

Has the Role of Children in Armed Conflict Changed?

Written by Louise Guillaume

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Has the Role of Children in Armed Conflict Changed Since the End of the Cold War?

A child soldier is a child 'who participates actively in a violent conflict as a member of an organization that applies violence on a systematic way' and may be a 'spy, scout, cook, messenger, porter or even sex slave' (Gates, 2011: 31). Child soldiers have been, since the end of the Cold War in 1989, a source of increasing concern for the international community. The recruitment of children in conflicts, notably in Sierra Leone, Uganda and Colombia, has greatly contributed to this concern. This essay is based on the notion of a child as a human being below the age of 18 years.

The generally accepted opinion points out the drastic change of the role of children in armed conflict since the end of the Cold War as constituting a 'child soldier crisis' (Rosen, 2005: 2). The Center of Emerging Threats and Opportunities has even stipulated in a report that, 'the Child Soldier Phenomenon has become a post-Cold War epidemic that has proliferated to every continent with the exception of Antarctica and Australia' (2002: 3). The child soldier crisis is characterized by the increasing number of child soldiers and by the evolution of their role within armed groups. Proponents of a different opinion believe child soldiers have always existed and have to a large extent fulfilled the same roles throughout history, therefore undermining the child soldier crisis narrative. This essay presents the following argument: the role of children in armed conflict has not fundamentally changed since the end of the Cold War, but the international community's legal and sociological perception of it has evolved as it is shaped by bigger discourses. The issue this essay touches upon matters, as better solutions to the problem of child soldiers can only be the result of a better understanding of the phenomenon.

The Role of Children in Armed Conflict has not Fundamentally Changed Since the End of the Cold War

Similar Roles

The development of lightweight automatic weapons is believed to be a fundamental cause of the changing role of children in armed conflict, as it has supposedly 'taken the child soldier from the margins to the very heart of modern conflicts' (Brett, 1998: 21). Cohn advocates the small weight weapons argument: 'today, arms technology is so advanced that even small boys and girls can handle common weapons like M16 and AK47 assault rifles' (1994: 23). Examples of children making use of light weapons are plenty in the literature on child soldiers, such as the testimony of a 14-year-old boy from Sierra Leone boasting about his skilled use of his light weapon (Wessels, 2006: 19). However, the weapons before and after the end of the Cold War were of similar caliber, as Rosen interestingly outlines through the example of the Kalashnikov assault rifle, which existed long before the end of Cold War (2005: 14). Therefore, the small arms argument is flawed and as a result does not provide a solid explanation on the changing role of children in armed conflict.

The small arms argument wrongly implies that children involved in armed conflicts, prior to the development of small weapons, only had indirect roles. Today, child soldiers execute both indirect (also called support) and direct roles in armed conflicts. Support roles, which consist of 'gathering wood, tending fires, cooking, drawing water' are fulfilled by child soldiers in many armed groups (Dallaire, 2010: 132). Additionally, child soldiers take part directly in combat, as the example of the first killing by an adolescent of a NATO soldier in Afghanistan demonstrates (Gates, 2010: 6).

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Nonetheless, child soldiers before the end of the Cold War had the same roles as child soldiers nowadays. They fulfilled both support and direct roles in armed conflicts. Indeed, 'civil war in the United States was a war of boy soldiers' who 'often had support roles but quickly graduated into combat roles' (Rosen, 2005: 4). Moreover, Jewish children who were engaged in partisan resistance during the Second World War against the Germans were part of the 'core of the urban partisan units', fulfilling indirect roles such as couriers and helping in the manufacture of weapons but also serving directly in combat (Rosen, 2005: 21).

Similar Determining Factors to the Enrollment of Children in Armed Groups

War and violence in a broader sense have always been determining factors for the enrollment of children in armed groups, regardless of the anterior or posterior Cold War nature of conflicts. According to Rachel Brett, war is 'the most crucial and fundamental environmental factor in the participation of young people in warfare' (2004: 36) as it 'becomes the normal everyday background to their lives' (2004: 10), which ultimately leads to its banalisation. During the Second World War boy soldiers from the Soviet Union took part in the armed conflict as they were greatly influenced by 'the reality of warfare' (Kucherenko, 2011: 1). Moreover, as violence becomes part of their everyday life, children feel a need for self-protection (Brett, 2004: 36). During the Second World War many Jewish children and adolescents joined the armed resistance, as it was 'a matter of life or death' for them (Rosen, 2005: 20). Another determining factor in the process of children's involvement in armed conflicts can result from the 'physical and structural violence' they witness, such as 'summary executions, death squad killings, and disappearances' (Cohn, 1994: 32). These experiences, in some cases, can lead to the child's desire for revenge (Cohn, 1994: 32). The desire to revenge is commonly found in the testimonies of child soldiers nowadays (Wessels, 2006: 49). This characteristic echoes the importance for Jewish child soldiers of the Second World War to die with honor, unlike their relatives who had been victims of the Nazi regime's terrible treatment (Rosen, 2005: 23).

There is a wide range of additional factors related to wartime and identified as crucial in the enrollment of children in armed groups. These factors can be found in the examples of child soldiers before and after the end of the Cold War. Some of these factors are family-based; others are of an ideological nature. These elements either trigger children's decision to enroll in armed groups or make them particularly vulnerable to a coerced or forced recruitment by armed groups. Firstly, a fragile family structure can play a decisive part in the enrollment of children in armed groups. According to Singer, a 'weakened social structure' characterized by 'disrupted family relationships', is generally a strong incentive for children to get involved in armed conflicts (2010: 98). Children might even in some cases consider commanders as 'surrogate fathers' (Gates, 2011: 42). A similar situation is illustrated by the conscription by Napoleon of many teenagers who were 'the war orphans of the Guard' when France was faced with invasion in 1814 (Leggiere, 2007: 99). The absence of any family structure might have been a facilitating factor for the recruitment of these adolescents. Secondly, ideology is an important factor in the recruitment of children in armed groups (Brett, 2004: 27). Similarly, in the 1980's, during the conflict between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, children were indoctrinated 'to fight for the revenge of Afghan people' (Cohn, 1994: 37).

Finally, scholars specialized in this debate have highlighted the specific psychological nature of childhood and adolescence – the latter referring to 'the period following the onset of puberty during which a young person develops from a child into an adult' (Oxford Dictionary English, 2012) – and how it might influence their decision to take part in armed conflicts (Brett, 2004: 29; Kucherenko, 2011: 1; Honwana, 2001: 128). The observations they make are not exclusively applicable to children of our times. Brett, who has studied several contemporary case-studies on child soldiers, highlights the importance of adolescence as a time for identity searching 'in a destructive or negative way' and points out the 'feelings of strength and power' characterizing adolescence (2004: 30). She further argues that adolescence is a time of great changes that can take the form of 'feelings of opposition and resistance to authority and power structures in the family, at school, and at state level' (2004: 3). Kucherenko, in her study on boy soldiers in the Soviet Union during the Second World War, finds some similar features such as 'adolescent maximalism, and even exhilaration of danger', which she defines as the 'influences of age' (2011: 6). These characteristics of childhood and adolescence can create a favorable basis for the decision of young people to engage in armed conflicts if combined with other factors like the ones mentioned above.

The International Community's Legal and Sociological Perception of the Role of Children in Armed

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Conflict has Evolved as it is Shaped by Bigger Discourses

Discourse on 'Old' and 'New' Wars

The child soldier crisis identified by many scholars is to a large extent shaped by the discourse on 'old' and 'new' wars, a distinction concretized by Mary Kaldor, which emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War.

Firstly, the nature of new wars and their allegedly increasing number since the end of the Cold War constitute two decisive factors in the child soldier crisis. New wars are characterized by 'organized crime and large-scale violations of human rights' (Kaldor, 2006: 1). Therefore, there is an identified distinction between old and new wars; the former described as 'rule-bound and limited' and the latter defined as 'anomic and chaotic' (Rosen, 2005: 10). New wars are characterized by a breakdown of social norms and values; therefore they are interpreted as a key agent in the changing role of children in armed conflict. Honwana defines the participation of children in conflict as a sign of the 'breakdown of society's structures and morality' (2001: 134). This strand of thought, which associates the appearance of new wars and the changing role of children in armed conflict, can be found in the United Nations report entitled *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* by Graca Machel, as it is a 'contribution to the humanitarian narrative concerning the distinction between new and old wars and the chaos and anarchy characterizing the former' (Rosen, 2005: 11).

Secondly, new wars are based on 'identity politics' and their goal and methods of warfare aim at 'getting rid of a specific identity' via 'terror, population expulsion' such as 'mass killing, and forcible resettlements' (Kaldor, 2006: 6). In Bosnia, ethnic visions 'played a crucial role in providing the framework and the impetus for the cleansing policies and the atrocities that ensued' (Berdal, 2003: 492). A possible connection between such characteristic and child soldiers is highlighted by Cohn, who points out the importance of 'the proliferation of ethnic conflicts fuelled by the generational transmission of adult hatreds' and suggests a possible 'influence of adult's subjective perceptions on children' (1994: 36). He illustrates his observation with the example of a Liberian human rights worker who argued, 'some parents volunteered their children to the INPFL [Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia] out of a desire to revenge tribal disputes, or in defense of their tribe' (Cohn, 1994: 42).

Thirdly, actors of new wars are defined as nonstate actors, such as paramilitary units, warlord troops, local militias and mercenary bands, who, according to Gates, carry out 'the worst forms and largest degree of child soldier recruitment' (2010: 4). The non-state actors of new wars use what Gates defines as 'unconventional tactics' during conflicts, such as 'ambushes, raids, sabotage', which 'minimize the difference between an adult and a child soldier' (2011: 32).

The distinction between old and new wars is flawed in many respects, as it excludes similarities between the two. Munkler compares the example of the Thirty Years War with new wars and finds some similitudes, such as civilian victims, 'religious- ideological oppositions' and 'private or semi-private operators' (2005: 45, 50, 45). The assumption of a striking difference between new wars and old (traditional) wars is 'one of the conceptual pillars of the child soldier crisis' (Rosen, 2005: 10). However, this pillar does not seem to be constructed on solid foundations, as new wars appear not to be so new, therefore undermining the child soldier crisis narrative.

Discourse on Children's Role Within Society

The increasing importance of children's role within society has in many respects played a major role in the debate on the role of children in armed conflict. Since the end of the Cold War, the protection of children involved in armed conflicts has been a source of great concern. This tendency started with the signature of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. According to this convention a child 'means every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained' (UNHCR, 1989). Article 38 lays the legal foundation of what the role of children in armed conflict should be. The article stipulates children must be protected according to the international humanitarian law and their recruitment in armed groups must be restrained by their age (UNHCR, 1989). It is within the framework set by the UN Convention on the Right of the Child that several initiatives have been carried out in order to protect children in armed conflicts. Various institutions, including

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the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 'have joined together to promote an international ban on the military recruitment and use of children as soldiers' (Rosen, 2005). It is not surprising to observe a concomitance between the appearance of the perception of a child soldier crisis and the signature of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Indeed, the child soldier crisis is defined as a post Cold War phenomenon while the Convention was signed in 1989, the year marking the end of the Cold War. The perception of the role of children in armed conflict has to a large extent changed because children and the protection of their rights have become increasingly crucial in our societies.

The increasing emphasis on childhood and on the protection of childhood is coupled with the belief that children involved in armed conflicts are solely victims. The assumed victimization of child soldiers and the apparent impossibility to consider child soldiers responsible for their actions (Cohn, 1994: 8) are two essential aspects of the child soldier crisis narrative. Rosen locates the roots of such narrative in the Middle Ages when a distinct definition of childhood as a time of innocence emerged, leading to 'the practice of segregating children from adults, and the isolation and prolongation of childhood as a special protected state' (2005: 7). Today this explanation impacts the debate on the role of children in armed conflict since 'much of the analysis so far has infantilized the young as mere receptors of environmental stimuli or of adult ideas and culture' (Boyden, 2006: 275). The use of 'Baeh's narrative of victimization and abuse at the hands of the Sierra Leone army' by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 'to launch its *Global Report 2001* on child soldiers' stands as a striking example of this point of view (Rosen: 2005). The definition of child soldiers as victims especially applies to girls. According to Denov: 'a danger is that girls become personified as voiceless victims often devoid of agency, moral conscience and economic potential' (2010:13). A recent study carried out by International Labour Organization (ILO) shows that "volunteers" make up for more than half of the child soldiers interviewed in four Central African countries (Brett, 2004: 1). In some armed conflicts children have even been determining actors: in Liberia they were the 'first to join armed groups' and during the 'Palestinian intifada in the Israeli occupied territories' they were the 'primary catalysts of violent strife' (Cohn, 1994: 23). Honwana points out 'a universalization' of children 'in such a way that children who do follow this path [child soldier] are considered to be at risk' (2001: 133). This attests to a considerable shift in the perception of the role of children in armed conflict. Before the end of the Cold War children's participation in armed conflicts was considered heroic (Kuchenrenko, 2011: 245) and enabling (Rosen, 2005: 6) – a contrasting view with today's depiction of 'child soldiers as quintessential victims' (Denov, 2010: 8). However, a debate on the agency and structure of child soldiers would most probably undermine the narrative of the victimization of child soldiers.

The child soldier crisis is in many respects not new and did not start with the end of the Cold War but has instead existed for a long time. Children's role in armed conflict and the determining factors that have led and still lead to their enrollment and recruitment in armed groups bear many similarities. Additionally, the international community's legal and sociological perception of the role of children in armed conflict has evolved as it is shaped by bigger discourses. These discourses are concerned with the distinction between old and new wars and the role of children within society. However, they are to some extent flawed, and therefore cannot wholly justify the argument that the role of children in armed conflict has drastically changed. The phenomenon of child soldiers is looked at through specific lenses, changing our comprehension of it. This essay does not intend to undermine the importance of the phenomenon of child soldiers, but instead attempts to better understand it. A better understanding of the child soldier issue could enhance the possibility of improving already existing programs directed at the prevention of child soldiers and their rehabilitation.

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