

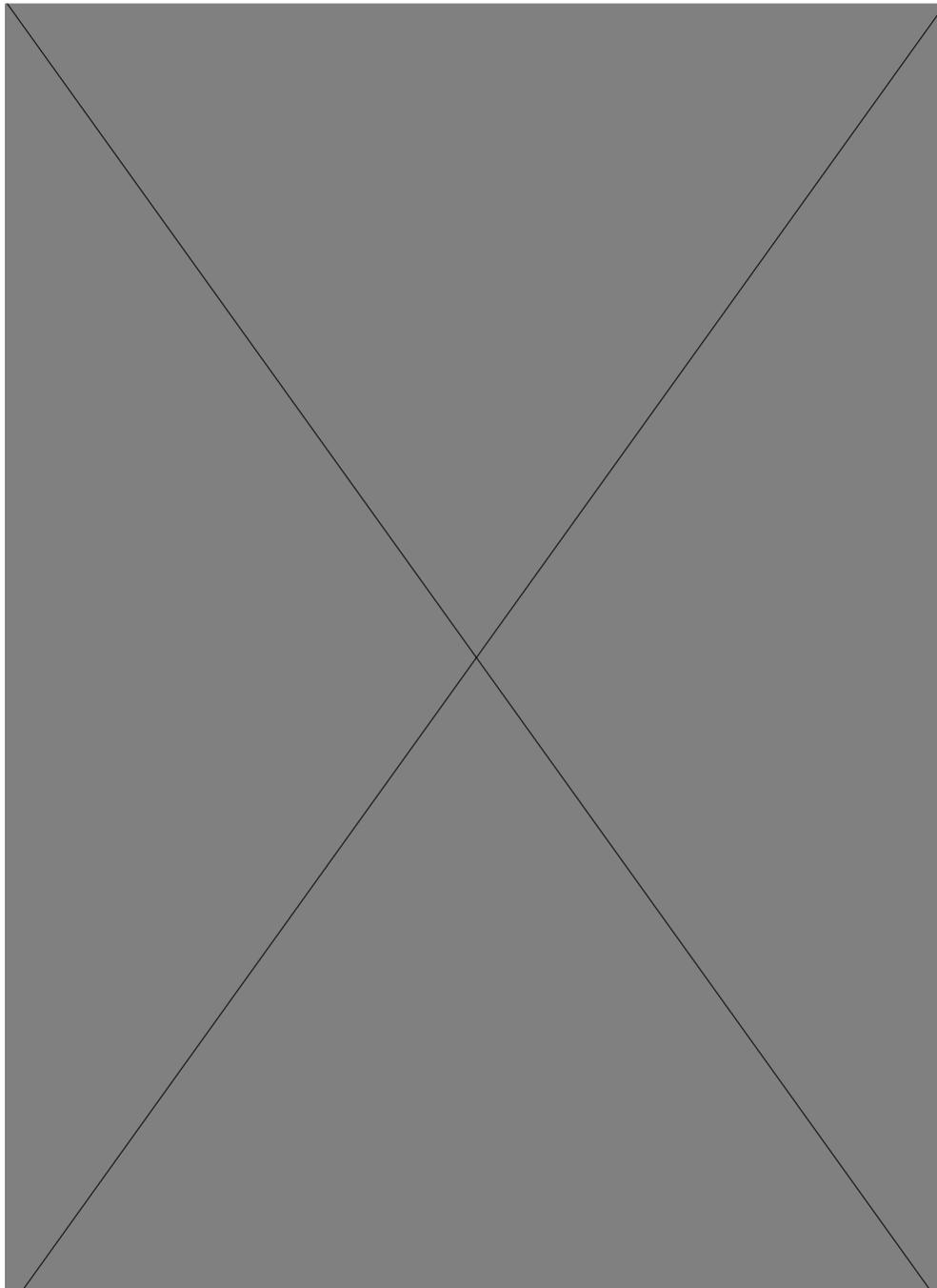
NOTES ON TOYS BY REBECCA ONION

FARAWAY FRONTS, CLOSE TO HOME

“Little Mother Drowns German Dolls,” ran a July 1918 headline in the American toy industry publication *Playthings*. The piece was a reprint from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, published as a filler and meant to amuse the toymakers, salesmen, and retailers who read *Playthings* for its industry info. The girl in question, a San Francisco seven-year-old, took her “beloved play children” to a fountain and put them under; an adult observer fished the dolls out afterwards, and the newspaper commented that “although their hair was dropping from their heads ... there remained stamped plainly on the back of each the legend that had sentenced it to a sacrificial death, ‘Made in Germany.’”

This patriotic “little mother”, pathetic though her grief might have been, and grisly though her crime may seem to contemporary eyes, confirmed the opinion, common among toymakers of the time, that American children needed American toys. This boosterism, which combined patriotism and business-minded opportunism, was but one dimension of the American toy industry’s response to World War One. Reading the issues of *Playthings* published in the years 1915-1918, the contemporary observer sees the war unfold through the publication’s advertisements of a wide array of toys and novelties. These toys brought a distant war into American childhoods, translating the very material clash of armies through the ether of commerce and back into the material realm in toy form.

In January 1916, *Playthings* reprinted an article by the American Secretary of War Lindley Garrison, who had written in *The Designer* that children should be told about war, and given war toys, on the same principle under which they should know about death. Garrison opined: “The soldier, real or leaden facsimile, represents force, and all civilization rests on force.” Force also sold toys. By 1915, boats that could destroy other boats with toy torpedoes became such a hot item that the Walbert Manufacturing Company took out a “warning” advert in *Playthings*, meant to serve as a shot across the bow of any other company planning to copycat. The A. Schoenhut Company of Philadelphia mounted a counterattack: a set of two toy boats, a submarine and a dreadnaught. When the child manning the submarine managed a direct hit on the dreadnaught, “a mechanical contrivance within the hull of the Dreadnaught is released, and the whole deck of the boat is blown up ... the deck goes one way, the turret another; in fact smoke-stacks and all go up in the air, resembling a most realistic destruction” (October 1915).



Above An advertisement for “Taking ‘Em Out of the Trenches”, a children’s game by the Hap-a-Day Toy Company of Kansas City, in the September 1916 issue of *Playthings*. Courtesy of the Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play™ at The Strong™, Rochester New York.

Taking the fight from the bathtub to the backyard, Milton Bradley manufactured a gun called “Big Dick,” which was a machine gun intended for play, and featured a crank-turned belt that fed the weapon cartridges full of wooden bullets (August 1915). “Single shot toy guns are as obsolete as single shot army rifles,” Milton Bradley informed toy buyers. “Insist on war games with ‘repeaters’ and you’ll have the kind that sell.” Verisimilitude was important; toymakers were convinced that children liked anything that was a copy of an adult object. So the US Coast Defense Toy Mortar, made by the Virginia Equipment Company of Oak Harbor, OH, “looks *just like our own US Big Guns*” (October 1915, emphasis in original). The Hap-a-Day Toy Company of Kansas City, MO offered a series of games called “Taking ‘Em Out of the Trenches.” “This game,” a *Playthings* writer reported, “includes illustrated

beautifully colored trenches, showing wire entanglements, bombs bursting as seen in actual warfare; soldiers representing the different nations at war in uniform standing in the trenches, appealing to be taken out.” (See image.) The player could “take them out” by shooting at them with the included gun. The biggest size of the game was the “lawn” edition, intended for adults as well as children (September 1916). Another trench kit partook in a relatively new innovation in toymaking, perhaps better exemplified by the chemistry set or other science kits, which were just then about to become available on a mass-market basis in the US. The idea was, if you sell a bunch of smaller items together in a batch, you can advertise the toy as a kit providing a complete “experience” for the buyer. The “Modern Trench Warfare” kit, manufactured by the Liberty Toy Company of New York and advertised in *Playthings* in July 1917, was intended for “seashore, back yard and winter snow,” and came with sandbags, semaphore flags, a periscope, a grenade thrower, and a trench shovel “of the same design as is used by the Allied soldiers.”

How would the American toy industry, which flourished during the war years as German imports were embargoed, transition back into peacetime? The October 1918 issue included an interview with “the well known toymen [sic]” William D. Himsel, of Milton Bradley, on the topic “Will the so-called war games lose their popularity after the war is over?” Himsel thought that the answer might be yes: “continual association with war in its hideous reality will not tend to make a returned soldier any too enthusiastic over his children or brothers and sisters playing games of this character.” Reassuringly, however, Himsel also thought “the tin and lead soldier... will always be popular.” These faceless combatants, unmarked with the historical details that tied other toys to the conflict immediately past, would soldier on while the Modern Trench Warfare kit would fall by the wayside.

Having brought the war home, toymakers hoped that the public would take away only one message from the recent conflict: buy American toys. These hopes were embodied in a June 1918 cartoon depicting an evil German toymaker handing an American kid a doll. A thought balloon hovers over the German’s head, populated by a German soldier attacking a Belgian mother with a child in arms and another clinging to her skirts. “No Nightmare Toys,” the caption read. “When The War Is Over There Will Be No ‘Come-Back’ for the Toys of Frightfulness.” Thus, an industry that had spent the war filling children’s lives with the most realistic possible weaponry tried to stuff German dolls full of the ghosts of murdered Belgians—a more convenient haunting that would, they hoped, put the economic advantage permanently on their side.