WAR AND THE PROBLEM OF CHILD SOLDIERS

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This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment for the award of the Master in Strategic and Defence Studies from the University of Malaya
Dedicated

to my beloved late Father
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INTRODUCTION

The impact of political violence and the disruption it causes to people's lives has been a major concern globally, not just for affected communities, but also among governments and non-governmental agencies. In recent decades and especially after World War II, there has been a significant increase in the number of conflicts. Although the figures vary widely, Duffield notes a rise from about ten in 1960, to around fifty today. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the vast majority of these conflicts are internal because only three of the 82 conflicts between 1989 and 1992 were between states.¹

In the forty years following the collapse of League of Nations, many nations began active resistance to state control. Civil disobedience, political reform, low intensity wars of resistance, political tension and open conflicts has characterized relations between many nations and states. Similarly, relations between neighboring nations inside state boundaries have challenged the integrity of states and raised the need for international measures for negotiated conflict resolution. Where arbitrary state boundaries divide nations, conflicts have often appeared to be inter-state, but in reality these conflicts reflect pre-state geographical realities. Many nations-and-state conflicts center on the availability

of natural resources, territory or the question of access. Most of the recent conflicts have occurred in the developing world and those on the front-line have mainly been civilians, the proportion of civilian casualties as opposed to military being over 90 per cent in some cases.

The severity of impact of conflict on civilians, both adults and children, is not in doubt. Children in early childhood and in the initial years of mid-childhood have specific susceptibilities to violence due to their immaturity and minority status in society. The collapse of traditional authority structures, decline of social networks, weakening of cultural and spiritual values and disruption of gender roles may undermine children’s socialization, for example, leading to a loss of survival and social skills. Every child has the right to a good start in life, and there is no simple, yet crucial, priority for every society. A good start encompasses sound nutrition, health care, a hygienic home and community environment, and care, play and stimulation. Yet millions are still denied these rights. Of the estimated eleven million children below the age of five who died in developing countries in 1998, nearly all were from preventable illnesses with about one-third of those under five being malnourished.

Education, a fundamental right of all children, has tremendous power to transform individuals and societies. For the millions of children denied

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2 "Race and Ethnicity: Relations Between Nations," eserver.org/race/relations-between-nations.html
3 Boyden and Gibbs, Children of War: Responses to Psycho-Social Distress in Cambodia, p. 4.
education, the consequences are dire, including poorer health and lives of poverty. A recent United Nations Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) report revealed that over 130 million primary school-age children worldwide are not enrolled in schools, of which nearly 60 percent are girls. The same report also disclosed yet another alarming and undeniable fact that is an estimated two million children have been lost in armed conflicts during the past decade, and six million have been seriously injured or permanently disabled.\(^5\) Innocent civilians do not only contribute to the above figures but also perpetrators- the child soldiers. Today, as many as 300,000 children under the age of eighteen are known to be serving in government forces or armed rebel groups with some as young as eight years old.\(^6\) It is impossible to give an exact figure, as most of them are the 'invisible soldiers'. They are 'invisible' because those who employ them deny their existence. No record is kept of their numbers and age, or the age falsified. Many are not part of the formal strength of the armed forces or armed groups to which they are attached, but are unacknowledged servants or hangers-on. Many are enrolled in a variety of militias and citizens defense groups, the very existence of which is an under-documented area, rarely included in official figures for armed forces. They are 'invisible' because most spend their time in remote conflict zones, away from public view and the preying lenses of the media. They are 'invisible' because they tend to vanish for many do not return from the battlefield because they are killed or, having been injured, are abandoned. When the conflict is over, they are rarely as visible among the

\(^5\) Ibid.
demobilized troops as they were among the combatants at the height of hostilities. On this point Archbishop Desmond Tutu states:

It is immoral that adults should want children to fight their wars for them. Children should be playing, not being pawns in dangerous adult games.

I. HISTORY

The phenomena of child soldiers, is far from new. For generations, young men in Africa have taken-up weapons alongside their fathers to defend their villages, just as they worked in the fields or herded cattle in peace-time. Drummer boys led armies into battle in America’s revolutionary war. In Europe, too, child recruits were common. In the Children’s Crusade of the 13th Century, the thousands of boys and girls who were dispatched from Europe to the Holy Land went-off unarmed and undefended, their very youth was meant to awe the enemy. While many died along the way, those who survived were captured by pirates and enslaved.

The Prussian General Frederick The Great’s words at The Battle of Zorndoff in 1758 which took place between the Prussians and Russians calling upon children to die for their fatherland were apt, as many soldiers were boys in their early teens. In 18th century France, the pre-teenage sons of poor nobility had

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7 Guy Goodwin-Gill and Ilene Cohn, Child Soldiers- The Role of Children in Armed Conflicts, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, pp. 19-20
little choice but to become career soldiers. It was for this same reason that Admiral Horatio Nelson, like other great seafarers, began his naval career as a ship’s boy and saw action in the Indian Ocean. An astonishing fact about the feat of Germany during the World War II is that Berlin was defended by 15 year-olds against the might of the Allies.

The French Revolution at the end of the 19th century witnessed a change when mass conscription became the norm and children were no longer needed as combatants. However, their role was not completely divorced from combat related activities. During the general mobilization of society near the end of the French Revolution, children worked exclusively with women and older men behind the scenes, tending to the wounded. The nature of warfare changed drastically during the Spanish Civil War years in the 1930s, in which airplanes bombed towns and cities. The ruthless destruction that began at Durango and Guernica, culminated when the atomic bombs killed 200,000 people at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The unleashing of war on civilian populations rekindled the use of children as combatants. During World War II, several thousand children worked in resistance movements, valued for their resourceful ways and quick tempers. Children also took-up arms in many of the colonial liberation wars of the 1950s and 1960s.

12 Boothby and Knudsen, “Children of the Gun.”
II. THE PRESENT SITUATION

In recent years, large numbers of children fighting in Latin America and the Middle East regions have been replaced as conflicts recede by new generations of child soldiers in Africa and Asia. In the industrialized world, there is a general trend away from conscription and towards volunteer, professional armies. Combined with economic and social change this has made enlistment levels more difficult to sustain and placed downward pressures on recruitment age.

While many children fight in the frontline, others are used as spies, messengers, sentries, porters, servants and sexual slaves, and often used to lay as well as clear landmines or conditioned to commit atrocities even against their own families and communities. In Colombia, tens of thousands of children have been used as soldiers by all sides in the country’s ongoing bloody conflict. Government-backed paramilitaries recruit children as young as eight, while guerrilla forces use children to collect intelligence, make and deploy mines, and serve as advance troops in ambush attacks. Often child soldiers are recruited from second countries, among refugee communities or ethnic diasporas, and trafficked across borders. Some two thousand Namibian children were reported to have been recruited by the Angolan armed forces in the border region while, Kenyan street-children have reportedly been recruited by the Burundi Hutu

militias active in the same conflict. In Uganda, the Lord’s Resistance Army has systematically abducted children from their schools, communities and homes to camps in Sudan, forcing them to commit atrocities and become sexual slaves.\textsuperscript{14} In the Middle East and North Africa, thousands of Iranian children, many of whom were straight from school, were used by popular militias in human wave attacks against Iraqi forces in the early-1980s. Until recent years, large numbers of children in Lebanon actively participated in the civil war with various paramilitary groups. Many of the child soldiers in Myanmar (Burma) are orphans who are trained in institutions made available by the ethnic armies and the tatmadaw (Burmese army).\textsuperscript{15} While some volunteer themselves as soldiers to avenge their parent’s death, many are abducted. According to one Burmese recruit, government soldiers surrounded his school and arrested forty to fifty youths between ages of fifteen and seventeen years.\textsuperscript{16} The problem of child soldiers is not confined to situation of armed conflict in the developing world alone. Some of the most industrialized countries of Europe and North America continue to accept recruits as young as sixteen. Canada, the first country to ratify the new Optional Protocol accepts sixteen-year-old volunteers although it has passed legislation to prohibit their deployment while the United Kingdom and the United States have even sent seventeen-year-olds to battle in the Gulf War in 1991.

\textsuperscript{15} No Childhood At All, Terre Des Hommes, Germany: Images Asia, 1996, pp 4-5 and; Mae Hong Son, “Myanmar guerrillas add more child-soldiers to roster,” Kyodo News International, 29 May 2000, www.findarticles.com/m0WDQ/2000_May_29/
In many countries, military training and indoctrination is provided through schools and youth movements, often as a means of bolstering defense preparedness or recruitment levels. In Iraq, thousands of children aged ten to fifteen participate in the Ashbal Saddam (Saddam Lion Cubs) youth movement formed after the 1991 Gulf War, where training reportedly includes small-arms use, hand-to-hand combat and infantry tactics. In the United States, military-run programs exist for children as young as eight. As of early 2001, the Young Marines had 14,865 boys and girls from age eight till eighteen in over two hundred units nationwide. The participants wear uniforms and are assigned military ranks and participate in ‘boot camp’ and rifle drills.¹⁷

¹⁷ Child Soldiers, Global Report, p. 23.