
CHILD SOLDIERS IN CIVIL WAR

WHY DO CHILDREN BECOME SOLDIERS?

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War has been marked by many significant changes in the international as well as national milieu. One change is the way war is fought in different parts of the world. Before the end of the Cold War, conflicts were predominantly international in nature, although intra-state conflicts and ethnic struggles also existed. With the emergence of a "New World Order" the international system witnessed an exceptional proliferation of intra-state conflicts and guerrilla-type warfare. The increasing nature of the phenomenon of child soldiers is a by product of proliferating ethno-political conflicts. Although, it is practically impossible to provide an exact figure, informed sources maintain that an estimated 300,000 children are involved as soldiers or in support roles within non-state paramilitary groups and state military forces (e.g Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2001). This article examines the question why children become soldiers.

The concept of a 'child' is problematic legally and otherwise. The problem of definition arises when dealing with persons between the age of fifteen and eighteen, as there exists a wider consensus in referring to all human beings under the age of fifteen as children. Some decades ago most international legal instruments, for example, the Convention on Armed Conflicts, set the maximum age for children far below eighteen years.

In most societies, especially traditional ones, persons between the ages of fifteen and eighteen are regarded as 'youth' or young people. Religious beliefs play a role in determining the concept of childhood in some parts of the world as for religious purposes, and by rituals a child may become or rather accept adult responsibilities at an early stage of his or her growth. In some 'pre-literate societies' age categories have been determined by physical process, such as puberty. A community's political, economic and cultural values also play a role in the way in which childhood is determined.

In spite of these dynamics, most international organizations and experts currently prefer to define childhood as eighteen years of age and under. The United Nations now defines children as persons under the age of eighteen years. For example, according to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years. Graca Machel, the expert who undertook the UN Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, defined the term 'child' to include everyone under the age of eighteen (Machel, 1996). Other international institutions, such as the African Charter for the Rights of the Child, also define a child as a human being under the age of eighteen.

Recruitment and Enlistment

As far as children's participation in armed conflict is concerned, some observers suggest that in most conflict settings children are forced to become soldiers by conscription. Meanwhile, some studies accept the fact that in addition to forceful recruitment, children also enrol in the army and rebel movements voluntarily. Machel (1996), for example, agrees that "in addition to being forcibly recruited, youth also present themselves for service" (p. 10).

However, Machel further argues: "it is misleading, however, to consider this voluntary. While young people may appear to choose military service, the choice is not exercised freely. They may be driven by any of several forces including cultural, social economic or political pressure" (p.10). Brett & McCallin (1998) also propose that the whole concept of what is 'voluntary' needs to be called into question, because the options for children are not free from influence. Cohen & Goodwin-Gill (1994) point out the role of social pressure and manipulation in the children's option to join armed groups, and they suggest that these forces are most difficult to resist.

Forcible Recruitment

Forceful recruitment of children is undoubtedly one of the most common forms of drafting new members for armed groups. There are countries where conscription is legal, for example, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Mozambique. In some countries where conscription is regulated by law, authorities engage in recruiting much younger children into the military as there are practical issues in proving the actual age of children (Wessells, 1998). Direct or indirect threat is used in places where conscription is not formally in place (Machel, 1996). Forceful recruitment often involves threat to the safety and well-being of children themselves and their families, and actual violation of the physical integrity of the youth. In some regions violence has been directed towards family members and others close to the child. Armed opposition groups, as well as national armed forces engage in these types of activities to force the children into armed movements.

'Afesa,' an Ahmaric term for press-ganging, is a common form of recruitment in many African states. Children are being forcibly recruited in streets, marketplaces, playgrounds, schools, and religious places of worship (Brett and McCallin, 1998). Brett and McCallin maintain that "teenage boys who worked in the informal sector selling cigarettes, matches, sweet, chewing gum and lottery tickets were a particular target" (p.50). Democratic Republic of

Congo (DRC) is one of the most dangerous conflict settings in Africa, involving a number of countries and parties in the ongoing war for land and resources. In Congo thousands of children are recruited, often forcibly, as soldiers. For example, Laurent Kabila's troops forced a large number of what they term 'young kadogos' into the army (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Other militia groups in DRC were also inducting children into their ranks. A Congolese boy explained his experience of forceful recruitment as follows:

I was coming from school at about 5 pm. I went to school in the afternoon. I was heading home when soldiers in a vehicle stopped me and made me get in. They were Rwandans. There were lots of other young boys in the vehicle. We went to the airport in Goma and from there to Kalemie by plane. We were all ten, twelve, thirteen years old and older. Then we were sent to Camps Vert in Moba and trained there. Lots were killed in the training. Lots died of sickness. The food was poorly prepared and many got dysentery. (Human Rights Watch, 2001: 10)

In Uganda, the rebels are taking children forcibly after each raid, often over the dead bodies of their family members. Although the rebels prefer children in their teens, they abduct children as young as eight or nine. Children who resist recruitment or oppose the rebels are killed without any qualms. In Liberia, a childcare worker reported that "some boys were told, you join us or we'll kill your family" (Human Rights Watch, 1994a: 25). Image Asia (1996) suggests that in Burma forced recruitment is particularly common before and during large offensives.

Voluntary Enlistment

As pointed out by observers as well as scholars, children also voluntarily enlist in armed organizations. There are several factors that contribute to children optionally joining armed groups. Prominent among them are: (i) Economic needs, (ii) Security needs, (iii) Power, (iv) Nationalism, (v) Revenge, (vi) Social and cultural values, (vii) Peer pressure, and (viii) Excitement.

1. Economic Needs

When basic human needs, economic as well as welfare needs, are not satisfied, human beings are capable of trying all possible alternatives to satisfy their needs. Children are no exception to this general rule, and in most conflict settings joining an armed group seems a last option for hundreds of children. That is why the lack of fundamental economic needs plays a major role in forcing children to take up arms with organized military establishments.

Machel (1996), the expert appointed by the U.N to study the effects of armed conflicts, claims: "one of the basic reasons that children join armed groups is economic. Hunger and poverty may drive parents to offer their children for service. In some cases, armies pay a minor soldier's wage directly to the family. Child participation

may be difficult to distinguish, as in some cases whole families move with armed groups. Children themselves may volunteer if they believe that this is the only way to guarantee regular meals, clothing or medical attention" (p. 10). Human Rights Watch (1994: 3) claims that all the warring factions in Liberia have forcibly recruited some children, but most children have joined voluntarily, usually because they saw no other way to survive. Again in Liberia, UN officials claim that most children chose to become soldiers because their economic situation was extremely limited (Human Rights Watch, 1994).

In Cambodia, the UN found that most child soldiers either were orphans or came from very poor families. For these children, joining the army voluntarily was a ready means to get food and earn some money for surviving relatives. Families may also encourage their children to enlist as means for economic and social advancement. In Liberia even seven-year-olds are involved in combat because, according to the Liberian Red Cross, "those with guns could eat" (Cohen & Goodwin-Gill, 1994: 33). Inside an armed group, an expert claimed, "for the first time these children can count on medical care and three meals a day" (Frankel, 1995: 44). Many underage soldiers, for example, in Lebanon, boast of bigger financial earnings than even professionals such as teachers and government servants (Cairns, 1996).

2. Security

Membership in an armed group and access to an AK-47, that a soldier would most probably obtain while inside the group, ensure protection from threat and harassment. Many children who have joined hands with armed groups have experienced violence in their personal lives, which makes them feel helpless. A Liberian boy soldier, for example, claimed that he joined United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO) to protect himself against the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) (Human Rights Watch, 1994). Machel (1996) summarizes this as follows: Some children feel obliged to become soldiers for their own protection. Faced with violence and chaos all around, they decide that they are safer with guns in their hands. Often such children join armed opposition groups after experiencing harassment from government forces. Many young people have joined the Kurdish rebel group, for example, as a reaction to scorched-earth policies and extensive human rights violations. In El Salvador, children whose parents had been killed by government soldiers joined opposition groups for protection (p.12).

Therefore, membership in an armed group ensures safety and security to a child from threats and harassments. Also, it provides a certain amount of freedom to engage in certain activities. For example, a certain amount of freedom of movement is provided to children who opt to become soldiers. Such freedom is not possible for a normal child under some circumstances. In that sense, the desire to be safe from security harassment and threat influence many children to take up the option of arms.

3. Power

Being a member of an armed group ensures power to otherwise powerless children who mostly come from weaker social groups such as the poor and the uneducated. Frankel (1995) believes that in some places, "picking up a gun is simply the best survival option available. A child soldier gets a clean uniform with bright insignia, his first pair of shoes and a weapon—symbols of power and status that few enjoyed beforehand" (p.44). According to a UN official in Liberia:

Lots of children are used at checkpoints. Manning a checkpoint gives a kid power and influence, even if he is twelve years old. Often a twelve or fifteen year old boy will stop a UN car at a checkpoint and make the officer in charge explain who he is, what he is doing... we teach our UN officers to be quiet, and try to explain. But a twelve-year-old doesn't understand. All he understands is that he is in power and has someone to command and can kill someone. Sometimes there are fifteen or twenty people at a checkpoint and the commander is only about ten years old. Boys at checkpoints have killed people for no reason at all. (Human Rights Watch, 1994: 32)

The power and prestige children acquire in armed organizations also allow children to break social traditions. In normal circumstances, elders such as parents and teachers control children. In conflict situations where children are involved as soldiers, parents and teachers may have to adjust to this new status of children. Furthermore, there are some social and economical benefits as well. For example, in Lebanon a girl claimed that her (underage soldier) brother does not have to wait in line to buy provisions (Cairns, 1996). In this sense the power children attain as result of their involvement in military organizations is not just political but also economic and cultural.

4. Ideology and Nationalism

Of course, many children believe in what they are fighting for because in one way or another they understand the stated objectives of their respective organizations. These designs may include equality, political liberation, holy war, the right to their ancestral lands, and ideology (Brett & McCallin, 1998). While some scholars insist that children profess loyalty to religious, nationalistic, or political ideologies and they take up arms to defend their beliefs (e.g. Juergensmeyer, 1993), others believe that children do not have the "cognitive capacity" to think rationally about concepts such as religion and nation (e.g. Coles, 1986). Cohn & Goodwin-Gill (1994) argue that children in Sri Lanka, for example, "were attracted by the black and white version of the world offered by the LTTE, which presents itself as sacred and infallible" (p.35).

For children, ideology is mainly a matter of compelling stories that relate the child's personal experiences to experiences of the community and to the future (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow,

1991a). Influenced by ideological motivations, children have taken part in political struggles in many conflict situations in the past. Children were on the front-line, for instance, in the Viet Cong's nationalist cause in Vietnam, in the Palestinian struggle against Israel, in Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini, in Nazi Germany, and even in the American Civil War (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991b). This also applies to the numerous national liberation struggles that are being fought against state institutions today (Coles, 1986).

5. Revenge

The desire to take revenge often influences children to seek a role in armed organizations. Many children admit to the fact that they have experienced violence in their personal lives and lost loved ones. For example, Roland Vah, who voluntarily joined the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) maintained that, "My mother got killed by government forces" (Susman, 1999: A24). Ishmael Beah, a nineteen-year-old, who was in the Sierra Leone Army at fourteen, claimed that, "I lost my parents in the war, and friends of mine watched their parents killed in front of them" (Farley, 2001: 26). A Liberian boy soldier claimed "I joined ULIMO, for revenge because, my papa was killed" (Human Rights Watch, 1994: 26). These are some of the most common accounts of what motivates children to fight on behalf of an armed group.

6. Social Values

Social values have a strong impact on the children's decision to enlist in an armed group. How a community values conflict and its consequences, for example, in terms of social justice, religion, ethnicity, chosen traumas, and so on, is likely to be central to children's own perceptions. In some situations participation in military or warlike activities is glorified. Children are raised to revere military leaders of the past, and to look on military induction as a sign of manhood. Children may become extremely attracted to the military life or the glamour and prestige of a military uniform (Coles, 1986). For instance, a study (Image Asia, 1996) on the child soldiers in Burma points out that:

Burma's military history plays an important psychological part in encouraging children to become involved in the military. This is due to the prominent role that General Aung San played in liberating the country from the British and Japanese occupations. The Burman public has turned him into an idolized national hero. Children, especially young boys, are raised to revere military leaders of the past, and to look on military induction as a sign of manhood. In much of the popular media, the soldier is held up as the perfect role model. Particularly among the ethnic groups, where many children grow up watching their fathers go to war... The ethnic groups also have revered leaders, that children are taught to adore, and often fear, from an early age. To be a soldier is to occupy a position of great honor and self-sacrifice. (p. 4)

The status of those who die in war is also imperative in this regard. In some conflict settings those who die in the war are being revered as heroes and saviours of the race, in extreme cases they become 'martyrs.' For instance, in Ireland, in Palestine and in Sri Lanka those who suffer death in confrontation are remembered with honour and revered as "martyrs" (Byrne, 1997). This "cult of martyrdom" plays a crucial role in forcing children to choose violence, because in essence the status of the dead becomes a source of pressure on the children in their respective environments.

7. Peer Pressure

Pressure, particularly from friends and members of the community, may influence a child to become a soldier. It is not uncommon for some children to join in armed groups simply because their friends have joined. All children expect approval from elders and their peers. Expectations of peer approval are an integral part of any child's life. The use of guns and involvement in violence are seen by many children as a way to win peer approval (Drogin, 1995).

8. Excitement

Being a soldier and the activities attached to it can give pleasure to many children, although not many child soldiers openly declare it. "The crackle of gunfire, the pride of being in charge, the experience of attacking a village and being allowed to keep some of the spoil. This is what used to give David Samai (a Sierra Leone child soldier and a self-styled Sergeant) a thrill," says an observer (Simmons, 1999:1). "I like being a Sergeant," declared David Samai, in an interview in Sierra Leone (Simmons, 1999, p. 1).

Garbarino, an eminent scholar of child psychology and violence, and his team endorse the view that some children may appreciate the thrill that comes with moderate danger and some children may even seek extreme danger as an expression of psychopathology (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991b). Garbarino and his colleagues, from their experience in several war-torn societies, conclude that: "if we are honest we must recognize that war may mean the fun and adventure of being young and set loose on the world. This is one of war's attractions for young people, particularly young people who are trapped in a dead-end existence or who yearn for glory and excitement" (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991a: 5). Cairns (1996) reports that in Belfast many young men seek membership in IRA as a way of relieving boredom. This may be also true in other conflict settings, like Sri Lanka.

Propaganda and Indoctrination

As aforementioned, some scholars question the real nature of 'voluntarism' in optional enlistment of children in armed groups, based on children's cognitive capacity to evaluate and make decisions. Of significance in this 'voluntary enlistment' is the role of propaganda and indoctrination. Since the propaganda mechanisms that are unleashed in conflict settings by concerned parties are so rigorous, children may find it hard to resist. This

may be because of the vulnerabilities of children themselves. According to social anthropologist Brian Milne, who has studied the exploitation of child soldiers in Southeast Asia, "kids don't have a doctrine or ideology" (Frankel, 1995: 44). "Adults need a good reason to take up arms. It is easier to convince kids to fight for almost nothing," remarked a Liberian working with former combatants (Human Rights Watch, 1994:3). Therefore, it is easy for any group, especially the ones that are in control, to induct children with any ideology including nationalism, holy war and the use of violence for political purposes. Olara Otunnu, the UN special representative for children and armed conflict said that:

Children become in a cynical way the best raw material to fashion into efficient, ruthless and unquestioning tools of war. Because they are impressionable, they are like a vessel. Whatever you want to make them into, they'll be shaped. So you indoctrinate them, you shape them, and then as we see, from Sierra Leone to Congo to Sri Lanka, they are the most ruthless. (Susman & Mohan, 1999: A15)

Influence of ideology, especially when young people develop a sense of social bonding and identity, can have a lasting impact on them. History have proven that in places such as South Africa, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka, the influence of ideology on children have brought disastrous consequences. In Sri Lanka, the Middle East, and Afghanistan, for instance, children have gone to the extent of undertaking suicide-bombing missions. This is, in fact done by respective armed organizations exploiting the innocence and immaturity of children (Machel, 1996).

Propaganda is undertaken by many ways and means. For example, in remote villages propaganda is undertaken by delivering lecture-like speeches explaining the goals and the rationality behind the decision to fight. The need for more manpower to maintain the struggle is also always emphasized. Then the villagers are asked, often with force, to supply the necessary human resources including little boys and girls (Brett & McCallin, 1998). Militants also use posters, street dramas and so on to attract the attention of children. This author has first hand experience of watching repeated telecasts of the movie *Omar Muktar: The Lion of the Desert* over the LTTE television station Nitharsanam in the early 1990s. This movie is based on a fine story of a Libyan resistance movement against the Italians during the inter-war period.

However, in most conflicts today, propaganda and indoctrination are not just isolated acts, but a part of the life of the people who live in conflict settings. It is everywhere in their environment, for example, in art, recreational areas, schools, places of worship and so on. In other words, in many conflict settings, propaganda has been undertaken by the militarization of the whole society itself. And militarization has become the single most efficient component of the propaganda mechanism of present-day armed groups (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994). In the Arab world, observers believe that the Islamist movements "have perfected the art of recruiting willing martyrs." They also point out that mosque-based religious

preparation plays a crucial role in such recruitment (Frankel, 1995; Juergensmeyer, 1993).

Conclusion

There has been a rapid increase in the number of children involved as soldiers in state armies as well as non-state paramilitary organizations in the recent past. While a substantial number of children are forcibly recruited, others voluntarily enlist for various reasons. Nevertheless, observers question the theory of voluntary enlistment, arguing that children do not have the cognitive capacity or skills to make independent decisions. This argument has been strengthened by the role of propaganda in forcing the children into violence. In many conflict settings, propaganda has been undertaken by several means including talks, poster campaigns, music, street dramas and so on. Yet, of significance is the way in which the whole environment has been militarized, so that the children cannot escape the attraction of the symbols of war and violence.

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