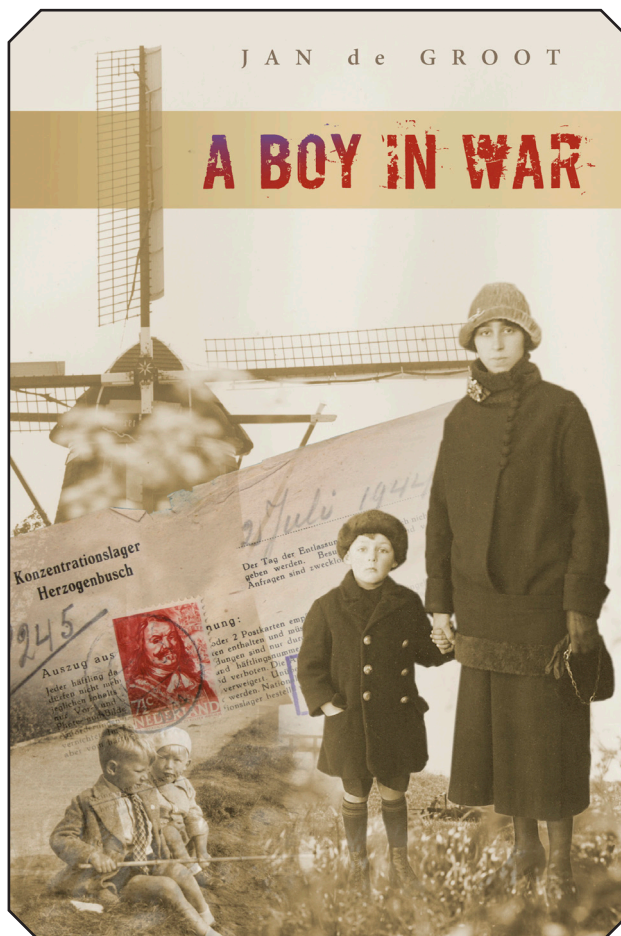


# Teachers' Guide



## **A Boy in War**

Jan de Groot

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Non-fiction/Memoir

192 pages

AGES 10+

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## Story Synopsis

In this true story, author Jan de Groot tells the story of his childhood in the Netherlands and during the Nazi occupation of the Second World War. When Jan is seven, Nazis attack and take over Holland. At first, not much changes. Soon, though, war starts taking things away: important things like neighbours and friends, trust and respect, even clothing, fuel, and food. Through it all, Jan is still a boy, finding ways to play with friends and paddle his sailing canoe in the canals. But he must also filch food and help protect his father's "guests" from the enemy.

Then the enemy takes his father away. Jan and his mother are on the run. They dodge bombs, sleep in haystacks, and work for their food ... all the while desperately searching for refuge and hoping for normal life — and Pa — to someday, somehow, return.

## As You Read

As you read *A Boy in War*, think about the relationship of hope and optimism to survival.

## Background and Historical Context

Where is the Netherlands (also known as Holland)? Identify it and the surrounding European countries. Colour the following countries according to this list:

- England - Pink
- Denmark - Orange
- Luxembourg - Red
- Belgium - Yellow
- France - Brown
- Holland - Blue
- Germany - Green



The Netherlands remained neutral through the First World War. At the beginning of the Second World War, the Dutch government again stated the country's intent to remain neutral. Germany paid no attention to this declaration and began an invasion on May 10, 1940. The poorly equipped and ill-prepared Dutch army could do little to stop the invading forces, and by May 17 the entire country was under German control.

From the beginning, the Nazis outlawed any opposition to their rule. It became illegal to belong to any political parties other than the German-controlled National Socialist Party (NSB). By 1941, persecution of Dutch Jews had begun. In 1942, Jews were forced to wear the yellow Star of David.

Despite the harsh punishments they faced, some individuals spoke out against the Nazi regime. Many were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Food shortages plagued the population. Those who defied the occupiers lost their food rations. Those who were discovered to be part of the resistance movement suffered a worse fate: execution.

Activities of the Resistance:

- forging ration cards
- creating false documents
- gathering information
- publishing illegal newspapers
- distributing food and supplies
- sheltering those hiding from the Nazis

### **Canadian Soldiers in the Netherlands**

The German army invaded the Netherlands in May 1940. From September 1944 to April 1945, the First Canadian Army fought a number of desperate battles for the liberation of the Dutch people. They also brought emergency food rations to people in the western Netherlands who had barely survived the terrible "Hunger Winter" of 1944. They were starving because the Germany army imposed so many restrictions that barely anyone had any food or the money to buy it.

The Canadian troops were part of the Allied forces who reached the Netherlands by way of France and Belgium. The Germans were not easy to defeat; they tore down many dikes to flood the low-lying countryside and force the Allies to stick to higher ground, where they were exposed to enemy guns. As the leading part of the push to liberate the Netherlands, the Canadians suffered a high number of casualties: over 7,600 Canadian soldiers were killed.

On June 6, 1944, the Allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy. Though the Allies made steady progress toward liberating the Dutch people who had been living

under German rule, it was not until May 5, 1945, that the German forces surrendered in the Netherlands.

More than 60 years later, the people of the Netherlands are still grateful for the tremendous sacrifice made by the Canadians.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What would you do if one of your friends or family members came to your door, asking for help? What if they were hiding from the government? Would this make any difference to you? What if the person at the door were a stranger?
2. How did the invasion of his country by the Germans start to affect Jan's life? Did he and his friends do the same things they always did?
3. Why do you think Jan's father and mother were willing to risk their lives (and Jan's) to hide people from the Nazis?
4. Why didn't Jan's father want to join the Dutch Resistance?
5. Do you think all the German soldiers were bad people, or were they afraid for their lives if they didn't follow orders?
6. How would you try to contact people if your country were suddenly occupied, and you knew the enemy was listening to all telephone calls and text messages, and scanning all web pages?
7. Jan's family allowed Isaac and Lena to hide from the Nazis by living in their apartment, but Lena betrayed them to the enemy. If someone you were helping betrayed you, would you stop helping people? Why or why not?

### Connecting Literature and Life

Historical research: Have your students find an actual reference for an event referred to in *A Boy in War*.

Example: Jan and his friends build rafts out of biscuit tins that the Allied forces had filled with food and distributed to the starving Dutch people. Here is a reference from a Canadian newspaper, the *Hamilton Spectator*, on June 26, 1945: "A notable feature of the decorations are thousands of biscuit tins painted red, white and blue and hanging in clusters on trees along the main streets. They were used by Allied forces to bring food to the starving people."

Online research can include visits to

- the Veteran Affairs Canada website <http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca>
- the Canadian War Museum at <http://www.warmuseum.ca>
- Wikipedia (includes links to many other websites)

## Plot

The plot tells the action of the story. This is true in works of fiction and non-fiction alike. Sometimes characters make things happen, while other characters are affected by events happening around them. Ask your students to name a person in *A Boy in War* who makes something good or bad happen, and a person who is affected by this action.

## Writing Practice

Have your students put themselves in the place of Jan's father and write a letter home from prison camp. How do they keep their families encouraged in spite of everything? How do they manage to keep their hopes up in wartime?

Jan liked writing puppet plays to entertain his friends and fellow students. Have your students write a short, one-act play about surviving in an occupied land in a time of war. For example, perhaps the characters are trying to get a message to the resistance but have to rely on code words and actions to avoid attracting the enemy's attention. Or the story could be about ingenious ways to prevent starvation. Your students can act out their plays or make and use puppets to tell their stories.

## The People in Jan de Groot's Life

Some of the people described in *A Boy in War* are central to Jan's story. Others play smaller roles. These individuals are like major and minor characters in a novel. Have your students write a list of four major and four minor characters in *A Boy in War*.

Human beings are rarely entirely good or bad. Have your students identify a character in the story who seems to be one of the bad guys, but who actually performs an act of kindness. Then have them identify a "good" person who does something wrong. Why does this happen? Does this make the person any less "good"?

Sometimes whether an action is good or evil depends on a character's point of view. Ask your students if they think Jan's brother, Folkert, is breaking the law by forging travel passes and ration tickets. Would the Dutch people call Folkert a criminal or a hero? What about the Nazis?

## Writing Practice

Have your students write a short letter to Lena, telling her how her betrayal affected Jan's family. Then have them switch their point of view by writing a letter to Lena from the Nazi government, congratulating her on assisting their war effort.

## Setting

Sometimes the setting of the story, where it takes place, influences a character's development. Have your students discuss how Jan's life was affected by where he lived at the beginning of the story. (Example: Would he have been as likely to become an avid sailor if he had grown up on the Canadian Prairies?) How are your students' lives affected by their environment? How does where they live affect the life choices their families make?

Geography: How did the geography of the Netherlands make it easy for the Germans to invade? Would Jan and his mother have been able to make their journey in the same amount of time if they had lived in Austria?

Time: What was considered high technology in Jan's time? In the time before CD players, MP3 players, cellphones, and computers, how did people entertain themselves?

During the Second World War, many countries had to impose food and fuel rationing on citizens. For instance, a family of three in England would have been allowed as few as three eggs a week, and butter and sugar were scarce. As climate change becomes more and more of a reality, ask your students what they think may need to be rationed in their lifetimes: Water? Gasoline? Electricity? How would rationing of key resources affect students? Have students write a paragraph titled, "How I Would Live Without \_\_\_\_\_." Fill in the blank with one of the resources identified as being a candidate for rationing.

## Style

Jan de Groot wrote *A Boy in War* to tell his own story. Ask your students to write a description of something important that happened in their lives. Would someone reading their story be able to find a lesson in it?

## Theme

What is the theme of *A Boy in War*? Does Jan's mother express the spirit of the story when she says "Persevere, Jan, don't give up"? Or is the theme "Ordinary people become heroes in extraordinary times"? What do you think this story has to say to people of today?

### About the Author

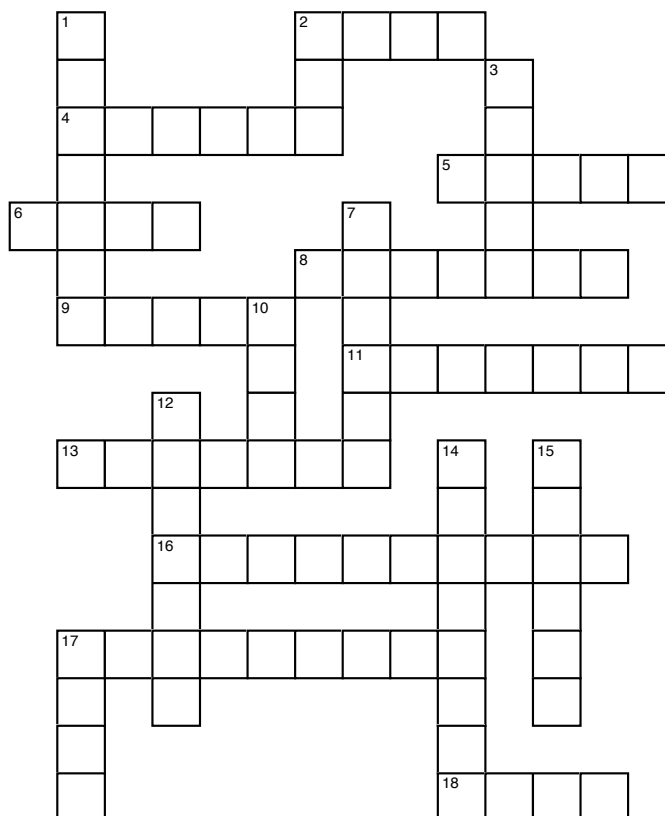
Jan de Groot was born in 1932 in The Hague, Holland, the second son of Folkert and Alida de Groot. His brother, Folkert Jr., was 12 years older. Jan was seven years old when the Germans invaded his country during the Second World War. Despite the many sudden changes that the war brought to his life, Jan and his friends were normal boys, occasionally naughty. Although too young to be a soldier, Jan was old enough to understand what was occurring around him, and why he could not always talk freely about his family's activities.

The war finally ended in 1945, forever changing Jan's family. In 1950, Jan became a merchant mariner and sailed to many places around the world. He emigrated to Canada in 1957, and from 1970 to 1980 he lived in the Caribbean. Jan has wanted to write ever since he was a child. He started writing articles for boating magazines in the 1980s and wrote his first book a decade later. *A Boy in War* is his fourth book. He chose to write his own story because he felt it was necessary for people to know what happens when a country becomes involved in war. "In North America, a war of this magnitude has never taken place. Here, people do not realize how it affects the civilian population." Jan de Groot hopes *A Boy in War* will contribute in some small way to helping end war.

To those who want to become writers, Jan says this: write the way you talk, the way you would tell the story. Don't try to make your story a literary accomplishment by using words and phrases that are not used in normal speech.

At the time his war memoir was published, Jan was busy writing his next story about his personal experience with a ship that was possessed by a ghost.

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**Across**

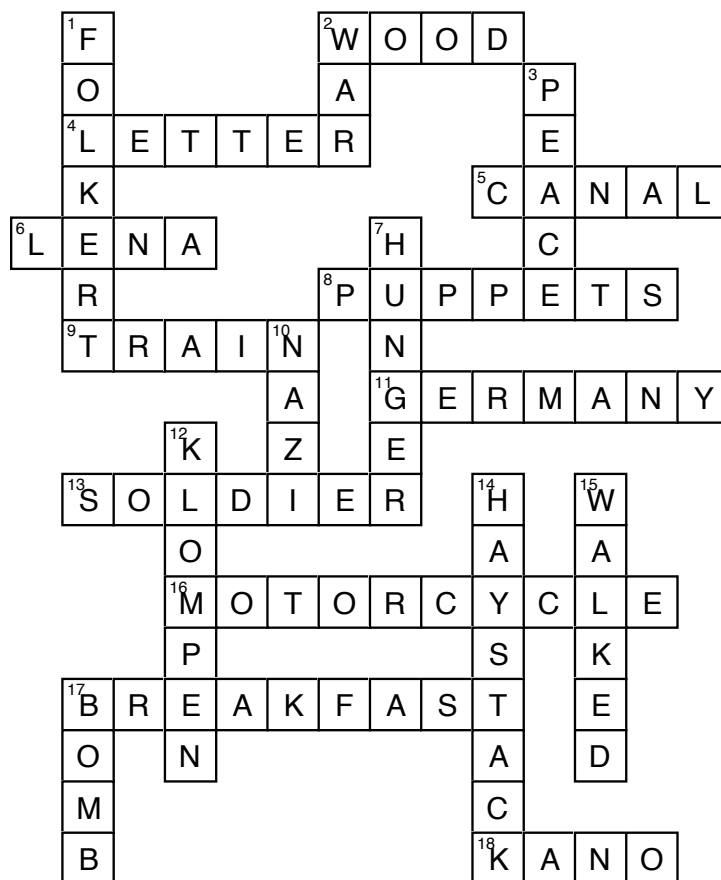
2. Jan's friend made him shoes out of this
4. A message written on paper and sent in an envelope
5. Where Jan and his friends sailed their boats
6. She turned Jan's father over to the Nazis
8. Jan liked to write plays that he performed with these toys
9. Type of transportation that needs tracks
11. The country that invaded the Netherlands
13. Someone who is in an army
16. Two-wheeled vehicle
17. First meal of the day
18. Jan travelled the canal in this

**Down**

1. The name of Jan's father and brother
2. An armed conflict between two countries
3. A time when there is no war
7. Extreme food shortages during the winter of 1944 meant that many Dutch people suffered from \_\_\_\_\_
10. A German soldier was also known as this in the Second World War
12. Dutch word for clogs
14. What Jan and his mother slept in one night in the country
15. Jan and his mother crossed the country this way: they \_\_\_\_\_
17. A deadly weapon that is dropped from enemy planes



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**Across**

2. Jan's friend made him shoes out of this [WOOD]
4. A message written on paper and sent in an envelope [LETTER]
5. Where Jan and his friends sailed their boats [CANAL]
6. She turned Jan's father over to the Nazis [LENA]
8. Jan liked to write plays that he performed with these toys [PUPPETS]
9. Type of transportation that needs tracks [TRAIN]
11. The country that invaded the Netherlands [GERMANY]
13. Someone who is in an army [SOLDIER]
16. Two-wheeled vehicle [MOTORCYCLE]
17. First meal of the day [BREAKFAST]

**Down**

1. The name of Jan's father and brother [FOLKERT]
2. An armed conflict between two countries [WAR]
3. A time when there is no war [PEACE]
7. Extreme food shortages during the winter of 1944 meant that many Dutch people suffered from \_\_\_\_\_ [HUNGER]
10. A German soldier was also known as this in the Second World War [NAZI]
12. Dutch word for clogs [KLOMPEN]
14. What Jan and his mother slept in one night in the country [HAYSTACK]
15. Jan and his mother crossed the country this way: they \_\_\_\_\_ [WALKED]
17. A deadly weapon that is dropped from enemy planes [BOMB]