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Tintin and the war

By Simon Kuper

Feedback?

Much has been written about Hergé the collaborator, but the books themselves reveal all. As Steven Spielberg's new film opens, Simon Kuper investigates

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Coming soon: Tintin and the Thomson twins in a scene from Steven Spielberg's new movie

In October 1940, the Belgian cartoonist Georges Remi began publishing a comic strip about Tintin in the children's supplement of the pro-Nazi newspaper *Le Soir*.

Hergé (Remi's pen name) drew the "boy reporter" for over half a century, but he arguably peaked in the war years. [Steven Spielberg](#) clearly thinks so. The director's new film *The Adventures of Tintin*, released next Wednesday, is based on three Tintin books written from 1941 through 1944: *The Crab with the Golden Claws*, *The Secret of the Unicorn* and *Red Rackham's Treasure*. During the war Hergé mastered storytelling and drawing, created the undying characters Captain Haddock and Professor Calculus, and worked through the tale of his own bastard descent. He did all this in a collaborationist newspaper.

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Peter Jackson, the film's producer, irritably waves off the age-old insinuations that [Hergé](#) was pro-Nazi. People who say that just want "to sell newspapers or books", the New Zealander told France's *Le Figaro* newspaper. It's too easy, he

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added, to attack somebody who can no longer defend himself, or to judge the war years from our own comfortable perch. If Jackson is right, nobody should ever write history. Yet the wartime Tintins are a fascinating topic for historians. The books provide a key both to Hergé's art and to the central trauma of his life.

Georges Remi was born into a lower-middle-class family in Brussels in 1907. He would later remember his childhood as grey and uneventful, and yet there were oddities. His mother, Elisabeth, would end up in a mental institution; his father Alexis and uncle Léon were identical twins of mysterious paternity. Elisabeth was known to interrogate the two in the evening to make sure she didn't accidentally retire to bed with the wrong brother. In the excellent [Hergé Museum](#) in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, the twins peer out from a marvellous 1928 photograph. It hits you at once: with their hats, moustaches, suits, sticks and general stiffness, they are the hapless twins Thomson and Thompson in the Tintin books. Another relative whose physique inspired Hergé was his own younger brother Paul. Later, in the Belgian army, Paul's fellow soldiers instantly spotted the resemblance and nicknamed him Major Tintin.



Hergé on a scouting expedition

In conservative Catholic prewar Belgium, one of the few places where a boy could find excitement was the scouts. Hergé would remain a scout into his twenties. An old album in the museum contains snaps of his scouting trips: at the Eiffel tower in Paris in 1923, hiking through the snow of the Pyrenees, swimming in Germany in 1929. Hergé's first published comic strips were in scout magazines; in 1926 he created a pre-Tintin, a scout leader named Totor.

While others were becoming communists or fascists, Hergé found an ideology in *"le scoutisme"*. He swallowed it whole: boys together, word of honour, survival skills, good deeds. "It was with scouting that the world really began to open up before me," he recalled in 1974. "Even if it all seems a bit old-fashioned today, I still hold dear the values we learned." As Hergé's excellent biographer Harry Thompson (no relation) wrote, "Tintin was essentially a big boy scout too."

In the late 1920s Hergé joined the subscriptions department of *Le Vingtième Siècle*, a "Catholic newspaper of creed and information". The paper was

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conservative, anti-Bolshevik and very religious. This was close to the then Belgian norm, and to Hergé's own upbringing. At school he had been taught by priests, and *Le Vingtième Siècle* was run by Father Norbert Wallez.

However, the new ideology of fascism was starting to encroach. Wallez kept a framed picture of Mussolini on his desk, and many on the paper were anti-Semitic. The foreign correspondent Léon Degrelle would become a leading pro-Nazi politician and SS officer during the war. (Degrelle found postwar exile in Franco's Spain, and in old age falsely claimed to have been the model for the Tintin character.)

It was in *Le Vingtième Siècle* in 1929 that Tintin first appeared. The early stories bear the marks of the newspaper. In the first adventure Tintin exposes the USSR as a den of Bolshevik thugs. Wallez then persuaded Hergé to send the character to the Congo, "our beautiful colony, which has such need of us". *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* and *Tintin in the Congo*, the first two of the 23 completed albums, are also the worst. They are poorly drawn, largely plot-free and the Congo book is so racist that a Congolese living in Belgium launched an ongoing legal bid in 2007 to ban it. Hergé later distanced himself from both books. Still, as he would point out, in 1930 almost all Belgians thought Africans were backward.

Hardly anyone in Belgium then had seen a comic strip with speech bubbles. Even Hergé was feeling his way along. Degrelle seems to have helped, by posting back a stack of American comics from assignment in Mexico. But as Hergé grappled with the new medium, he reached back to an only slightly older one: cinema. From the age of four or five he had gone with his mother to matinées. The slapstick humour of Tintin derives partly from Chaplin and Harold Lloyd, but cinema's influence on Hergé went deeper. Film gave him the pacing, close-ups and montages of the Tintin books. As Tom McCarthy, another of the legion of Tintin critics, points out, the Totor stories had actually been presented as "a great comic film", with the author's credit going to "Hergé Moving Pictures". Decades later, when Hergé was contacted by Spielberg, he regarded the American as a colleague. They arranged to meet in March 1983, but Hergé died in the month that Spielberg planned to come to Brussels.

The early Tintins, though flawed, were fantastically successful. By 1932 *Le Vingtième Siècle* was "selling ten times more copies than normal on Tintin day", wrote Harry Thompson. During the 1930s Tintins steadily improved. The books acquired good plots and plausibility. Hergé was following current events, and saving newspaper cuttings, albeit more as a source of realistic story ideas than out of any political commitment. He did so much research that some Tintin books read like fictionalised documentaries for children. Their precision gives them the quality of vivid dreams, fairy tales set in the 20th century.

Gradually the prewar books turned into commentary on the "low, dishonest decade". "Hergé had a great political and satirical dimension," his admirer Andy Warhol noted later. Many of the villains in these prewar stories are fascists. *The Blue Lotus* (1936) takes the Chinese side in the Sino-Japanese war. *The Black Island* (1938) features a German villain, Dr Müller. *King Ottokar's Sceptre* (1939) reworks the German-Austrian Anschluss in a Balkan setting, with the scary fascist leader Müssler whose name derives from Mussolini and Hitler. And after European war broke out Hergé was publishing *Land of Black Gold*, in which Dr Müller sabotages global petrol supplies, when in May 1940 the real Germans rudely intervened by invading Belgium. The 1930s Tintins are (to use the jargon of the day) lightly anti-fascist. This is

surprising given where Hergé was publishing them, and worth remembering given what happened later.

In war, wrote Harry Thompson, Hergé was no Tintin. He didn't even seem to aspire to heroism. He had spent the first months of conflict in the Belgian army, mostly requisitioning bicycles, and when the Germans came he fled to France. After Belgium surrendered, King Léopold issued his famous summons to his countrymen: "Tomorrow we will return to work." Hergé did. He needed money. Because *Le Vingtième Siècle* had closed down he joined *Le Soir*, or as Belgians were already calling it, *Le Soir volé* (The Stolen Soir). Many of its journalists had resigned after the Nazi takeover. But Hergé liked *Le Soir*'s massive circulation of 300,000, and any pro-Nazi paper could do with a dash of Tintin's popularity.

The war changed Tintin. From 1940 Hergé was going to write stories that couldn't get him into trouble. Adventures inspired by current affairs were out. During the occupation he barely drew a picture that even hinted at the war.

The Crab with the Golden Claws – the first Tintin under occupation, and the first of the three albums that went into Spielberg's film – gets Tintin on to uncontroversial territory fast. By page 12 he has left Europe on a ship. When he next reaches land, it's in the Sahara. All three albums chosen by Spielberg revolve around the sea – the safest place to visit for an artist under occupation, but also surely a focus of the dreams of the landlocked in an age when even Paris had become a forbidden land, and when the sardines that Hergé received from his Portuguese publisher in lieu of pay must have seemed like emissaries from another world. As Hergé later reflected on the war: "I kept drawing Tintin, the only difference being that he travelled in other directions."

And Tintin now travelled with other companions. Captain Haddock appears for the first time in the Crab story. When Tintin meets him, Haddock is effectively being held prisoner on his own ship by his wicked first mate Allan, who is feeding the alcoholic captain whisky to keep him from making trouble. Tintin and Haddock instantly team up.



The war seems to have forced Hergé inward into his own imagination, and Haddock is one of the best things he found there. The captain's alcoholism and swearing would be staple jokes of all subsequent Tintin books. Pretty much all writers on Tintin note that the main character is a cipher, a humourless two-dimensional boy scout. "A blank domino," Hergé's friend, the philosopher Michel Serres, called him. Tintin therefore requires company. Prewar, he only

had his dog, Snowy. Haddock (played by Andy Serkis in Spielberg's film) was much more interesting. Even Hergé seems to have come to prefer him to Tintin. And if Hergé was going to spend the war writing maritime stories, he needed a seaman.

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The Crab with the Golden Claws is a wonderful book. Even as an adult reading it for research, you can't stop. Each frame is rich and yet painless to absorb, and drives you on to the next. The jokes never slacken the pace. Here is Tintin, after just eight pages, summing up events so far: "A tin + a drowned man + five counterfeit coins + Karaboudjan + a Japanese + a letter + a kidnapping = a real Chinese puzzle." The wartime paper shortage may perversely have helped teach Hergé not to waste a single frame. Asked years later to pick his best drawings ever, he chose two apparently unremarkable ones from *Crab* and *Red Rackham's Treasure*. Each, he explained, had driven the story forward with perfect economy. In war he had become a great storyteller. (Spielberg, who knows something about wartime Europe, must have given these matters some thought, but he isn't saying.)

When *The Crab with the Golden Claws* appeared as an album, the first edition sold out in two days. *Le Soir* must have been delighted with Hergé. The paper's photographs of Hitler and justifications of laws against Jews were rather less popular. Even after the newspaper shrank to four pages in 1942, it still found room for Tintin.

Hergé was now on a roll. "Everyone is after him and he is in top form," writes another biographer, Philippe Goddin. In summer 1942, just as the roundups of Belgian Jews were starting, Hergé embarked on *The Secret of the Unicorn*, the album he would consider his best until *Tintin in Tibet* (1960). *The Unicorn* is set entirely in the Brussels of his day, but Hergé never slips up: there isn't a uniform or wartime shortage to be seen. When Spielberg says of his film, "There will be no cell phones, no TV sets, no modern cars. Just timeless Europe," there is a reason why Hergé made it look timeless.

The Unicorn's sequel, *Red Rackham's Treasure* (1944), is now probably Hergé's bestselling album. It introduces the last great character in Tintin: Cuthbert Calculus. The nutty deaf professor was modelled on the Swiss physics professor and balloonist Auguste Piccard, who taught in Brussels, where Hergé often encountered him on the street. Piccard's grandson, incidentally, is the balloonist Bertrand Piccard, who is now developing the world's first solar-powered plane. It's an idea that Hergé would have loved. The cartoonist was as keen on science as on travel: an inventor and a seaman sprang from him.

The Unicorn and *Red Rackham's Treasure* – and indeed Spielberg's film – turn on the story of Haddock's ancestor and fellow seaman, Sir Francis Haddock. In 1676 Sir Francis acquired a treasure in the Caribbean. Tintin and Haddock set out to find it.



This apparently fantastical tale is in fact Hergé's father's autobiography reworked. Only after Hergé's death in 1983 did the vast critical apparatus discover the cartoonist's family story, which he had never discussed beyond his private circle.

It turned out that his father and uncle had been born in 1882 to an unmarried maid who worked in a château for a countess. As the Tintin historian Dominique Maricq told me, in a wink to the French politician: "It was a time when domestic workers had rather *DSK-esque liaisons* with their bosses."

Nobody knows who the twins' father was. The gardener Philippe Remi, who gave the family its surname, met Hergé's grandmother only years after the boys were born. However, many suspect the twins' real father was of high birth, because the countess let the mother and boys live in her château until Alexis and Léon were 14, whereupon she summarily turfed them out into the lower middle classes.

One frequent visitor to the countess's château was Belgium's then king, Léopold II, founder of the Congo Free State. Michel Bareaux, artistic director of Moulinsart, the company that owns the rights to Tintin, says it's "a kind of Belgian legend" that Léopold is Hergé's ancestor.

In *Unicorn* and *Red Rackham's Treasure*, Hergé wishfully rewrites his family's secret tale. The Haddock's ancestral mansion has been usurped by crooks, just as the Remis have been expelled from their rightful aristocratic home. However, Tintin and Haddock drive out the usurpers and find Sir Francis's treasure in Marlinspike. As in Hergé's own life, notes McCarthy, the secret is in the home. In a later Tintin story, McCarthy adds, we even see twin boys carved into the stone above the family blazon at Marlinspike.

After Hergé finished *Unicorn* he took a rare week's holiday, but spent most of it working. He spent the war working. He would even work on Sundays. Tintin was living for him. "I only have two hands," Hergé complained, and by spring 1944 he was sick from overwork. However, he proceeded with the drive of a man who knows he is in his prime. Through ceaseless drawing he was perfecting his own style: *ligne claire* or clear line. In *ligne claire* each object was equally clear, marked off with black lines, and usually in strong unmixed colours. Maricq says: "By chance, in this difficult period, he reached his graphic maturity."

The two Rackham stories – the first two Tintins translated into English, in 1952 – set up all future Tintin albums. The obstreperous Haddock, deaf Calculus and gormless Thomsons were the perfect comic combination. Hergé had created his Marx brothers. Tintin ceased to be the focus of the books, and became just one of a rich family of characters. For the next 30 years of stories

he, Calculus and Haddock would live at Marlinspike in a male ménage, going off on adventures like a troop of scouts.

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Red Rackham's Treasure concludes a period of productivity that Hergé would never again recapture. From 1941 through 1944 he had published a Tintin book a year, the last albums he would ever write virtually alone. From 1950 he had an entire studio working for him, and his father acting as business manager, yet from 1945 through 1976 he finished only nine more Tintins. "Until the end of the war he was a young man, he had lots of ideas," said his postwar collaborator Bob de Moor.

Hergé's wartime productivity is all the more impressive given how much else he was doing. In 1941 alone he wrote two Tintin plays (now lost), several stories featuring other characters, and two anti-Semitic caricatures to illustrate someone else's book of fables. Throughout he seems to have done his best to ignore the "absurd murder-fest", as he called the war in one contemporary letter. When an old friend berated him for working for *Le Soir*, Hergé accused him of "cheap patriotism" and wrote, "I am neither pro-German nor Anglophile." He positioned himself above the fray. His cheery Christmas card of Tintin and Snowy sending best wishes for 1944 sums it up. At least Tintin had had a good war.

Perhaps Hergé was escaping into his work to take his mind off the postwar reckoning. In private he joked that he'd be hanged as a collaborator. His last cartoon appeared in *Le Soir* on September 2, 1944, two days before British troops reached Brussels. Soon his enemies were publishing a parody, *Tintin in the Land of the Nazis*.

And yet there was nothing Nazi about Hergé. Perhaps the best way to understand his war is to compare him to another comic genius who got into trouble. The British novelist P.G. Wodehouse was living just across the Belgian border in Le Touquet in France when invading German soldiers found him in 1940. The next year, while Hergé was publishing the Crab story in *Le Soir*, Wodehouse gave a series of humorous broadcasts on Nazi radio from Berlin. Britons erupted in fury. The powerful journalist Cassandra accused Wodehouse of "worshipping the Fuehrer". MPs called for him to be tried as a traitor.

The parallels between Wodehouse and Hergé are striking. Both clung as adults to a childish ideology: *scoutisme* for Hergé, the English public-school "play the game" code for Wodehouse. Both created a series of great prewar comic characters frozen in time. For over 50 years Wodehouse wrote Jeeves and Wooster stories and Hergé wrote Tintins, yet neither man's characters ever developed. "The peculiar mental atmosphere" of Wodehouse's books "shows little alteration since about 1925," wrote George Orwell in his 1945 essay, "In Defence of P.G. Wodehouse". Similarly, Tintin is forever "a boy with a 1930s



Hergé signing 'Tintin and the Picaros', his last album, in 1975

hairstyle, who fights 1930s villains, in 1930s cars, without once disturbing his immaculate 1930s plus fours,” wrote Harry Thompson.

Both Haddock and Wooster swan about in country mansions with servants. Both Haddock’s butler Nestor and Wooster’s Jeeves tactfully pick up after their drunken masters. In both Wodehouse and Hergé, the few female characters are noisy harridans. Tintin’s world “is a universe of boys”, admits Hergé in one late filmed interview; so is Wooster’s.

Both authors satirised fascists. In 1938, while Hergé was creating Müsstler, Wodehouse produced Spode, leader of the “Black Shorts” and secret proprietor of the Eulalie Soeurs lingerie shop. Yet neither author was very interested in politics. That made both men easy targets for Nazi PR stunts. The Germans didn’t need Wodehouse or Hergé to write propaganda. Lending some childish cheer to Nazi rule was enough. Both men were collaborators, but they weren’t fascists.

Both eventually got off. “Hergé passed in and out of police hands four times. He was arrested by three resistance groups,” writes Thompson. Famously, the public prosecutor finally decided it would be ridiculous to put “Tintin” in the dock. “Would I have had to subpoena his dog too?” he asked. Still Hergé struggled to obtain a “certificate of good conduct”. Finally the Resistance hero and publisher Raymond Leblanc got him one. There was a price to pay: Leblanc set up Tintin magazine, and Hergé agreed to churn out new Tintin stories for it ad infinitum as a sort of indentured labourer.

Both Hergé and Wodehouse were eventually rehabilitated. In the early 1970s, just before the Briton got his knighthood, Belgium made Hergé an Officer of the Order of the Crown. Yet the war clung to him forever. Some Belgians never forgave him. Michel Bareau of Moulinsart says that as a child growing up in a family with a Resistance past, he was forbidden from reading Tintins. As late as last year Bart de Wever, leader of the main Flemish separatist party, took a jab at Hergé’s war, citing it as an example of francophone Belgium’s failure to examine its own collaboration.

Hergé suffered depressions for years after the war. In the early 1950s he worked through his own wartime experiences in Tintin books. In *The Calculus Affair* and the two Moon books, evil powers are trying to steal Calculus’s inventions. Hergé seems to be identifying with the unworldly genius exploited by criminals. Also in the Moon stories, Calculus’s assistant Frank Wolff is a traitor who almost manages to leave Tintin and friends stranded on the moon. But Wolff isn’t a bad man, and finally saves the others by jumping into space. And so the Nazis shaped the postwar Tintin stories just as they had shaped the prewar and wartime ones.

Hergé said in his final interview that he had put his “whole life” into Tintin. The stories have sold somewhere over 200 million copies worldwide. Without the war they might never have been so good.

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