflage gear.



THE BRITISH ARMY

At the start, the British Expeditionary Force was composed only of volunteers and career soldiers. The scale of the conflict led the government to introduce conscription, resulting in 1,600,000 members of the population participating in the war effort.



THE COLONIAL TROOPS

In order to establish a relatively stable front, reinforcements were constantly needed and colonial troops were therefore enlisted in the effort. The Germans were outraged at this situation, accusing the Allies of using men external to the conflict.

At the start of the war, the colonial soldiers immediately attracted the attention and sympathy of the French, who saw the troops parading in exotic uniforms. The toy manufacturers also appreciated their bright, popular colours.

In Africa, there was also fighting at the borders of various German colonies with the Belgian Congo and with some French and British colonies.



THE RUSSIAN TROOPS

The wooden toy presented here is very representative of the situation in 1916. On one side, Russia occupies the Eastern front against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while on the other, France, Britain and Italy, whose soldiers still wear their old uniforms, are striking at Emperor Wilhelm II's forehead. The Russian giant is missing a hammer.



THE AMERICAN ARMY

1917 was marked by the arrival of the American “boys” in Europe. The announcement of this new ally on the battlefield was instrumental in fuelling the defeatism prevailing in the German army. When the front collapsed, defeat was immediate, with soldiers surrendering by the thousand, leaving the front to the victors.



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