

## **Action Figures, Cultures of Militarism and the Sanitisation of Geopolitical Logics.**

[Published on the V&A's Museum of Childhood's website as part of the War Games exhibition]

Tara Woodyer

June 2013

Toys have a longstanding and important role in warfare; as tools for recruitment and training, test beds for defence industry innovations, and strategies for legitimating and sustaining geopolitical logics and technologies. Tracing the historical trajectory of action figures has much to tell us about changing attitudes to war and conflict, and associated cultures of militarism.

The Hassenfeld Brothers' US launch of G.I. Joe in 1964 ushered in a new era for toy soldiers. Eschewing the classic small toy soldier in favour for a 12-inch mannequin doll was a risky endeavour for the Hassenfeld Brothers (later to become Hasbro). G.I. Joe had to be differentiated from Barbie (who had arrived five years earlier) and the notion that mannequin dolls were designed for the more 'passive play' of girls. The first range comprised four figures incarnating the US army corps: Action Soldier, Action Sailor, Action Marine and Action Pilot. G.I. Joe entered a phase of retirement in 1978 due to rising crude oil prices, but was re-launched as a 10cm action figure in 1982.

In 1966, a repackaged version of G.I. Joe was introduced to the British toy market under license from Hasbro as Action Man. Distributed by Palitoy, Action Man competed with Tommy Gunn, a 12-inch figure produced by Pedigree Toys, the company that also made Sindy. Despite the superior quality of Tommy Gunn figures, the range was discontinued in 1968. The Palitoy Action Man was not retired until 1984. Following a redesign, and with a younger age market of 4-7 year olds, he was reintroduced by Hasbro Europe a decade later. The iconic Action Man range has since been replaced by the contemporary HM Armed Forces action figure range, manufactured by Character Options.

The British action figure's historical trajectory reveals an interesting story of US-British relations. Whilst Action Man started life as a repackaged version of the American G.I. Joe, primarily British themes were developed to distinguish him from his US counterpart. This nationalisation was crucial for creating a British market and establishing the action figure's prominent role in the household. One series that truly set Palitoy's line apart from Hasbro's was the 'Ceremonials'. Although Hasbro produced a set of Cadet ceremonial outfits, they did not match the scope of the British versions, which also included a horse of the Life Guards with full ceremonial regalia. The Palitoy design team actively researched the detail of military uniforms and tooling through visits to the British-based Aldershot regiment. Whilst this nationalisation was important, Palitoy's link to the US firm was also crucial for commercial success. Access to Hasbro's designs allowed them to offer a wider range than their main British competitor, Tommy Gunn, which sold in much lower volumes and was subsequently halted only two years after introduction. Action Man's relation to his European brothers – Action Joe (France), Action Team (Germany) and Geyperman (Spain) - was also important for co-ordination of production and packaging processes. Nevertheless, each European range was nationalised to some degree, with due attention to the geopolitical climate of the time of manufacture. The German range, for example, was treated in a less warlike way, with most outfits accompanied by a UN Peacekeeping troop armband.

Changing geopolitical climates were a strong driving force behind the design and commercial success of these different nationalised action figure ranges. Whilst G.I. Joe was originally launched during the time of the Vietnam War (1959-1975), growing public disapproval of war toys prompted Hasbro to redirect the range towards adventure in 1969. A bearded, more muscular adventurer was introduced, his quest being the exploration of hostile regions spanning the Arctic to the Jungle.

The 1982 re-launch of GI Joe can be linked to the US political climate at the time. The re-launch came three years into the period known as the 'Second Cold War' (1979-1985). This was a period of increased tension between the US and the Soviet Union, prompted by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and dominated by a nuclear arms race. The 'impossible' narratives of nuclear victory combined with a new paranoia about the 'enemy within' meant propaganda and rhetoric played a significant

part in the Cold War. Toys, alongside other forms of popular culture, did not merely respond to this new era of nuclear warfare, but rather were constitutive of Cold War militarism. G.I. Joe was reintroduced as an antiterrorist commando, 'A Real American Hero', with a cast of comrades and villains sculpted with the help of Marvel Comics. The premise for the new toyline revolved around the defence of human freedom from Cobra, a ruthless terrorist organization determined to rule the world. G.I. Joe's popularity peaked around this time.

In a bid to gain some kind of advantage over the enemy, the 'Nuclear Age' led to the rapid development of new technologies, especially in the arena of weaponry and space exploration. The Nuclear Age and the Space Age were folded together in the geopolitical strategies of the Cold War (MacDonald 2008). This technological competition and interest in space travel found expression in all kinds of popular culture, including toys. At the time of President Reagan's 'Star Wars' defence initiative – a space-based anti-missile system to defend the US from attack from Soviet inter-continental ballistic missiles – the new G.I. Joe range tapped into these new space age narratives. One of the largest playsets in the toyline series was the Defiant, a space shuttle vehicle and station complex. Older narratives of frontiersmen, represented by G.I. Joe's hand fighting combat style no longer worked. Vietnam's defeat of the US had rendered these older narratives ineffective. The arrival of the hugely popular *Star Wars* was almost greeted with a sense of cultural relief as it created a set of new cultural narratives beyond the ineffective narratives of the frontiersman and the impossible narratives of the nuclear age (Fleming 1996). Popular enthusiasm for space was used to legitimate the underlying military purpose of space exploration. Play naturalised the anxieties of the Cold War. The hardware of nuclear destruction was translated into a domestic setting through toys like G.I. Joe. This domestication of Cold War technologies eased nuclear weapons into the political mainstream. Through the ordinary rehearsal of defending 'us' (Western, free, capitalist) from 'them', children were inducted into the wider geopolitical frame of the Cold War (MacDonald 2008).

Similarly to G.I. Joe, the Action Man range saw the introduction of 'bad guy' characters such as the space pirate, Captain Zargon, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, British action figures have maintained a much stronger militaristic theme.

Action Man's move towards an action adventure theme came much later than G.I. Joe's as the effect of the Vietnam War was not felt as strongly by the British range. Hasbro Europe re-launched the toy as an extreme sports figure in 1994. Palitoy's main consideration was consumer attitudes to German-themed World War II figures, which were deliberately placed at the back of displays at the Nuremberg Toy Fair. Action Man played into, and helped sustain a particular British culture of militarism dominated by nostalgia for World War II.

The military action figure returned to the UK toy market in 2009 with the launch of the contemporary HM Armed Forces range. This brand has become one of the strongest new brands overall in the toy industry and the first commercially successful boys' brand not to comprise a TV or film backed concept in many years. In contrast to the earlier Palitoy series, the HM Armed Forces range is directly licensed by the Ministry of Defence. The Armed Forces play a crucial role in the brand's design and promotion. Clothing and accessories are tooled on actual field equipment, RAF Northolt hosted the launch event held on VE Day, and one of the toys has accompanied officers on a Northern Exposure expedition, becoming the first military action figure to 'combat the North Pole'. The brand owners, Character Options, acknowledge the brand's role in a wider re-enchantment with the British military. The success of the HM Armed Forces range has been attributed to the 'free promotion' provided by coverage of British military operations in TV news bulletins. In light of military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the infantryman in desert combats is both the best selling figure and dress up theme overall.

Popular cultural activities are increasingly performing an ideological role in support of the UK military during the post 9/11 US/UK led 'War on Terror'. Following a call for greater public support of the troops by the British army chief, General Dannatt, in September 2007, a multi-agency campaign of 'support the troops' initiatives emerged, including homecoming parades, annual Armed Forces Day, military-focused charities, pop concerts and military personnel appearances on prime-time Saturday evening programmes. The emergence of this series of multi-agency practices is remarkably similar to the PR-induced activities of the US and Canadian governments, and serves to normalise the presence of war in general, and the War on Terror specifically (Kelly 2012). Play with HMAF toys contributes to this wider training in institutionalised

homage to militarism. In much the same way as the hardware of nuclear destruction and the wider geopolitical frame of the Cold War were domesticated and eased into the political mainstream popular culture, including toys, the HMAF ranges contributes to a naturalisation of the 'hero-fication' of British militarism. As licensed correlates and an analogue of 'real' military field knowledge, this toy range encourages interest in, and support for the original hardware in its strategic context.

As the historical trajectories of G.I. Joe, Action Man and HMAF show, through their place in national cultures of militarism, action figures have played, and continue to play an important role in legitimating and sustaining particular geopolitical logics and technologies. It is precisely play's banal and taken-for-granted nature that enables domestication and sanitisation of military technologies and logics, and allows its role in popular imaginaries to go unchallenged. Toys do not merely respond to geopolitical climates and cultures, but are co-constitutive of them.

#### References

Fleming, D. (1996) *Powerplay: toys as popular culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Kelly, S. (2012) Popular culture, sport and the 'hero'-fication of British militarism, *Sociology*, online first, 1-17.

MacDonald, F. (2008) Space and the atom: on the popular geopolitics of Cold War rocketry, *Geopolitics*, 13(4), 611-634.