

## Review - The Child Soldier's New Job

Written by Kai Chen

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KAI CHEN, MAR 18 2017

### **The Child Soldier's New Job (*Børnesoldatens Nye Job*) by Mads Ellesoe**

The past decades witnessed the re-emergence of privatized wars, in which parts of warfare, such as logistics and ground combatants, have been outsourced to private military/security companies executing operations around the world. The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq was followed by the increased use of private military/security contractors in this country. Not surprisingly, President Donald Trump also used private security at the campaign events, and hired his former security director, Keith Schiller, to be the director of Oval Office operations (Boyer, 2017).

In 2016, a thought-provoking documentary entitled *The Child Soldier's New Job (Børnesoldatens Nye Job)* by Mads Ellesoe (a Danish journalist) was broadcasted in Denmark. Based on interviews of the ex-child soldiers and investigation of contract documents, this documentary revealed a dark side of the privatized wars, that is, a nexus between privatized war and child soldiering.

Ellesoe spent years investigating a good example of the above-mentioned nexus. In the documentary, he claimed that a UK-based private military/security company hired 2,500 men from Sierra Leone and Uganda to work in Iraq (e.g., security guards on military installations and bases), some of whom were ex-child soldiers.

Many interviewees in the documentary are the ex-child soldiers, who provide detailed evidence of their serving as child soldiers. In Africa, they were victims of child soldiering in Sierra Leone's 11-year civil war, which ended in 2002. During the war, they were forced to fight for survival, even involved with killing and other forms of violence. Unfortunately, when they were demobilized and left the battlefields in Africa, as adults, they were re-assigned to private military/security contractors in Iraq, where reactivated the ex-child soldiers' memories of the brutal war and the trauma of violence.

Why do the private military/security companies broadened their recruitment to include former underage combatants (or child soldiers) from Africa? In the opinion of Ellesoe, superficially, the private military/security companies did not check whether the new recruits were ex-child soldiers. Actually, they did not afford professional contractors at higher cost, but turned to find lower cost contractors. According to the contract documents, these African contractors were paid as little as \$16 a day. To the private military/security companies, after 18, the ex-child soldiers have a right to seek work freely. In other words, private military/security companies have no right to deny.

There is a similar case. In June 2016, Omar Mateen – a former employee of a private security company named G4S, murdered 49 people at an Orlando nightclub. In 2013, G4S was “banned for six months from bidding on U.K. government contracts after it overcharged for electronically tagging criminals”. It is noteworthy that the military/security companies “have no way to validate whether a potential or current employee is on a terrorist watch list or is under active investigation” (Board, 2016).

Ellesoe's main concern is to make English-speaking audiences aware of the negative impacts of the privatized wars, especially private military/security companies' hiring ex-child soldiers. To this reviewer, at the very least, there will be

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two impacts in the foreseeable future.

On the one hand, the private military/security companies have trying efforts to reduce cost, while giving a contract to a professional contractor would incur a higher cost. It does not exclude the possibility that the private military/security companies will keep recruiting lower cost contractors, some of whom were once child soldiers in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. If these ex-child soldiers are given powers to arrest troublemakers, or protect people and property, it may open a door to misuse of violence.

On the other hand, it is evident that people have reasons to question that there is something wrong in the screening system of the private military/security companies. Would the private military/security companies improve their screening systems at the cost of increasing their budgets? If not, they could not prevent more terrorists or extremists' permeation. Put another way, the tragedy will probably repeat itself.

*The Child Soldier's New Job* questions what we think we know about private military/security companies and child soldiering. Ellesoe succeeds in conceptualizing the nexus between privatized war and child soldiering, and making audiences aware of the negative impacts of the privatized wars. Ellesoe and his documentary may well provide a fresh impetus for future research on child soldiering and privatized wars.

## References

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## About the author:

Kai Chen, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at the School of International Relations, Xiamen University, China. His principal research focuses on the nexus between international security and human insecurity. His previous positions include post-doctoral fellow in Zhejiang University (China) and post-doctoral fellow in Fudan University (China). He has held visiting appointments at the National University of Singapore, Kyoto University, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Thammasat University in Thailand, and Chengchi University in Taiwan. He is the author of *On Geo-cultural Relations between China and Indo-China Peninsula Countries* (Xiamen University Press, 2016), and *Comparative Study of Child Soldiering on Myanmar-China Border: Evolutions, Challenges and Countermeasures* (Springer, 2014). His next book on child labor was financially supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation (Grant No. AZ 02/KF/15).