

Exploring the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers

Written by Stian Eisentrager

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/04/19/exploring-the-recruitment-and-use-of-child-soldiers/>

STIAN EISENTRAGER, APR 19 2012

The images of young boys and girls, who have probably not yet reached their teens, look as frightening and wrong, as they look unreal. But real they are. Since the 1970s, several juridical, international efforts have been undertaken to reduce the usage of children in armed conflict. Still, The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (2008) reports that the phenomenon is widespread: an estimated 300,000 children serve as soldiers in more than 30 armed conflicts around the globe. The largest number of child fighters is used on the African continent, but during recent years many have also been used in countries like Colombia, Sri Lanka and Nepal (Cataldi & Briggs 2007; Singer 2010)

The images of child soldiers appear more often and have become increasingly normal to see during the last two decades of globalization, media revolution and the explosive emergence of NGOs and their armies of PR officials whose job is to feed the mainstream media, suffering under constant cost-reduction policies, with information subsidies.

An interview in the newspaper *Verdens Gang* (Grønning 2008) with the former Norwegian mercenary Espen Lie attracted a lot of attention, as he admitted to having shot at children during a mission in Sierra Leone: "When you shoot, it is often on a distance of 100 or 200 meters. It is not easy to say whether they are 12, 14 or 16 or older". The phenomenon has also received attention through former child soldiers who have written books about their own experiences, such as Ishmael Beah (2007) who fought as a child in Sierra Leone, and Emmanuel Jal (2010) from Sudan, who also shares his story through hip-hop music.

It is not only popular media that has engaged with the topic. Also, a growing group of scholars have shown an interest, resulting in an increasing amount of books and articles on the subject. However, NGOs repeatedly present the child soldier phenomenon as a new feature of war, and both the media and several scholars seem to have adopted this view. Anwo (2009, 1) characterizes the child soldier issue in Africa "historically unprecedented". Singer, for example, says that "children never where an integral, essential part of military forces through history" and that children in war was a "rarity" until recently (Singer 2010, 93).

This is a vaguely documented claim, though: since Biblical time and in various cultures, children have been recruited into militaries and gone to war as servants, drummers, scouts and spies – but also as fighters. George Orwell makes an account of child soldiers as young as eleven or twelve years old in his book about the Spanish Civil War, "Homage to Catalonia" (Orwell 1986, 25). Some years later, Russian, German and Jewish children were participating in the fighting in World War II (Rosen 2005).

This essay questions the eagerness of presenting child-soldiering as a new phenomenon, as it draws attention away from an important way of building an understanding of it, and will draw comparisons between contemporary and earlier societies.

With this in mind, this essay will try to identify and discuss the most important factors that are at play when children are recruited into armed groups and used in armed conflicts.

Conceptions of childhood

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As NGOs, media and even scholars tend to present child-soldiering as a new feature of war, David Rosen makes an important point by underlining that we should not mythologize the past and make the thousands of children who fought in wars invisible (Rosen 2005, 14).

Throughout history and in different cultures, the concept of childhood has not been defined and experienced in the same manner. One of the first scholars to claim that childhood is a modern invention was Philippe Ariès (1996). During medieval times, he argues, children were regarded as mini-adults who did not have any different needs than adults, and that they were not protected against any of the aspects of adult life, such as for example, labour, sex and violence. It should therefore not be a surprise that children have participated in warfare long before our time of living. In medieval Europe, children were seen as natural companions of adults, also in war (Rosen 2005, 7). The young boys that accompanied adult knights in battle on foot were called “infante” by the Italians, and thus making up the “infanteria” – the infantry (Honwana 2006, 26). As Helen Brocklehurst (2009) remarks, adding the prefix “child” to “soldier” does not indicate the beginning of the practice of soldiering by children. Instead, it is the milestone where the western society’s conception of childhood was no longer consistent with its concepts of warfare. Brocklehurst additionally notes “the ‘child soldier crisis’ is a modern political crisis which has little to do with whether there are more or fewer children in wars today” (Brocklehurst 2009, 5).

What is important to note, with this in mind, is that the conception of childhood is different in many of the developing countries where children are used as soldiers today, for instance in societies of Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in rural areas. While the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and many developed countries strictly draw the line between childhood and adulthood at 18 years, this is not the case in many of these predominantly rural societies where child soldiers are used: once a person is doing adult work or has completed cultural rituals that lead to manhood or womanhood, he or she is regarded as an adult. Consequently, cultural phenomena, traditions and social roles in developing countries is leading to the perception that a person becomes an adult when he or she is in the early teens. At the same time, though, many elders and state officials in these societies either regard a person less than 18 years of age as too young to participate in armed groups, or they can accept this view after a combination of reflection and persuasion (Vermeij 2009, 9; Wessells 2006, 5). Nevertheless, the conception of childhood is one of the factors that are the basis for whether children are used as soldiers.

Connected to the conception of childhood is also the use of child labour. We can see the historical linkages between these two factors and the use of child soldiers. Rosen (2005, 7) argues that the idea of children as “innocent” and “weak” emerged with the introduction of formal, institutionalized education – a development that accompanied the industrial revolution in the Western world, and started the segregation of the stricter categories of childhood and adulthood. Prior to this, the most common form of education was apprenticeship, thus introducing children early to adult life.

Today we can see that the states, in which armed groups have recruited children under the age of 18 into their ranks during the last decade, are also associated with widespread use of child labour (see table 1).

“Old” and “new” wars

An assumption that is used when explaining the child soldier crisis is that contemporary, “new” wars are significantly different from traditional or “old” wars. According to Rosen (2005), it seems to be a notion amongst a lot of organizations, media and scholars (for example Collier, 2003; Singer, 2010) that there are sharp qualitative distinctions between how war was fought before and now in the 21st Century. This is based in a belief that “old” or traditional wars were self-limiting and rule-bound in several ways: having clear political goals, being limited in time and geographical space, in addition to being “humane” in the sense that these wars were fought in accordance with rules accepted by all, for example by making a clear distinction between civilians and soldiers. In the humanitarian discourse, contemporary wars are in possession of few, if any, of these features (Rosen 2005, 10-11).

Singer (2010, 103) makes the claim that while the military operations of the Western powers have developed to be more technological, the warfare in developing countries “has become messier and criminalized”. World Bank expert,

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Paul Collier (2003) is one of the scholars claiming that the “new” or postmodern wars are first and foremost fought for economic gains, not ideals, referring to that key characteristics of a country with a high risk of internal armed conflict is economic.

Rosen, on the other hand, criticizes how “new” wars are presented as being conducted by pure criminals without any political goals, and that these wars are portrayed as a “way of life” without any other purpose than upholding the wars themselves. He also points out that despite the brutality of contemporary warfare, neither high civilian casualties nor terrorist or genocidal acts represent a real change from how wars have been fought historically. The wars of the 1700s and 1800s, often used as examples of wars that was fought “by the rules”, at best constitute exceptions in the history of warfare (Rosen 2005, 11).

Taking a closer look at for example the Thirty Years’ War, the Napoleonic Wars or the American Civil War provides us with clear evidence that “old wars” neither were self-limiting nor rule-bound. Claiming that the actors in the armed conflicts of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Rwanda and Congo-Kinshasa, all examples of conflicts where children were present as soldiers, did not have clear political goals, do not serve any other meaning than to reduce them to “apolitical criminals and child abusers” (Ibid., 14)

It can be shown that certain aspects of warfare, for example technology, has developed through history, but according to Rosen there is no empirical justification for making a distinct division between “old” and “new” wars at the end of colonialism. Children have always been present on the battlefield as soldiers, thus “the roots of the child soldier crisis cannot be said to lie in the anomaly of modern warfare as it is experienced in postcolonial states” (Ibid., 12)

Supply and demand

Achvarina and Reich (2010, 55-76) have shown that possible factors, such as poverty levels and the proportion of orphans in a population, do not help us much in explaining the differences in occurrence of child soldiers throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, they have evidence that suggests that there is an important connection between the access to refugee and internally displaced persons camps and the participation of child soldiers. They presume children, whether orphans or not, are less likely to be recruited if the camps are well protected. It is well documented that children join armed groups and armies by free will, of a variety of reasons, as well as by forced abduction (Honwana 2006, 49-74; Vermeij 2009). Poverty, education, war, protection of refugee camps, family relations and friends are all factors that shape the supply of children for recruitment. Nevertheless, demand is determining how many children are actually ordered to kill (Andvig & Gates 2010, 78-79).

Children’s role in war through history is recognized by Andvig and Gates (Ibid.), but they point out that while historically child soldiers were complementary to adults and therefore proportionally fewer, in several contemporary armed conflicts children seem to be substitutes for adult soldiers as they represent a high proportion of the total number of combatants. For instance, in the recent wars in Liberia, Sudan and Angola, the child soldier rates were 53%, 39% and 28% respectively (Ibid.; Achvarina & Reich 2010, 72). In the rebel group Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda, children under the age of 18 constitute a high proportion of the soldiers (Vermeij 2009). Several scholars argue that it is easier for children to join war, and that they can substitute adult combatants, because of the availability of cheap, powerful, yet lightweight and easy-to-carry weapons such as the AK-47 assault rifle (Singer 2010, 99-102; Vermeij 2009, 28). The same argumentation has been used both by UNICEF (1996) and Human Rights Watch (2008), the latter stating that: “Technological advances in weaponry and the proliferation of small arms have contributed to the increased use of child soldiers. Lightweight automatic weapons are simple to operate, often easily accessible, and can be used by children as easily as adults.” The proliferation of light and powerful firearms is what we can call an enabler and an important structural factor for the use of child soldiers.

But why are children more favourable recruits than adults for certain military groups? A Congolese rebel leader interviewed in an article in *The Economist* (Children under Arms 1999) summarizes the three main reasons why children are good soldiers: “they obey orders; they are not concerned of getting with getting back to their wife and

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family; and they don't know fear" (cited in Andvig & Gates 2010, 79). These characteristics appear in several studies of child soldiers. Both Vermeij (2009), Sanin (2010), Wessels (2010) and Singer (2010) show how armed groups recruit and socialize children into the groups to make them stay. Not surprisingly, children adapt more easily into personalized management, which still is very common in the poor countries where child-soldiering is taking place. The key demand factor is, however, whether there are armed groups that find children useful and want to recruit them.

Developing international legal standards

Historically, the lack of laws and regulations prohibiting child-soldiering may have been a contributing factor to the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. States have been very eager to secure their own interests, rather than the interests of underage individuals participating in hostilities. For example, the international delegitimizing of state-authorized non-state violence began already in 1856 with the Treaty of Paris and the attached Declaration of Paris, which declared, "privateering is, and remains abolished" (Thomson 1994, 70-71). It should take more than a century before the international community declared something similar about child-soldiering.

Since the 1970s a number of international legal standards to protect children from recruitment and use as soldiers have emerged (Anwo et al. 2009; CSUCS 2011a). Here we can also see an inconsistency in the definition of a child, as discussed in the first section, Conceptions of childhood:

- **ILO Minimum Age Convention 138**: States should pursue a policy to abolish child labour and to raise minimum age of work to "a level consistent with the fullest physical and mental development of young persons". (ILO 1973)
- **ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 182**: States should "take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour as a matter of urgency". Children are persons under 18 years of age and the worst forms of child labour include child-soldiering. (ILO 1999)
- **Additional Protocols to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949**: The minimum age for recruitment and use in all types of armed conflict is set to 15 years of age. (ICRC 1977)
- **Convention of the Rights of the Child**: Even though a child is generally defined as a person below the age of 18 in the convention, the age of 15 is used as the minimum age of recruitment and participation in armed conflict. (OHCHR 1989)
- **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict**: The age of 18 is set as the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities, nevertheless states can accept volunteers from the age of 16. (OHCHR 2000)
- **Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC)**: The ICC shall try persons charged with committing war crimes, which includes the conscription, participation and use of children under the age of 15 in both war and internal armed conflict. (ICC 1998)
- **African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child**: The world's only regional treaty that addresses child-soldiering defines a child as any person under the age of 18. (AU 1999)
- **UN Security Council Resolutions** 1261 (1999), 1314 (2000), 1379 (2001), 1460 (2003), 1539 (2004), 1612 (2005) and 1882 (2009) contains condemnation of the recruitment and use of children in hostilities. The Security Council does not offer its own definition of a child, but calls on all parties in armed conflicts to comply with international law, referring to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol, as well as the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, thus setting the minimum age to either the age of 15 or 18 (UNSC 2009)
- **The Paris Commitments and Principles**: The Commitments consists of legal and operational principles to protect children from being recruited and used in armed conflict. 95 countries have so far endorsed the Paris Principles, which defines a child as "any person less than 18 years of age in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child". (*Paris Commitments and Principles* 2007)

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Fighting impunity

Although many states have ratified one or more of the above-mentioned international legal instruments – as many as 120 states have ratified The Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict – the big challenge is to make sure that “they are used to maximum effect” (CSUCS 2008, 9). There has never been better international legal standards for the protection of the rights of children, but the existence of laws that prohibit the use of children under the age of 18 is in itself not enough to ensure that the use of children in armed conflict is not actually taking place. Little evidence actually exists that these measures have been effective. The concerned states’ (in)ability and willingness to apply and bring the international conventions they have signed into force remains a problem. So-called “naming and shaming” of states using child soldiers could be argued to have had some positive effect on the situation in Colombia and the UK, although regimes such as Burma continues to recruit children into its armed forces (Gates & Reich 2010, 4).

Additionally, child-soldiering is highly apparent in non-state armed groups that operate outside of, and in disregard for, human rights and international law. The “naming and shaming” strategy has failed in respect to non-state groups, which are highly dependent on child soldiers, such as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda. Insurgents do not care about neither blacklisting from NGOs, the media and the UN, nor international legal standards – at least as long as the impunity that has been the general rule so far is maintained.

The last few years there have been developments towards holding child recruiters accountable for their actions. In June 2007, the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) found the three accused, Alex Tamba Brima, Ibrahim Bazy Kamara and Santigie Borbor Kanu, guilty of war crimes, crimes against humanity and other violations of international humanitarian law, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Each of the three former rebels of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) received sentences of more than 45 years in prison, and the judgement represents the first case where someone is found guilty of recruiting and using children in an armed conflict (CSUCS 2011b; SCSL 2011c).

A couple of months later, in August 2007, a former leader of the Sierra Leone’s Civil Defence Forces Militia, Allieu Kondewa, was found guilty on several counts, among others the recruitment of child soldiers. He was sentenced to eight years in prison (CSUCS 2011b; SCSL 2011a). In February 2009, Issa Hassan Sesay, Morris Kallon and Augustine Gbao, senior leaders of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), were found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity – thereunder recruitment of child soldiers – that took place during the civil war between 1991 and 2002. They all received sentences between 25 and 52 years in prison (CSUCS 2011b; SCSL 2011b).

Former Liberian president Charles Taylor currently stands trial at The Special Court for Sierra Leone, charged with using child soldiers. Additionally, the founder of the Union of Congolese Patriots (UPC), Thomas Lubanga, was found guilty of recruiting boys and girls under 15 years of age to fight with his militia in 2002 and 2003 by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on the 14 March 2012 (BBC 2012; CSUCS 2011b; ICC 2011; SCSL 2011d).

To what extent leaders of states, militias and rebel groups in the future will let the risk of prosecution be a factor to be taken into account when considering to use children as combatants, remains to be discovered. In present conflicts, it is likely that groups that are dependent on child soldiers will not abolish the practice if that involves the risk of defeat. There is also a danger that criminalization could be an obstacle to negotiating peace agreements: If the utilizers of child soldiers fear post-war prosecution, there is a risk that they will not lay down their weapons (Gates & Reich 2010, 5).

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the use of children by armed groups is nothing new. Children have been present as soldiers in war throughout history and in different cultures. It has also been argued that the strict division between childhood and adulthood at the age of 18 is a relatively modern, western phenomenon. Despite this, even western

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powers have used, and still use, persons under the age of 18 in their militaries.

The conception of childhood varies in different cultures and sub-cultures, and is often linked together with labour: When a person is able to work, the person is adult. States where children are used as soldiers are associated with high child labour rates. While present in many cases through history, and today, is an understanding that children are in possession of some other features than adults, it is not then said that there is an understanding of any moral or ethical problems related to the use of children in war. The perception of childhood, maturity and the ethics connected with these concepts are therefore important factors at play when children are recruited into armed groups.

A way several scholars have tried to explain the use of child soldiers, is to draw a line between “old” and “new” wars, trying to make the brutality of contemporary insurgencies a factor in itself. However, war has always been brutal and children always have been used as soldiers. To mythologize the past in this way do not give us an improved ability to understand the contemporary child soldier crisis.

The most important factors that determines the supply of children to be recruited as soldiers has also been presented. Poverty, education, protection of refugee camps, family relations, orphan rates, and not at least war itself, are all important supply factors. What is an even more important factor, though, is the demand for children to be recruited. Historically, child soldiers have been complimentary to adult soldiers. What we have seen in several later armed conflicts is that children to a higher degree have been substitutes for adult soldiers. The proliferation and the increased availability of light but powerful firearms have been an enabler for the use of children as soldiers. The demand for children is also influenced by the perception that children are better soldiers, as they obey orders and are less likely to desert.

Historically, there have been no legal restrictions on the use of children in war. More than hundred years after the use of authorized non-state violence in war was outlawed, the first regulations on the use of child soldiers came in the 1970s as a result of western, liberal initiatives. During the last five years we have gotten several cases where former leaders of different armed groups have been prosecuted and sentenced for using children as soldiers. It still remains to see whether the criminalization of the use of child soldiers will have a general preventive effect, or if it will cause obstacles in the negotiations of peace agreements.

In respect of the long history of children fighting in war, the conclusion is that the use of child soldiers will persist as long as military leaders and the societies within which they operate do not have any conceptual, moral or ethical problems by using individuals under the age of 18 as combatants, and as long as the military organizations see these individuals as useful.

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Table 1

Countries where children under 18 were recruited and used by armed groups 2001-2007 Child labour 2000-2009 (% of children 5-14 years old)

Region	Country	Percentage	
Africa south of Sahara	Angola	24	
	Burundi	19	
	Central African Republik	47	
	Côte d'Ivoire	35	
	Chad	53	
	Congo-Kinshasa	32	
	Congo-Brazzaville	25	
	Guinea	25	
	Liberia	21	
	Rwanda	35	
Sierra Leone		48	
	Somalia	49	
Uganda		36	
Americas and the Caribbean	Colombia	7 (Data incomplete)	
	Peru	34	
	Asia/Pacific	Afghanistan	13 (Data incomplete)
		Bhutan	19 (Data incomplete)
		India	12
	Indonesia	7 (Data incomplete)	
	Myanmar	Data not available	
	Philippines	12	
	Nepal	34 (Data incomplete)	
	Pakistan	Data not available	
Sri Lanka	8		
Thailand		8	
Europe	Russia	Data not available	
Middle East and North Africa	Israel/OPT	Data not available	
	Iran	Data not available	
	Iraq	11	
Lebanon		7	
	Libya	Data not available	

Sudan

13 Yemen 23

Sources: *Child Soldiers Global Report (2004)*, *Child Soldiers Report (2008)*, *The State of the World's Children (UNICEF 2011)*.

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Date written: March 2011