

## Why Use Children in War?

Martin P. was a child. He lived in Uganda. He knew how to march in formation, how to load and fire a submachine gun, and how to kill. He fought twice for the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The LRA kidnapped him for use as a soldier in their insurgency against the Ugandan government. James P. was also abducted by the LRA. He had a similar experience. "What did I do with the LRA during my time in captivity?" he said, "Killed people, beat up people, and looted property. This was under order from the commanders; when we approached a village, some persons would be singled out. We were never told why these people and not others, we were simply told that this one had to be killed" (Human Rights Watch, 2003a, p. 10). Both of these boys were caught up in a conflict that has lasted almost 20 years.

In Sri Lanka, a child who trained at the age of 11 to fight for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), explained how he was programmed to seek revenge for the killing of his friends. He said, ". . . he was shown videos of dead women and children and told that his enemies had done this. Soon afterwards he was involved in attacks on several Muslim villages near Batticaloa. When recounting one attack, he described how he had held a child by the legs and bashed its head against a wall and how he enjoyed hearing the mother's screaming. He said they deserved to die" (Amnesty International, 1998, p. 38). In 2014, the Islamic State (IS) distributed videos showing "toddlers firing weapons they can barely hold" (Hilburn, 2014), and "kids watching public beheadings, training in hand-hand combat . . . distributing knives to men preparing to behead prisoners—and even carrying out executions themselves" (Horgan and Bloom, 2015).

Despite the popular image of child soldiers being mostly African, thanks to the success of the movie, “Blood Diamonds,” and novels such as *A Long Way Gone* (Beah, 2008), *What is the What* (Eggers 2006), and *Beasts of No Nation* (Iweala, 2006), the social problem is, in fact, a global phenomenon. According to Human Rights Watch, in 2006 the practice was geographically dispersed in over 30 different countries all over the world, occurring in states such as Columbia, Mexico, Peru, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Chad, Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Solomon Islands, New Guinea, Sri Lanka, East Timor, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Guerilla forces and government armies alike are incorporating children into their ranks. “These young combatants participate in all aspects of contemporary warfare. They wield AK-47s and M-16s on the front lines of combat, serve as human mine detectors, participate in suicide missions, carry supplies, and act as spies, messengers or lookouts” (Human Rights Watch, 2006). As of 2015, the United States Department of State labeled eight governments as using children in their militaries, which thereby prohibited the U.S. from offering assistance such as military aid to those countries (U.S. Department of State, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

The most commonly cited figure for number of children involved in conflicts is over 300,000 (Human Rights Watch, 2006), but that estimate is not necessarily the most accurate figure as raw data on ages and recruitment rates are difficult to find and to validate (Alternet, 2006). We do know however that the age range spans from just under the age of 18 to as young as eight years old.<sup>2</sup> Those most likely to be recruited are the poor, those living in combat areas, displaced persons, those split up from family, and the under-educated (Woods, 1993; Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Machel, 1996; Brett, McCallin & O’Shea, 1996). Boys are not the only recruits though. Girls are pulled into the conflicts as well:

In addition to combat duties, girls are subject to sexual abuse and may be taken as “wives” by rebel leaders in Angola, Sierra Leone and Uganda. In Northern Uganda, Human Rights Watch interviewed girls who had been impregnated by rebel commanders, and then forced to strap their babies on their backs and take up arms against Ugandan security forces. (Human Rights Watch, 2006)

Singer (2005) and others (Machel, 1996; Brett, McCallin and O’Shea, 1996; Stohl, 2002; Stohl, Schroeder and Smith, 2007) assert that the proliferation of smaller armies and lightweight weaponry has been a huge part the problem. The “availability of small arms is without question a contributing factor to the use of child soldiers” (Stohl, 2002). Guns are not nearly as heavy as they used to be, and they are much easier to fire. Training and supplying children with small, lethal weaponry has had effects beyond the battlefield:

After a conflict small arms may become instruments for other forms of violence such as crime and banditry. In some areas, these surplus weapons may create a culture of violence that traps whole societies in an endless cycle of war. When children have no experience with or exposure to non-violent conflict resolution, small arms become the tools for conflict resolution. (Stohl, 2002)

Stohl’s argument implies that empowering children with guns during a conflict has the potential to change not only power relations but also the culture.

Gun-toting children storming across the battlefield appears to be a relatively modern phenomenon. As Singer (2001–2002) points out, medieval knights had young servants handle and care for their weapons, and the Germans enlisted children for the *Hitler Jugend* force during World War II, but these are not standard practices for most armed forces. Rosen (2005) finds an abundance of children used in battle in the 1800s. He states that the American Civil War was a war of “boy soldiers,” and that “historical analysis suggests that between 250,000 and 420,000 boy soldiers, including many in their early teens and even younger, served in the Union and Confederate armies” (p. 5). There is evidence that children as young as eight years old had enlisted.

Nevertheless, the widespread use of child fighters is essentially a recent innovation in warfare, much more prominent after World War II. As will be discussed later, the use of children to gain leverage in a conflict becomes apparent during the Vietnam War; it then travels through the practices of the Khmer Rouge and on into numerous insurgencies in Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America. In Colombia today, child soldiers “are nicknamed ‘little bells’ by the military, which uses them as expendable sentries, and ‘little bees’ by the guerillas, because they ‘sting’ their enemies before they know they are under attack” (Singer, 2001–2002, p. 42). On the African continent, the problem is pervasive. Child soldiers are either assisting the insurgency or the government, or both, “in nearly every one of its wars” (p.

43). And in Afghanistan, the Taliban has fine-tuned the practice, forming cadres of suicide bombers, ages 12 to 18. “[T]hey were trained in weapons handling, preparing of suicide jackets and ambush attacks,” explained one Pakistani military official, and promised a place in heaven—a land of virgins and rivers made of milk and honey (Damon, 2010).

Today, the phenomenon can be seen as significant crux of modern state legitimacy. No longer does the state rely on family and education as the only sites of socialization (i.e., alignment with state ideals). More and more, children are incorporated into the military as the frontline backers of the “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force” (Weber, 1958, p. 78). The Islamic State (IS) is explicit in its use of children to build its state machine. The “Cubs of the Caliphate” not only enter indoctrination schools in order to absorb the ideology of IS, but the underage recruits are trained in hardline military skills as well. The result is a fighting force of children who can carry out executions and suicide bombings (Bloom, 2015).

## Myths

Child soldier research started about three decades ago in 1979 with the work of Dorothea Woods and her partnership with the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) in Geneva (Heckel, 2005). Woods (along with Martin McPherson) acted as an advocate against child soldiering and as a researcher, collecting some of the earliest systematic, country-by-country evidence (Woods, 1980, 1990, 1991, 1993). She provided brief sketches of what was happening in various countries as well as speculation about why military groups would use young fighters. Probable causes included poverty and manpower shortages (Woods, 1993). Graca Machel’s<sup>3</sup> report to the United Nations (1996), “The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children,” was another major step in child soldier research. The report looked at 24 case studies and covered 30 years of conflict. Machel’s work was based on interviews with government and military official, legal experts, human rights organizations, the media, religious groups, local leaders, and women and children involved in conflicts. She made site visits to about 10 different states, including Angola, Cambodia, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, and parts of the former Yugoslavia. The report lists multiple causes such as: globalization, rapid urbanization and the erosion of the family, weak states, small arms proliferation, the militarization of society, poverty, manpower shortages, and poor education.

For the past 30 years child soldier research has basically followed the trajectory set by Woods and Machel. There have been multiple case studies and historical analyses based on interviews and secondary documentation. Numerous hypotheses, from small-arms trade to an increase in poverty, have been generated in order to explain why insurgencies and governments have trained children to fight. However, only a handful of researchers have performed large-N analyses.<sup>4</sup> This project addresses the child soldier research gap by incorporating multiple methods. The study includes: a regression analysis of all armed conflicts, ranging from 1987–2007; process tracing the diffusion of norms through insurgency and terrorist networks; historical analysis; and interview data from U.S. troops, adult fighters as well as child soldiers. Hopefully this research will debunk some of the more common myths that have been generated from past research as well as provide clearer explanations for what might be driving the use of children in battle. Some of the most familiar, popular images of child soldiers include poor, drug-crazed Africans with AK-47s. Despite the emotional appeal of the irrational, wild child or tiny victim image, these are one-dimensional heuristics that do not fully explain why youth are being militarized.

#### *Myth #1: Poverty*

If we examine the Real Gross Domestic Income (RDGI),<sup>5</sup> according to the state where each armed conflict occurred from 1987–2007, we find that poverty pervades, regardless of whether or not child soldiers are involved.<sup>6</sup> For a total of 107 armed conflicts, 83 involved child soldiers and 24 did not. The RDGI mean for “yes” child soldier use was \$2,812.49, and the RDGI mean for “no” child soldier use was \$3,018.64. Hence when conflicts did not have children in combat, the RDGI was only slightly higher, by \$206.15. Furthermore, the RDGI world average from 1986–2007 (which is the time frame that the data is drawn from) was \$9,987.47. The comparison shows that states that had armed conflict—both for child soldier use “yes” and child soldier use “no”—sit in the bottom third of the RDGI world rankings. Poverty appears to be more closely correlated with armed conflict than with child soldier use.

#### *Myth #2: All Child Soldiers Are Drugged*

Insurgencies, such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), have used cocaine and

amphetamines to motivate the young to fight (Abdullah and Muana, 1998; Sesay and Ismail, 2003; Ellis, 1998). However, this is not necessarily the standard operating procedure for all groups that engage young combatants. When analyzing all armed conflicts in Africa from 1960–2006, Tynes (2007) found that drugs were utilized in less than 50% of the states where children were involved in battle. Rather than encompassing the entire continent, drug use tended to parallel illicit drug trade routes. So, more insurgencies in West Africa tended to access drugs for their troops, because cocaine flowed from South America through West Africa and on into Europe. When cocaine was readily available, insurgencies were more likely to access it and feed it to their young fighters.

*Myth #3: It's an African Thing*

Another generalization about child soldier use is that it takes place in Africa<sup>7</sup> and that it is mostly guerilla troops that train and deploy young combatants. When looking at the 83 armed conflicts<sup>8</sup> that had child fighters (1987–2007), we discover a regional spread of the phenomenon. Africa contains 26 of the conflicts (31.3%), Asia has 26 (31.3%), Europe's share is 11 (13.3%), the Middle East has 11 (13.3%) and North and South America make up the remaining 9 (10.8%). A rough sketch with the data demonstrates that child soldier use is not African-centric. An analysis of opposition versus government child soldier use also helps to clarify misperceptions. When children are used on the battlefield (83 armed conflicts), the breakdown is as follows:

- Used by government only = 13.3% (11)
- Used by opposition only = 36.1% (30)
- Used by both sides = 50.6% (42)

Governments used child soldiers in a total of 63.9% of the conflicts and the opposition used child soldiers in a total of 86.1% of the conflicts. The results demonstrate that many governments are culpable when it comes to having youths (15 years of age or under) in their ranks.<sup>9</sup>

These cursory statistics on child soldiers and poverty, drugs, regions, and governments/insurgencies are but an initial step toward refining the underlying determinants for child soldier use. This research offers a much more rigorous consideration of the social problem. Nonetheless, the conclusions developed herein are not meant as final pronouncements, but rather as an addition to the field as well as an indication of new directions to be explored.

## Tactical Innovation

This study tackles the question: Why are children used in battle? The quick answer might be that children are used because more troops equals more fighting power. The issue becomes more complicated, though, if we consider that child soldier use has not been the norm until the 20th century. “While there were isolated instances in which children did serve in armies or other groups at war, a general norm held against child soldiers across the last four millennia of warfare” (Singer, 2006, p. 15). Moreover, Bennett (1998) deflates the specific claim that using children in combat is a “legitimate African tradition”:

. . . *children* were not recruited to regiments nor did they bear arms. At most, as we have seen in the case of the Zulu, children gave incidental support as non-combatants. While a degree of uncertainty might always exist about a recruit’s precise age, the evidence is clear that men were drafted into regiments three or four years after puberty, and it should also be noted that (contrary to current practices) *girls* were never used as combatants. (p. 20)

An important marker for when a child can become a soldier is puberty, and whether or not a person has passed through an initiation into adulthood. Among the Mende of Sierra Leone, boys who have not performed puberty rites in the secret society of Poro are not allowed to fight in battle or even act as spies no matter how old they may be (Confidential Source, 2007). The focus is less on age, which may vary from 12 to 18, and more on a biological and social transition.<sup>10</sup>

Conversely, Rosen (2005) counters general claims that child soldiering is a recent phenomenon, stating that it is prevalent throughout history. He cites evidence from 17th-century Europe when 11- to 13-year-olds served as commissioned officers in the army and navy; and, during the American Revolution there were 12- and 13-year-olds in General Thomas Gage’s regiment; and, the Cheyenne of the 19th century had 14- and 15-year-old warriors. The modern shift, says Rosen, is that previously battle was seen as “ennobling” children, whereas today battle is seen as doing damage, making the child “an abused and exploited victim of war” (p. 6). His argument is not meant to downplay the brutality of war, but to refocus our attention on the cultural constructs that are being both masked and reformed. Part of his point is to insert international-level forces into the equation:

The problem of child soldiers . . . is part of a global politics of age in which humanitarian and human rights groups, sovereign states, and the United Nations and its administrative agencies battle over the rights and duties of children over the issue of who is a child and who is a child soldier. The child soldier crisis is part of a contested domain of international politics in which childhood serves as a proxy for other political interests. (p. 2)

With Rosen's argument it becomes important to consider that the construct of the child is not only being leveraged by insurgencies and state militaries, but also by humanitarian political entrepreneurs in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). His argument is valuable, because it dissipates the normative bias that surrounds the issue. It complicates the claim that the problem exists "out there" with insurgents and governments. Actually, according to Rosen, the child soldier phenomenon is woven into fabric of international politics.

The research from *Tools of War, Tools of State* sits beside Singer's and Rosen's work, acknowledging that youth have been involved in various battles over the last several centuries, and that international social forces have had a major influence on the child soldier discourse, creating the "bad guys" and the "good guys." The findings from this study also suggest that there has been a significant shift in the 20th century—something new is happening. Rather than children being merely troop builders, I argue that following World War II children have become part of a larger war-fighting strategy. As Singer (2006) notes, "While not formalized in a drill manual, it represents a new body of fundamental principles, deliberate instrumental choices, and transferred teaching about how to fight" (p. 6).

I begin by arguing that the use of child soldiers is a *tactical innovation* (McAdam, 1983). Most guerilla groups lie outside the established polity and as such are social movement organizations (SMOs) that must seek alternate forms of power in order to overthrow the established political institutions.<sup>11</sup> One method of power-building is through negative inducements, which involve "the creation of a situation that disrupts the normal functioning of society and is antithetical to the interests of the group's opponents. In essence, insurgents seek to disrupt their opponent's realization of interests to such an extent that the cessation of the offending tactic becomes a sufficient inducement to grant concessions" (pp. 735–736). In other words, a group will utilize an extreme, often morally "bad" tactic, to demonstrate how far they are willing to go for victory. Doing so appears to step beyond

the rational and into the realm of the irrational. When children are used as combatants, this field of irrational behavior is invoked. And for the opponent, the negative action might seem almost without a rational counter attack. Political entrepreneurs such as Foday Sankoh of Sierra Leone, Charles Taylor of Liberia, Joseph Kony of Uganda, and Laurent Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo realize the latent, irrational power of using young soldiers and capitalize on its potential. “[T]hese men, and many like them, realized that arming children could serve as a means to gaining military capacity” (Singer, 2006, p. 54). Ultimately, insurgents and government militaries use child soldiers in order to increase political opportunities. Roos and Böhmelt’s (2015) study helps support this assertion. They find that at least with rebel groups, children may increase fighting capacities, and prolong civil wars (2017).

Whether or not the insurgents force the hand of the opposing regime depends upon numerous variables, and the process is not a one-shot approach. Instead, as McAdam (1983) states, the introduction of a tactical innovation sets off a back-and-forth process whereby the opposition counters with a tactical adaptation, leading to another tactical innovation, and so forth, and so on. The overall process is known as tactical interaction. Brett, McCallin and O’Shea (1996) observed this phenomenon in their 24 case studies, stating “the recruitment of children into armed opposition groups often fuels under-age recruitment into government armed forces and vice versa” (p. 4).

With many insurgencies, child soldiers are a tactical innovation that becomes very difficult to counter, and hence, political opportunities increase. Political opportunities are when an event or social process “serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured” (McAdam, 1982, p. 41). Child soldiers have become essential to what Hammes (2006) labels as today’s “evolved form of insurgency,” or fourth generation warfare (4GW), which is less about hitting force with force and more about directly attacking “the minds of the enemy decision makers to destroy the enemy’s political will” (p. 2). The overall strategy originates with Mao Tse-tung, whose theory of protracted war helped the Chinese Communist Party defeat Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists after decades of fighting. Mao’s philosophy is about adapting tactics to “introduce the element of surprise, set ambushes, concentrate superior numbers at any selected point, choose the time and place of fighting, avoid all evenly-matched or unfavorable engagements, escape mopping-up campaigns, and contribute to the demoralization of the enemy’s rank and file.” (Johnson, 1968, p. 437). Mao’s protracted war strategy has been utilized by post-WWII

insurgencies including the Viet Cong in Vietnam, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, and Al Qaeda globally.

As a subset of the strategy, child soldiers are a high-capacity tool utilized against armed forces that are often technologically superior. The tactic works at ground level and is based on human-to-human contact. When child soldiers enter battlefield, some actors are immobilized while others are more readily mobilized. The effect has at least three significant dimensions: the creation of moral dilemmas, the fortification of troops, and the relocation of fear in the social system (see diagram 1 below).

Moral dilemmas are problems that play out at on the individual level, in military officials as well as foot soldiers. This psychological dynamic involves an internalized conflict: when you have to make a choice between two actions and you have valid moral reasons why you should do both. But you can only pick one of those actions. A dilemma arises because a complex problem is being reduced into one solution. It is an irresolvable situation that must be resolved. Of course, you can choose one or the other path, but in a “genuine moral dilemma it must be . . . true that neither of the conflicting requirements is overridden” (McConnell, 2006). “For instance,” states Tynes (2008), “as a soldier engaged in battle, you must (a) protect civilians from harm and death and (b) defeat your enemy (because your cause—what you are fighting for—is just)” (p. 38). Both choices are imperatives.

For troops facing off against young fighters, the dilemma becomes a choice between killing the enemy and at the same time killing a child. Hence, kinetic action against the insurgents becomes much more complex and difficult to resolve, thereby increasing the power of the group using child soldiers. A study by psychologists using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) demonstrates that brains faced with moral dilemmas engage

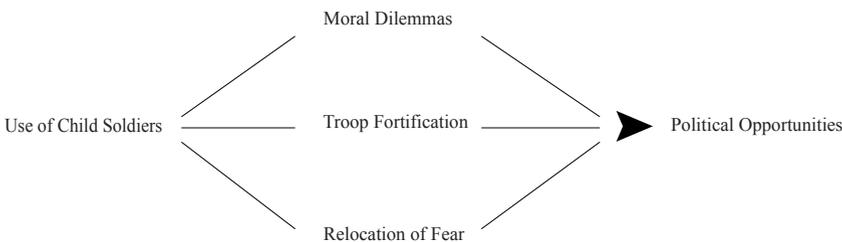


Diagram 1. Causal Relationship of Child Soldier Use to Political Opportunities

in emotional processing as well as cognitive processing, depending upon the complexity of the dilemma. (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley and Cohen, 2001). Translated to the battlefield, the result might be a soldier whose rules of engagement schema is infiltrated by sympathy for youth schema, which diminishes his/her response rate and increases vulnerability. And if the soldier is not killed first, but instead, kills a child, the effects last well beyond the fighting. When British troops faced off with child combatants in West Africa in 2001 and 2002, numerous soldiers experienced clinical depression and post-traumatic stress disorder after battling with them (Singer 2005). African troops have also been affected by the tactic. Members of Uganda's military, the Uganda People's Defense Force, have been psychologically disturbed by having to fight against children and alongside them. For these soldiers, the dilemma is about killing children as well as seeing their own leaders contribute to and benefit from the problem (Neu 2004).

The second dimension of tactical innovation, that of troop fortification, translates into more troops for the insurgents. As Singer (2006) states, "Any organization willing to use children as fighters will usually be able to field a force well beyond what they would be able to do without them. With this, the balance of potential forces in a war is shifted" (p. 95). According to Woods (1993), this became part of the mujahidin's survival tactic against the Soviet Union. The mujahidin recruited young fighters in order "to supplement the crumbling armed forces" (p. 14). While this may appear to be a straightforward method for building troops, with children the threshold of resistance to recruitment becomes much lower. Children are more readily coerced (often kidnapped and then threatened with death if they do not join the insurgency) and reprogrammed (controlled by the insurgents in some cases through the use of drugs such as cocaine). In Sri Lanka, guerrilla leaders recruit children because ". . . they are easily conditioned and motivated, and can be put into battle with less training. Although children are put into more danger, they too are of greater danger to their adversaries" (Brett, McCallin and O'Shea, 1996). Similarly, Blattman (2007) finds in his case study of northern Uganda: "armed groups with few or limited resources forcibly recruit young adolescents because they offer the optimal combination of effectiveness and ease of retention" (p. 3). This is unlike the process of recruiting adults for rebellion, which involves many more obstacles to mobilization. Additionally, even when the opposition counters by protecting children in refugee camps, the problem worsens. Achvarina and Reich (2006) find that in the case of African conflicts, greater access to refugee and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps correlated with an

increase in child soldier recruitment. Also, the more camps there were for the protection of children, the greater the consolidation and vulnerability. Refugee camps become child soldier collection points for insurgents: “The practical result is that a high-risk pool of potential recruits is created” (p. 140).

The third dimension involves relocating fear in the social system. Insurgencies attempt to usurp the state’s or ruling regime’s ability to institute fear. States or ruling regimes need the power of fear in order to maintain social control.<sup>12</sup> When an insurgency uses children in battle, they undermine the authority of the opposing regime. Fear and awe of rulers/elites/leaders diminishes and reinstates in the child. The result is a severe strain on the social structure<sup>13</sup> that can immobilize citizens, especially those who might otherwise mobilize for collective action against the insurgents. It is “just one aspect in a larger campaign carried out by an armed group, designed to intimidate local civilian communities” (Singer 2006, p. 60).

This is a form of what Chabal and Daloz (1999) call the political instrumentalization of disorder. Chabal and Daloz claim that the brutality in civil wars in Mozambique, Liberia, and Sierra Leone served an instrumental purpose, which aimed at dismantling the state. During Sierra Leone’s decade-long civil war, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) used child soldiers to devastate the civilian population and to help dissolve the state. It was not until the rise of an opposition, known as the Civil Defense Force (CDF), that the RUF began to suffer serious setbacks in their insurgency. The CDF was an indigenous group of fighters that possessed a strong knowledge of warfare in the bush; notably, they were also accused of using child soldiers as combatants. The civil war in Sierra Leone became a case wherein civilians finally overcame the immobilizing effects of the RUF’s relocation of fear. However, the new civilian SMO countered the RUF’s tactical innovation with a parallel tactical adaptation—the CDF appropriated the RUF’s relocation of fear. The CDF began using child soldiers too (Sesay & Ismail, 2003).

Relocating fear in children also necessitates retraining them, providing them with new social norms and cosmologies. Creating a new social structure was key to Joseph Kony’s power in Uganda:

Indoctrination into the LRA was a complex process of spiritual training, misinformation, and the strategic use of fear and violence. Spiritual practices appear central to motivating recruits and can be seen as an attempt to create new social bonds based on a shared cosmology (as well as fear). Kony created a cult of mystery and spiritual power which few abductees or civilians disbelieve even now. (Blattman 2007, p. 18)

In Sierra Leone, the RUF attacked the reigning powers of state and society in part through reinitiating children into an alternate form of patronage (Murphy, 2003). Richards (1996) claims that this was part of the insurgency's attack on the state, that the "only means to attack a patrimonial elite is to terrorize *rural* communities that have gained little or nothing from patrimonialism. This pits the power of the new initiation against the old" (p. 83). It is "the social production of dependency on patronage when local and national structures fail to provide for the social and economic needs of youth" says Murphy (2003, p. 62). The insurgency then potentially becomes the new holder of the legitimate use of force.

Groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), exemplify the state-making role that child soldiers play. All three fighting forces maximize the utility of children, recognizing the potential power that they contain—children as both symbolic and material capital. When ISIS publishes videos online that depict children training for war, they understand the symbolic violence that the images can yield against western viewers. ISIS challenges not only who has the Weberian monopoly of the legitimate use of force, but also what qualifies as legitimate violence. Children being intentionally and publically transformed into soldiers becomes what Bourdieu (2014) calls a symbolic revolution. And while the label may seem academic or inconsequential, the reality is that symbolic revolutions can "unleash terrible violence because they attack the integrity of the minds, they attack people in what is most essential for them, it's a question of life and death" (p. 367). When ISIS grants children the right to behead others, the global notion of human rights and security is upended.

### Evolution of a Norm

Even if one concedes that using child soldiers as a tactical innovation might create moral dilemmas, might amplify recruitment, and might relocate fear in the social system; and even if one can entertain that these dimensions might increase political opportunities for insurgents, there still remain lingering questions: Why not engage in a less morally reprehensible practice? Why not harness the power of NGOs? After all, an insurgency might be more successful in the long run if it were to enlist the help of the international community (see, for instance, the tactics employed by the Zapatistas in Mexico as outlined in Bob, 2005). Beyond the tactical advantage that this strategy appears to have, I am interested in why some groups (insurgencies

and/or states) are willing to break a widespread cultural norm against using children in battle.

The most comprehensive explanation is that the acceptability and unacceptability of child soldiers has not been a one-note affair. For the last 100 years, the norm has developed, evolved, and multiplied. As will be discussed later, the practice has grown out of a decline in the sanctity of civilian life on the battlefield, and a rise in youth empowerment globally. For Rosen (2015), the transfiguration of the norm has developed in part out of a struggle between child, family, and state, switching to-and-fro, from child as patriot to child as victim. Hence, it is the constantly morphing confluence of multiple social forces that has contributed to the construction of the child soldier norm. Additionally, rapid advances in war-technologies have made child soldiers a utilitarian choice for insurgencies.<sup>14</sup> Even though it may be morally repugnant to many people, child soldier use has become a legitimate option.

In fact, child soldier use *is* the norm in the 21st century, whereas the international norm prohibiting child soldier use is relatively new. The prohibition against child combatants was introduced into international law a little more than 30 years ago with the 1977 Additional Protocols to the 1949 Geneva Convention (Rosen, 2005). The Protocols advocated against using anyone under 15 years of age in hostilities and suggested special consideration for children caught up in armed conflict (United Nations, 1977). Subsequent international agreements include: the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, which introduced the prohibition against recruiting anyone under 18 years of age (United Nations, 1989); and, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000), which set forth, in more detail, guidelines for the child's role in armed conflict and set the age limit for any type of participation in combat at 18 or older (United Nations, 2000). These three pieces of international law are part of the current movement to re-shift the global norm away from child soldier use. However they are not yet the commonly accepted guidelines on the battlefield. Understanding this ground-level reality of child soldier use helps us address the moral complexities involved in this social/political phenomenon.

### What We Know

Three decades of research into the problem of child soldiers has produced numerous potential causes. The work initiated by Woods (1980, 1990, 1991,

1993) and furthered by Machel (1996) has generated multiple branches of explanatory variables. Subsequent research has helped us hone in on what lies at the end of those branches, i.e., many of the essential driving forces behind child soldier use. Separating the correlates of war from the correlates of youth combatants can be somewhat sticky. Nonetheless, researchers have proposed quite a number of independent variables that appear as underlying factors that potentially tip the scale toward child soldier use. The primary focus has been on weak states, poverty, militarization, globalization and the tactical function.

The first and overarching theme in the literature is the premise that weak states provide fertile terrain for child soldier recruitment. When a weak state is pulled into armed conflict, multiple variables increase the likelihood that youths will volunteer, or will be forcefully recruited, to fight. Poverty, according to Woods (1993), Machel (1996), Cohn & Goodwin-Gill (1994), Brett, McCallin and O'Shea (1996), Barnitz (1997), Sesay and Ismail (2003), Twum-Danso (2003), Singer (2006) and Wessells (2002, 2006), creates the environment whereby children lose the security of the state, and either see fighting and the shelter of an insurgent group as more socially and/or economically reliable, or are made more vulnerable to coercion and compulsory conscription. Cohn and Goodwin-Gill (1994) assert that for many young soldiers, volunteering is the rational choice, an attempt to "counter children's feelings of helplessness, vulnerability and frustration" (p. 31). This is not to say that children are fully exercising their free will, but rather that they are making a rational choice that is severely constrained by structural variables such as poverty. Woods (1993) found that some parents in Burma were sending their children to fight for the Karen Army because "it provides clothes and two meals a day" (p. 18). And even if press-ganged into service by armed groups in countries such as Ethiopia, El Salvador, Burma/Myanmar, or Liberia, children still might view the situation as favorable: "In situations of deprivation, the gun . . . can become an entry point to food and survival (Brett, McCallin & O'Shea, 1996).

Historical analysis and ground-level interviews with children have demonstrated that poverty certainly can influence their decision making—to fight or not to fight. However, studies by Achvarina and Reich (2006) and Achvarina, Nordås, Østby, and Rustad (2007), which provide quantitative analyses of child soldier recruitment, find only a partial correlation with poverty rates. Achvarina and Reich's (2006) study of 19 intrastate African conflicts also disputes the claim that poverty might even have a threshold effect "because while richer countries may not use child soldier in intrastate

conflict, child soldiers do not serve in all intrastate conflicts in poor countries” (p. 163). In their logit regression of 690 sub-national regions in 52 African countries from 1990–2004, Achvarina, Nordås, Østby, and Rustad (2007) show that poverty variables are generally insignificant except for some possible influence from high infant mortality rates, a variable that Cohn and Goodwin-Gill (1994) had previously identified as important to the child soldier equation.

Several other variables are bundled together in the weak state argument. According to Cohn & Goodwin-Gill (1994), Machel (1996) and Wessells (2002, 2006), a decrease in education and educational opportunities influences recruitment and volunteering. Machel (1996) draws a correlation between education and child soldiers from Afghanistan in the 1990s: “approximately 90 per cent of children now have no access to schooling, [and] the proportion of soldiers who are children is thought to have risen in recent years from roughly 30 to at least 45 per cent” (p. 16). Here, as with poverty, we see a costs/benefits framework at work. In Sri Lanka, “inadequate education,” says Cohn and Goodwin-Gill (1994), “can make the LTTE seem like a viable option” (p. 34); one that many insurgencies capitalize on by creating educational institutions of their own to cultivate children into soldiers. Lack of employment opportunities can also invoke a sense of despair and/or can turn fighting in armed conflict into a viable job option (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Machel, 1996; Brett, McCallin & O’Shea, 1996; Sesay & Ismail, 2003). In the decade-long Sierra Leonean civil war, “youth either joined pro-government or rebel factions because they perceived soldiering as an opportunity to earn a living in the absence of educational opportunities and the exiting limited economic prospects in the country” (Sesay & Ismail, 2003, pp. 151–152). As a consequence, the social and economic ties that youth develop while as combatants can develop into solidified ways of being. Children, who may have had very little before entering an armed conflict, become empowered from securing their own livelihood in combat. Hence, jobs become important in persuading child soldiers to stop fighting (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994), and demobilization programs that forsake job skill development programs miss the long-term structural problems surrounding child soldiers (Mustapha, 2006). In postwar Sierra Leone, boosting employment rates is, says Mustapha (2006), an imperative for the well-being of the child as well as the state: “A gainfully employed ex-combatant is less dangerous than an unemployed ex-combatant” (p. 66). The concern is that the cycle of war and child soldier use will be repeated, that youth will return back to an institution that offers more stability for them—thuggery or even armed conflict.

Vulnerability and expendability of the child are general themes imbedded in the child soldier discourse. Researchers have pointed to an increase in the orphan population (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Brett, McCallin & O'Shea, 1996; Barnitz, 1997; Twum-Danso, 2003; Singer 2006; Wes-sels, 2002 & 2006), or an increase in adult mortality (Machel, 1996) as variables that encourage a decrease in defenses for children. Youths become less protected, less grounded, and more disposable. Orphans are seen as easy prey, victims of family disrupture. Cohn and Goodwin-Gill (1994) claim that in the 1980s, Uganda's National Resistance Army (NRA) became a refuge for parentless children. Orphans can reclaim a "close-knit family structure" in insurgent or government armies (p. 35). Achvarina and Reich (2006) criticize the orphan correlation for being based largely on anecdotal evidence. They counter, stating that there are numerous narratives "repeated elsewhere about parents shot dead for refusing to hand their children over to governmental or rebel forces" (p. 135); and that their regression analysis of African conflicts reveals no statistical correlation between orphan rates and child soldier recruitment rates.

Rosen (2005) refutes the general claim that children are used because of their vulnerability, citing the important role that many youth played in World War II. He states: "Children and youth played a major role in partisan resistance against the Germans. They formed the core of the urban partisan units and were an important component of many forest partisan groups" (p. 21). The Lithuanian Division of ghetto fighters and partisans included about 300 people who were between the ages of 10 and 15. Rosen further supports his claim with two other case studies of Sierra Leonean and Palestinian youths. His research does not dispute the fact that many children are abducted and forced into military ranks, but it does undermine the thesis that the child victim is a causal force driving the recruitment of children.

It could be, proposes Singer (2005), that children are much more available for recruitment because youths are outnumbering adults. He points to an explosion in the youth population, especially in Africa, as a contributing factor. The fallout from an increase in more children is a larger labor pool (for illegal economies and/or fighting forces) to draw from as well as a decrease in the influence of older generations, who are now outnumbered. As a result, youths become less socially constrained: "the typical stabilizing influences of elders are lessened by the overall mass of youth. The lost youths are more easily harnessed into more pernicious activities that can lead to conflict" (p. 41). The role flip is from child as agent-victim to child as agent-perpetrator. This tips the balance in favor of cheap labor force that is more attuned to armed conflict. "With their ready availability and easy

transformation into combatants, children now represent a low-cost way to mobilize and generate force” (p. 53).

The second theme in the child soldier literature is based on the idea that children are primed to fight, thanks to the proliferation of armed conflict globally. Many researchers suggest that there has been a widespread militarization of daily life (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Machel, 1996; Brett, McCallin & O’Shea, 1996; Wessells, 2002 & 2006). War after war after war sets the stage for child soldier use, almost making battle a tradition in itself, one that sets less and less of a distinction between civilian and soldier (Singer, 2006). Machel (1996) supports her position with state spending statistics, which, she argues, express just how militarized sub-Saharan Africa is:

. . . between 1960 and 1994, the proportion of the region’s gross domestic product (GDP) devoted to military spending rose from 0.7 per cent to 2.9 per cent. The region’s military expenditure is now [in 1996] around \$8 billion, despite the fact that 216 million people live in poverty. (p. 71)

Militarization of all facets of life has produced a “moral vacuum,” states Machel, “a space in which children are slaughtered, raped, and maimed; a space in which children are exploited as soldiers” (p. 9). Children become caught up in a system of structural violence, wherein violence is the norm and in which revenge is acceptable (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Brett, McCallin & O’Shea, 1996; Singer, 2006). All-pervading militarization has also over-glorified war, such that children sometimes view fighting as prestigious, as a pathway to gaining their adult identity or at least as a way to relieve peer pressure (Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Machel, 1996; Brett, McCallin & O’Shea, 1996; Barnitz, 1997; Singer, 2006).

Even though these authors suggest that the militarization of daily life is part of a new war style, which is “far more brutal and criminalized” (Singer, 2006, p. 38), the infusion of military ideology and discipline was apparent hundreds of years ago. In 17th-century Europe, militarization extended all the way down to the level of the child (Foucault, 1979; Aries, 1962). And, notes Rosen (2005), “military discipline was thought to have a particular kind of moral virtue” (p. 7). This image stands in contrast to today’s negative image of a victimized or inglorious child soldier. However, the addition of Rosen’s historical analysis to the fieldwork of Machel and others does not mask the brutality of child soldiering. By revealing the lineage of the ennobling aspects of war, we gain a more complex understanding of the

construction of norms surrounding war-fighters. Prestige, or revenge, may be the reason why children say they want to become soldiers, but they are not necessarily new rationales, nor causes.

Globalization is another modern-era theme that previous studies have delineated as a culprit for child soldiering. Machel (1996) frames the entire problem as a result of global forces that exacerbate poverty: “countries caught up in conflict today are also under severe stress from a global world economy that pushes them even further towards the margins” (p. 13). Globalization increases individualism and the pool of political entrepreneurs who capitalize on self-interest; and globalization leads to rapid urbanization, market-based values and the erosion of family values (Machel, 1996). Honwana (2006) agrees, asserting that the world economy and structural adjustment programs have led to the “crisis of the postcolonial state” in Africa, where:

. . . inequalities have widened and livelihoods have become more insecure, straining and weakening the social fabric. Household and community capacities to nurture and protect the young have declined, and social norms and value system to protect children have weakened. This trend has resulted in the commodification of children and a revaluation that has induced an increase in child labor, including child soldiering. (p. 46)

The global market is also pushing the proliferation of small arms, which, according to Machel (1996); Brett, McCallin and O’Shea (1996); Singer (2005); Singer (2006); Barnitz (1997); and Stohl, Schroeder and Smith (2007), is enabling insurgents, helping them make soldiers out of children. The theory is based on the premise that there are hundreds of small-arms producers and millions of guns in the world. The Small Arms Survey (2001) estimates that in the 1980s there were 196 legitimate small-arms companies and by 2000 that number had increased to 600 companies worldwide (p. 11). The global production of military-style small arms (excluding the United States production) from 1980–1999 totaled more than 43 million new weapons (p. 13). This flood of small arms has spread throughout Asia, Africa, South America, and so forth. AK-47 assault rifles from Russia, three million rounds of ammunition from Egypt and 20,000 rifle grenades from South Africa all entered into Rwanda and were utilized during the 1994 genocide (pp. 206–207). The small arms are not only increasing the likelihood of armed conflict but are also changing the dynamics of soldiering: “The ready availability of simple-to-operate lightweight automatic weapons has

transformed the capacity of children to serve as combatants on something approaching an equal footing with adults” (Brett, McCallin & O’Shea, p. 11). The small arms proliferation equation is: an easy-to-carry, easy-to-fire, deadly weapon, plus an easily coerced child, equals a plethora of new under-aged troops.

Both Rosen (2005) and Achvarina and Reich (2006) challenge the small arms hypothesis. The AK-47, says Rosen, has been around since 1949 and was used by liberation groups well before the child soldier “crisis” occurred. And the weight of the AK-47 (9 pounds, 7 ounces) is about one pound more than the U.S. rifle musket (8.88 pounds) used in the American Civil War. The Civil War South carried British Enfield rifles that weighed less than 9 pounds, and Sharps carbine rifle was about 8 pounds (pp. 14–15). Rosen adds that child soldiers are lugging around much heavier weapons today. Fighters for Hizbollah carry anti-tank weapons, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), which weigh just over 15 pounds (Gander 1998, pp. 354–355). Achvarina and Reich (2006) question the “ease of handling” claim about small arms. Many of these weapons have a strong recoil action, they argue; and oftentimes, children are not given guns, but perform a multitude of non-battlefield tasks, including cooking and carrying supplies. Finally, Achvarina and Reich (2006) discuss the problem of operationalizing the small arms variable for a quantitative analysis. They state that global data on small arms is incomplete and therefore cannot be utilized to the small arms hypothesis: “Figures on this trade are difficult to obtain and notoriously unreliable; they fail to take into account indirect transfers through neighboring countries by rebel force purchases, and tend to omit long-term transfers resulting from past proxy wars” (p. 137). Consequently, past studies on child soldiers (Machel, 1996; Brett, McCallin & O’Shea, 1996; Singer, 2005; Singer, 2006; Barnitz, 1997; Stohl, Schroeder & Smith, 2007) provide evidence from history, interviews, and general statistics about small-arms production, but none test the small-arms variable at the large-N level.

A fourth area of child soldier research examines the tactical aspects of the practice. The focus here is on how child soldier use might be needed by armed groups and the advantages that young soldiers might provide. The most prevalent factor singled out is that child soldier use is about troop shortages and maximizing recruitment (Woods, 1993; Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Machel, 1996; Brett, McCallin & O’Shea, 1996; Twum-Danso, 2003; Singer, 2006; Wessells, 2002 & 2006; Blattman, 2007). Woods’s (1993) study is one of the earliest to single out “manpower shortages” as a causal influence. Quite simply, she saw it as “the temptation to kidnap children