

Review - Comparative Study of Child Soldiering on Myanmar-China Border

Written by Simon Reich

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Comparative Study of Child Soldiering on Myanmar-China Border: Evolutions, Challenges and Countermeasures
by Kai Chen
Springer Verlag, 2014

The issue of child soldiering has taken on a greater degree of importance in the twenty-first century as a result of two, often interrelated, factors.

The first is the heightened media publicity given to the plight of child soldiers as a result of the efforts of a variety of actors. These include the initiative of the United Nations' Office of Children and Armed Conflict; NGOs, including the Global Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and its constituent members, notably Human Rights Watch; and the film industry that has contributed through movies, most recently the critically acclaimed 'Beasts of No Nation.'

From their perspective, to use the more accurate and politically correct term, 'children associated with fighting forces' are victims – and this is a human rights issue. At the outset, child recruitment into government armies and rebel militias is best understood as a result of structural factors, such as acute poverty. At the concluding end of this process, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration programs are among the most likely panaceas to end a recurrent cycle of violence, offering the prospect of both political stability and economic growth.

Yet a second factor – and approach – also explains the greater emphasis on child soldiering. It is the broader and deepening engagement of western forces in conflicts in failed and fragile states. In this context, children are depicted as instruments of war (Dallaire 2010 p.109; Singer 2006 p.275). They present allied combat troops with ethical and tactical dilemmas in that they offer a benign appearance while posing a palpable and realistic threat. The fact that neither most individual countries nor coalition forces have uniform guidelines as to how to engage child soldiers in combat magnifies the problem. The results are often tragic on both sides: the first coalition soldier to die in Afghanistan was killed by a 14 year-old boy. The number of children who have perished in the roles of combat troops or suicide bombers has grown across Africa and the Middle East. From this perspective, child soldiering is primarily a disquieting security issue and regardless of their age, these children are combatants and perpetrators, not victims.

Yet there remains a great deal of fuzziness and confusion about even the most basic facts when it comes to child soldiers. Any simple Google search, for example, will repeatedly suggest that there are between 250,000 and 300,000 active child soldiers in the world, when the numbers are evidently lower. Likewise, child soldiers are commonly depicted in the popular media as black, African, pre-adolescent and carrying a Kalashnikov rifle. In fact, most child soldiers are located in Asia, are adolescent and are not combatants. Rather, they are used as cooks, porters, for sex or as bait in the battlefield.

In sum, we are increasingly aware of the human rights and security issues generated by child soldiering but know surprisingly little about the subject, in large part because it is a policy realm dominated by policy makers and advocates, but one where academic researchers have largely feared to tread – for lack of data or of access. The result is a plethora of academic papers that use the Peace Research Institute's (PRIO) database to generate

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quantitative studies that may have their virtues but offer us an incomplete picture of the dynamics of child soldiering, and little by way of suitable prescriptions.

It is in this context, that Kai Chen's book on child soldiering is particularly welcome. Although too brief for my taste, at just under 100 pages, Chen describes and explains the historical context and the underlying causes of, arguably, the most acute contemporary case of child soldiering in the world, that of Myanmar. Myanmar is one of the few remaining countries in the world where the government uses child soldiers on a massive scale, although the reputed number of 70,000 is unreliable because of the usual reporting problems encountered in what has been, until very recently, a very closed country.

Despite its relative importance, Myanmar is an area of the world that other scholars have failed to examine. Chen does an admirable job of chronicling the dimensions of the problem, and outlining the causes and consequences of child soldiering. His book ably utilizes and cites the existing literature to assemble a portrait of the problem in Myanmar, despite the fact that he encountered the perennial problem of a lack of access to the country's remote regions where many child soldiers serve.

Successive chapters examine the historical context of the problem; the current situation; the structural drives of recruitment; the reasons why some children are coveted as recruits and other not; and possible prescriptions.

Chen concludes that there is no optimal solution for redressing the problem of child soldiering. But the most promising, he suggests, is through a Transnational Public-Private Partnership (page 69) generally composed of multi-stakeholders that includes – in principle – local NGOs and community-based organizations, national governments, INGOs, international donors, transnational companies and neighboring countries. He favors this approach, in large part, because of what he characterizes as a surprisingly weak central state that lacks the tentacles to carry out reforms in those remote areas where, according to his assessment, the majority of child soldiers serve. Those that exist on the Chinese border, he suggests, can establish a monitoring system and compliance regime that may, at best, curtail the most egregious practices (page 75) and act as a conduit for private mediation processes (page 78) between the government and its rebel adversaries, who have their own child soldiers, albeit it in far smaller numbers. Enforcement over the relatively autonomous Myanmar military, Chen acknowledges, remains an issue (page 83). But gradual mechanisms for building mutual trust and for enforcement offer a “second best” solution (pages 84-87).

Chen, understandably, could not have foreseen the election of what is at least nominally a democratic government (despite the notable disenfranchisement of the Rohingya minority from the election) and thus not evaluate the potential longer-term effects of the election on child rights in Myanmar. Nonetheless, his book provides a useful assessment of one of the most troubling cases of child soldiering in the world today.

References:

Dallaire, Romeo (2010) *They Fight like Soldiers, They Die like Children: The Global Quest to Eradicate the Use of Child Soldiers*. Random House

Peter Singer (2006) *Children at War*. University of California Press

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Simon Reich holds an academic appointment as a professor in the Division of Global Affairs and Department of Political Science at Rutgers Newark. He is author or editor of ten books and over fifty articles and book chapters. His work has been published in *Governance*, *International Interactions*, *International Organization*, *International Security*, and *the Review of International Political Economy*. Reich's most recent book, *Good-bye Hegemony! Power and Influence in the Global System* (with Richard Ned Lebow), was published in the spring of 2014 by

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