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## Animating the War: The First World War and Children's Cartoons in America

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### Abstract

This article examines the changes that animation underwent in its relation to and depictions of the First World War during the war and in the following decade, during which time American animators' approach to the conflict changed from one of trepidation regarding references to wartime violence to one of enthusiastically recasting that violence in fantastical forms. An analysis of these changes is key to understanding animation's shifting use of the fundamental tension in the medium between realism and fantasy and helps to reframe the form's evolving relationship to the world of children during the early twentieth century.



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The periods during and after the American involvement in the First World War saw numerous animated responses to the conflict, from documentaries of wartime destruction to comical exploits involving some of the most popular animated characters of the era. But within this body of animated renderings of the war, a noticeable disconnect exists between those works produced during the conflict and those created in the decade that followed, in terms of the depictions of war and violence and, correspondingly, in the relationship these features had to children's culture. In the years before America joined the conflict, cartoon serials depicted the European war as a grand adventure, a background setting for outlandish exploits propagated by larger-than-life characters. But with America's entry into the conflict in 1917, animated shorts began to treat the war differently: either attempting to position themselves as animated documentaries intended for adults or, alternately, offering highly sanitized visions of wartime Europe, largely devoid of any references to the actual conditions of the war. This would, however, change in the years after the armistice. A new generation of animators, with experience on the front or in the service of military film divisions, rendered the war anew, presenting highly detailed pictures of the experience of war in the context of fantastical, sometimes comical, adventures. For these animators, the medium would offer a chance to recast and reexamine the conflict in imaginative and often fantastical ways, and to utilize the unique possibilities of a medium that was becoming more and more associated with children. This article examines the changes that animation underwent in its relation to and depictions of the First World War during the war and in the following decade. The nature of these changes is key to understanding animation's changing use of the fundamental tension in the medium between the dictates of realism and fantasy, a tension that is noticeable and pivotal in even the earliest American cartoons. Moreover, to

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