

Conscription of Child Soldiers: Their Own Volition?

Written by Emilia Dungal

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EMILIA DUNGEL, AUG 8 2013

“The Agency of Children: To What Extent Can We Understand The Conscription of Child Soldiers as Of Their Own Volition?”

A person's a person, no matter how small!
And you very small persons will not have to die
If you make yourselves heard! So come on, now, and TRY!

-Dr Seuss[1]

Introduction

When Dr. Seuss penned the above lines, he most likely did not intend for them to be used in the context of a paper on children and war. Nonetheless, this essay recounts them here to illustrate the dichotomy in encouraging children to stand up for themselves but disregarding their opinions and voices when they do. People have a duty to protect all children, but equally important, people all have a responsibility to listen to them. How are people to understand these obligations when listening leads them to the insight that they have created such a crass world for all children that children want to put themselves in harm's way in order to change it?

Today, there are approximately 300,000 child soldiers in the world. Despite the oft-detailed occurrences of forced or coerced recruitment, most child soldiers join armed struggles voluntarily,[2] but as Fernando suggests, “we do not even have the language that might grant meaningful agency to children.”[3] What underlying factors make children want to engage in conflicts, and how informed are these decisions when made by children?

The current humanitarian discourse on child soldiers is heavily focused on victimising former child combatants, emphasising their vulnerability and need for protection.[4] Scholars suggest that this victimisation approach is detrimental, as it takes away from our understanding of the realities of war, circumstances which may cause new bouts of violence if not adequately addressed.[5] A component of this may be the observation that former child combatants describe themselves differently in different contexts. Schepler describes that child soldiers use “imported discourses off the rights of the child for their own purposes”[6]: bragging about their death-defying actions in combat when talking to their friends, maintaining their trauma as innocents when dealing with NGOs, and acting like regular children with their community members.[7] Furthermore, if children are not seen as active agents of their own fates, there may be a danger of polarising adults and children to such an extent that people no longer seriously consider the non-biological needs of children.[8]

Nonetheless, international conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) have been drawn up to protect the child and give him or her a voice. However, overlooking the possible agency of children in armed combat also neglects to take into account this voice. These notions form the point of origin for the issues to be raised in this paper.

Aim

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This essay seeks to answer the question: to what extent can people understand the conscription of child soldiers as of their own volition? The essay will answer the question in two sections. First, it will offer a brief historical background of the role of children in armed conflict. Second, the essay will address the reasons children voluntarily conscript with specific examples from Sierra Leone and Northern Ireland. Lastly, the paper will conclude with some thoughts on possible future consequences of viewing children's choice to join armed struggle as voluntary.

Operationalization

Operationalizing the terms "child" and "child soldier" is a contentious task, with scholars arguing that the accepted international definitions are deterministic in nature and neglect cultural contexts.[9] The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) originally outlined that children over 15 years of age could voluntarily take part in combat. This was regarded as a weak standard, and lobbying by NGOs and other interest groups eventually resulted in three treaties: the Rome Statute, the Worst Form of Child Labour Convention (Convention 182), and the Original Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the latter of which established 18 as the legal age for participating in armed conflict.[10] This is referred to as the Straight 18 position, which has been criticized for, again, not considering the different cultural contexts in which children are seen as adults and given responsibilities.[11]

This essay will, nonetheless, use the definition of child soldier most referred to (with certain variations in wording) by scholars and NGOs:

any person below the age of 18 who is a member of or attached to government armed forces or any other regular or irregular armed force or armed political group, whether or not an armed conflict exists.[12]

By "of their own volition," the essay refers to voluntary decisions, the free will of which will be analysed further in the coming sections. The term "conscription" here implies the decision to join a political faction with the prospect of engaging in "combat" and "armed struggle," used interchangeably.

It is important to note that this paper focuses only on situations where children are not coerced or forced into recruiting. Furthermore, the essay will not go into detail about the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) of child combatants, as this is a topic for a text of a much larger scope.

Background

Despite many people's outrage at the use of children in armed conflict, it is far from a new phenomenon. In his book *Armies of the Young*, Rosen describes preindustrial societies from Native America to East Africa where children were valued combatants, as well as the recruitment of youth combatants in the British military dating back to the Middle Ages.[13]

Similarly, Rosen describes the US Civil War as "a war of boy soldiers," estimating that over one million out of the 2.7 million soldiers were under the age of 18.[14] For example, Joseph John Clem enlisted at age ten and killed at least two Confederate officers. He and his fellow boy soldiers were lauded as heroes. Another example is the role of children in the Jewish partisan (ghetto fighter) resistance of World War II. There is a well-told tale of Motteleh, age 12, who smuggled explosives in his violin case into a hostel where an entire SS division was staying, managing to kill them all. A child's decision to join the resistance was in this context often a question of survival but nonetheless, children enrolled out of honour and moral duty as well.[15] They, too, are remembered as heroes, as Rosen writes, "these child soldiers made dignified and honourable choices, and their lives serve as a reminder of the remarkable capability of children and youth to shape their own destinies." [16] Conversely, the number of voluntary members of the Hitler Youth (Hitler Jugend) rose from one to five million from 1933 to 1936, when membership became mandatory. Having been trained for years, the Hitler Youth comprised a large portion of the German forces in the Battle of Berlin in 1945.[17]

In a somewhat paradoxical logic, many praise the children of the Jewish resistance as heroes for the dignified choices they made, but people do not condemn nor scold the members of the Hitler Youth, perhaps resigning

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ourselves to the notion that they did not know any better. Are children only responsible for their own actions when coming out on what history deems the morally correct side? By no means is this essay suggesting that everyone glorify the Hitler Youth, but, nonetheless, it wishes to further highlight the problem of a child's choice in an adult discourse. Turning now to the question at hand, the essay will observe the factors that cause children to choose armed combat today, and how voluntary these decisions are.

Factors of Voluntary Conscription

This section's intent is to highlight and examine the reasons why children choose to join in combat by analysing the extent of free will in these decisions. I have chosen the categories based on recurring themes by authors on the subject[18]: ideology; protection/survival; socio-economic circumstances; revenge; and tradition. This section will offer examples from Sierra Leone, a nation whose history of child soldiers has been widely discussed, and Northern Ireland, a less commonly analysed account in these terms. This section includes Northern Ireland because it is important to again highlight that child soldiers are exclusive neither to Africa nor to so-called "New Wars." [19] Moreover, it is not the essay's intent to draw comparisons between the two conflicts beyond the issues at hand. Furthermore, the essay cautions that the children referred to may not be representative of their region as a whole, but their experiences are still valid in providing insight into their individual reasons for joining.

Ideological conviction serves as one of the reasons for joining a conflict, and it encompasses some of the other factors, in that one's personal political leanings depend greatly on one's surroundings, traditions, and socio-economic circumstances. For example, ethnic and religious belonging in a polarised society can contribute to one's willingness to fight, as in the case of a child combatant from Northern Ireland, who saw himself as defending the "decent Protestant people" from the Catholic Sinn Féin/IRA (Irish Republican Army).[20] Furthermore, if political parties have a clear presence in society, children may be influenced and motivated to join them, due to the allure of uniforms and glory, as was also the case in Northern Ireland.[21] It has also been argued that armies like the IRA are appealing to children because they are "wild and conservative simultaneously, thus allowing more excitement within their stability than do standing armies." [22] For instance, Denov suggests that by supporting an ideological cause through violence, children may acquire a sense of empowerment and social status normally not attributed to them.[23] In this sense, can we understand the choices of children to join as completely voluntary? If they live in a society so permeated by politics and militarisation, can it be argued that they have an informed understanding of all the choices available to them? Ideology does seem to affect how children view themselves in a post-conflict setting—viewing themselves as "warriors" as opposed to victims.[24]

Protection/survival is one of the most common themes offered by scholars as to why children choose to fight. This essay suggests that it goes hand in hand with ideology, as some children may view their survival and safety as dependent on what political actors are in power, and identifying an enemy, in turn, affects one's sense of need to defend oneself. For example, a Sierra Leonean demobilized male child combatant linked to RSLMF (Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces) said that he would return to the army if they let him so he could "defend his motherland," [25] a sentiment reiterated by other Sierra Leonean RSLMF child combatants. Beyond this, a child may join a struggle because the child realizes that if he or she does not, then he or she will die at the hands of other combatants. Henceforth, the presence of war becomes a reason to join in and of itself. As pointed out by Brett and Specht, war often seeks out the children, as opposed to them it.[26] The level of free will in deciding to join combat in this context can be discussed because if warring factions have imposed themselves on a society, the range of options for a child would be very limited. Here, it is also worth mentioning that children may not have a full understanding of the dangers facing them in combat. Some studies suggest that children in Northern Ireland, for example, have seen so much violence around them, that they have lost the notion of fear, as well as peace, and are, therefore, difficult to discipline.[27]

Closely linked to the survival theme is that of socio-economic circumstances. Lee suggests that economic uncertainty in Sierra Leone caused the elite to hold a firm grasp over their resources, instead of passing them on to the next generation, which in turn caused grievances among children and youth. Areas of conflict often result in a struggle over resources, and in the face of starvation, joining an army is one, sometimes the only, way to secure food, as related by former child rebels in Sierra Leone. Children in Northern Ireland, though not in as dire straits as Sierra

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Leoneans, similarly joined because the armed forces could provide them with better opportunities and a “guaranteed wage,” an aspect especially alluring to youths due to their low economic means. As a result of poverty, child labour is a common problem in the developing parts of the world like Sierra Leone, and joining combat may be more appealing to a child than working in a factory or in a field. Hence, Sierra Leonean former child soldiers recounted the skills that they had learned in the army[28] and believed that they had been “trained to save lives and property.”[29]

In terms of levels of education playing a role, it was common for children in Sierra Leone to join combat as a way to gain an education, a reason reiterated by Northern Irish children. Moreover, child soldiers in Northern Ireland described conscripting in order to occupy their time with something if they were not enrolled in school. On this note, it is important to remember that educational spaces are often used as a recruiting ground, which refers back to the ideological argument of the presence of the political factions in society.[30]

Personal revenge appears to be one of the more powerful reasons children conscript. As examples, a Northern Irish child combatant described his father being shot on his front door, and two former RSLMF combatants related the death of a little brother and the destruction of a family home as reasons of joining, respectively.[31] This is perhaps the most personal reason for voluntary conscription. Although the violence was a result of external forces, the resulting feeling of revenge is individual as is the decision to act on it. Hence, because revenge is deeply connected to one's sense of pride and self-image, it can be a significant tool in motivating one's violent actions. Brett and Specht however, assert that revenge as an emotion may be constructed by adults and attached to children as a way to get them to fight.[32]

The last category, tradition, can manifest itself in various ways. A former Kamajo rebel from Sierra Leone explained that his father had a gun and was, therefore, forced to fight, but he was getting old, so the son took his place.[33] The voluntary aspect of this decision is vague, as the soldier knew his father would not be able to fight and wanted to protect him, but it was still his sense of family duty that compelled him to do so. Traditional spiritual beliefs factor into combat strategies in Sierra Leone, but they will not be discussed here, as they are not specifically relevant to conscription. On the note of religion, studies have shown, somewhat controversially, that Catholic children show more signs of stress than Protestant children, and may, therefore, be more prone to anger, joining the IRA out of anger stemming from feelings of revenge.[34] This observation fits into both categories revenge and tradition, which, in turn, again highlights that the dynamics contributing to children's voluntary conscription do not exist in vacuum, but are interlinked.

In sum, the factors of voluntary conscription by children discussed above are, as with decisions made by adults, subject to external influences. Denov writes that although a focus on children's agency is important, it is equally important to consider the structures and collective forces that influence children's decision-making.[35] The essay suggests that children, like adults, make decisions based on the information they have in their surroundings. However, because they have had less time in, and exposure to, the world, their choices might be voluntary in the structures within which they exist but are less informed than those of adults.

Concluding Thoughts

The essay can conclude that people can understand the conscription of child soldiers as of their own volition but are subject to societal structures created by adults. Again, these decisions are not necessarily well-informed, and children's cognitive processes are not fully developed. However, their decisions are voluntary, based on the information the child has about the world.

In there, then, lies the heart of the matter. People are reluctant to step away from the victimization discourse because they worry that it will mean holding children fully accountable for actions which the children did not, perhaps, fully understand the ramifications of. This essay would argue, however, that acknowledging the agency of children in conflict would not necessarily imply that people have to forego the notion that children are children. It is possible to take on their insight without holding them to the same punishable standard as that of an adult.

Perhaps the very notion of thinking in terms of accountability and punishment is a very Western construct—the idea

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that punishment serves social justice. Does justice come from watching the perpetrator suffer, or does it come from the victim finally at peace with the horrors they have had to face? Or, is it possible that justice comes from addressing the root causes that make fighters, in this case children, want to fight, instead of targeting the symptoms of those causes? If so, then the agency of children remains a vital part of the discourse, if accepted as that of individuals with voices of their own. In short, maybe everyone can learn from children after all, no matter how big or small.

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[1] Seuss 1954

[2] Cohn, Goodwin-Gill 1994:30.

[3] Fernando 2001:9

[4] Podder 2011:141, Lee 2009:8ff

[5] Lee 2009:24ff

[6] Schepler 2005:200

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[7] *Ibid.*

[8] MacMillan:2009:43,48

[9] Fernando 2001:19, Podder 2011:141

[10] Becker 2005:16-17

[11] Lee 2009:14, MacMillan 2009:37, Rosen 2009:106

[12] Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2008:9

[13] Rosen 2005:4

[14] Rosen 2005:5

[15] Rosen 2005:20-21,55

[16] Rosen 2005:56

[17] Denov 2010:22

[18] See for example Peters, Richards 1998; Brett, Specht 2004; and Schmidt 2007

[19] I have chosen to forego an explanation of the conflicts at hand, though I can refer the reader to Appendix 2 in Brett, Specht 2004, where brief overviews are offered.

[20] Brett, Specht 2004:28

[21] Brett, Specht 2004:56

[22] Cohn, Goodwin-Gill 1994:98

[23] Denov 2010:40

[24] Denov 2012:289

[25] Peters, Richards 1998:190

[26] Brett, Specht 2004:12

[27] Cohn, Goodwin-Gill 1994:115

[28] Lee 2009:21, Schmidt 2007:63

[29] Peters, Richards 1998:190

[30] Brett, Specht 2004:41-45

[31] Peters, Richards 1998:189,192; Brett, Specht 2004:58

[32] Brett, Specht 2004:73

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[33] Peters, Richards, 1998:196

[34] Cohn, Goodwin-Gill 1994:107

[35] Denov 2010:42

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