

# **The Unethical Use of Children in War**

Mariana Davis

November 18, 2022

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the role the nature of children has in the immorality of their use in warfare. The exploitation of children in war is a long, pervasive issue that is primarily documented in third-world countries with ongoing conflicts. This paper details the developments in the legality of the use of children in war. It expounds upon the current and historical use of child soldiers and the horrors that come with it. Evidence was taken from the consequences to the children and the nations that use them to demonstrate why this practice is unethical and immoral. This paper studies why the effectiveness of the use of children in war does not equal its morality.

Where there is war, you will find children who are desperate, angry, and fearful, and these emotions can be useful for those looking for something to exploit. Warlords desiring to extend their conflict recruit lost orphans needing purpose or vengeful children hoping to regain what they lost, or they abduct children from their homes in the chaos of war. A child's vulnerability, malleability, and resilience are tempting traits that make them easy to recruit, instruct, and expend. Their underdeveloped sense of danger makes it easier to manipulate them, and they are more likely to be obedient and submissive. Their lack of life experiences means they do not fully understand the consequences or severity of immoral actions. Child soldiers are also cheap, as they don't require as much equipment or nourishment as adult soldiers. Their small size allows them to be used as scouts, spies, and messengers on the battlefield. In some cases, they are used as cooks or help carry supplies and launder clothing. They can be used as bomb makers, advance troops in ambush attacks, and cruelly, as suicide bombers. With modern weapons in modern warfare, children can be used more extensively in direct combat and can be as deadly to their adversary as adult soldiers. The appearance of children in the warzone is a diversion and an ethical qualm to an enemy, no matter what task the child is taking. No soldier with a conscience wants to dirty his hands with a child's blood, and his hesitation may cost him. The intentional ending of anyone's life weighs heavy on the soul, but when it is a child, that burden is irreconcilable with its perceived necessity. This demoralization is a direct effect of the nature of children. This is because it is not children that drive wars, or start uprisings, or conquer kingdoms. Regardless of children's usefulness in war, their innocent, trusting, and vulnerable nature makes the use of them an unacceptable evil. The examination of the legal and historical use of children in war helps prove why its effectiveness does not equal its morality.

### **Legality**

The use of children in war has not always been so decidedly wrong. The prohibition and criminality of this action have only recently been developed. This answer has shifted depending on the era and culture, but by today's international standards, there appears to be a consensus. The use of children in war is a crime that is now internationally understood and prosecuted as such. The first documents addressing the general rights of children came in 1924 through the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child and in 1948 through The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Geneva Declaration in 1924 was adopted by the League of Nations and recognized and affirmed for the first-time specific rights for children. The fundamentals of the document were the rights of children to relief, protection, and assistance that would benefit their well-being. This declaration stated that "mankind owes to the Child the best that it has to give" and the duty of men and women is to provide for the Child<sup>1</sup>. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights inspired the development of international treaties and human rights bills and the formation of human rights institutions. This declaration states in its first article that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and in the third article, "everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the security of person"<sup>2</sup>. However, neither the Geneva Convention of 1924 nor the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was legally binding.

---

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF. "Convention on the Rights of the Child." Unicef, 1989. <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

When deciding what constitutes a child in war, international law looks solely at the age of a person. The Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 defines a child as any person below the age of eighteen. The 1977 Additional Protocol was the first-time international law directly dealt with the issue of child soldiers. Article 77 declares that the highest measures should be taken so that “children who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities”<sup>3</sup>. The children who take part in hostilities after the age of fifteen can only do so completely voluntarily. The Rome Statute in 1998 codified that the enlisting of a child under fifteen to use in active hostilities is considered a war crime. However, under the Rome Statute children were still able to participate indirectly as scouts, porters, spies, or informants. In 2000 the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child treaty was adopted by the United Nations. This treaty established that children under 15 were to be protected from all forms of military involvement. It forbids the recruiting of children under 16 and the use of 16 and 17-year-olds in direct hostilities. The conditions for recruiting children aged 16 and 17 require proof of age, informed consent, and the assurance that applicants are fully informed. These treaties and prohibitions apply to international and non-international armed conflicts. However, its criminality has not dissuaded its use.

### **Historical and Current Use**

Many places over the world have exploited children to pursue their military goals. According to UNICEF, “between 2005 and 2020, more than 93,000 children were verified as recruited and used by parties in conflict”<sup>4</sup>. Almost 80% of children used in war are below the age of 15. 30% of these children are girls, who are abused sexually or taken as mistresses. More than half of the conflicts involving child soldiers take place in Africa, where long conflicts create orphans and warlords use children to prolong their military motivations. The history of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is one many African and Middle Eastern countries share. It is a long one wrought with division and conflict. The DRC went from a colony in the late 1800s and early 1900s to a 30-year dictatorship that began in 1965. The dictator’s overthrow in 1997 began the First Congo War, and his disposal did not prevent the Second Congo War in the following year. The Second Congo War ended in 2003 with the election of a president under whom human rights continued to suffer. The DRC became a battlefield where different African nations fought for its power and resources. The many civil wars in the country since have included the forces of various African countries and armed groups. Both the Congolese Armed Forces and opposition groups forcibly recruited children. These children started out as runners, bodyguards, porters, or spies and later were integrated into combat situations. The Lord’s Resistance Army, which operates in Uganda, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic, has had its hand in the DRC as well, kidnapping children and forcing them into becoming soldiers and fighting in their wars.

Armed groups such as these endanger the development of 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries. A report by Save the Children stated that Nigeria recruits the most children into its armed forces. The militia group Boko Haram is known to abduct children to use as suicide bombers and executioners in Nigeria. These children are forced into military training and drugged with

---

<sup>3</sup> Satyendra, Nadesan. “Human Rights - Child Soldiers & the Law.” tamilnation.org, November 2004.  
<https://tamilnation.org/humanrights/child/index.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF. “Children Recruited by Armed Forces.” UNICEF, September 3, 2020.  
<https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>.

cocaine or heroin to keep them compliant. In Syria, war has raged since 2011 and millions of children live in extreme poverty. The Borgen Project quotes that “in 2016 alone, 851 children were recruited to be armed soldiers”<sup>5</sup>. Some are kidnapped, some are convinced of noble causes such as Islamic radicalism in ISIS, and others volunteer because of their severe situation of poverty. For some militia groups, pensions and salaries are given to the families of the recruited child. This use of children in war also spans Central and South America, most notably in Colombia, the favelas of Brazil, and during the civil war in El Salvador. In Latin America, around 14,000 children are reported to “serve in combat, make and deploy mines, and gather intelligence”<sup>6</sup> In Colombia, criminal gangs and armed forces have continued to recruit children since its civil war in 1964. There has been nearly a 40 percent increase in child soldier recruitment since 2017. This is due to turf wars, the cocaine trade, and armed groups’ desire to expand their territory<sup>7</sup>. In the favela slums of Brazil, notorious for being lawless and incredibly violent, homeless children turn toward gangs for their best prospects of survival. Drug gangs recruit children because “they have no sense of danger...[and] being a member of a drug gang gives them a sort of adrenaline rush”<sup>8</sup>. These children are desperate and will do anything for money and a better life, with little concentration on its legality or lack thereof.

### Consequences

These children are primarily victims before they are anything else: soldiers, murderers, or rebels. They are victims of their country and their people whose duty was to protect and nurture them. There are places where whole generations of children grow up without knowing peace. In their desperation as children, they may have done the only thing they had the option to do: fight. Often, they have seen horrendous evils and committed atrocious acts, sometimes against their own family as a form of initiation. To nullify their fears and misgivings about their circumstance in war, the children could have been subjected to substances such as cocaine, heroin, and marijuana. Girls are often subjected to sexual exploitation, rape, gang rape, and forced servitude. Because of this, they can be infected with AIDS and other STDs and forced abortions<sup>9</sup>. They lose their years of school education and lack basic survival skills, as the military provided for them.

Experiences such as this damage the children’s relationship with their families and communities if they still have those to go back to. Some children are not accepted back into their societies because of their association with the armed forces. They are viewed with suspicion. Others have trouble building relationships after they return because of their inability to verbalize or process what they went through. In other cases, this is because of the mental trauma that came from substance abuse or psychological distress such as PTSD or complex PTSD. Child soldiers who return from conscription have higher levels of depression, anxiety, sadness, hostility, and the inability to cope with daily life than solely war-affected children. Being in a traumatic

---

<sup>5</sup> The Borgen Project. “Child Soldiers in Syria | the Borgen Project,” July 23, 2018. <https://borgenproject.org/child-soldiers-in-syria/>.

<sup>6</sup> COHA. “From Cradle to Conflict: Child Soldiers’ Growing Role in Latin America’s Drug Wars,” April 24, 2012. <https://www.coha.org/from-cradle-to-conflict-latin-americas-child-soldiers-new-direction-to-drug-wars>.

<sup>7</sup> blpglobalanalyst. “Child Soldiers in Colombia: The Latest Threat to Colombian Peace.” CTG, April 26, 2021. <https://www.counterterrorismgroup.com/post/child-soldiers-in-colombia-the-latest-threat-to-colombian-peace>.

<sup>8</sup> COHA. “From Cradle to Conflict: Child Soldiers’ Growing Role in Latin America’s Drug Wars,” April 24, 2012. <https://www.coha.org/from-cradle-to-conflict-latin-americas-child-soldiers-new-direction-to-drug-wars>.

<sup>9</sup> COHA. “From Cradle to Conflict: Child Soldiers’ Growing Role in Latin America’s Drug Wars,” April 24, 2012. <https://www.coha.org/from-cradle-to-conflict-latin-americas-child-soldiers-new-direction-to-drug-wars>.

environment at a young age negatively affects a child's growth and mental development. A study done by Harvard shows that "the younger the age of conscription, the harsher the psychological consequences"<sup>10</sup>. Children are the future of the country, if they are warped, ruined, and corrupted, the survival of the country is at stake. What happens to the nation, and what happens to the children, when these child soldiers grow up?

The most notable example of the ideological impact on children used in war was in Germany during World War II. Adolf Hitler's philosophy was that "he alone, who gains the youth, gains the future", and he knew his plans for Germany could not succeed immediately. He thought that if the youth of Germany could be indoctrinated to support his ideology of a superior human race, he would never face a challenge to his system. Several organizations were formed to educate children under the age of 18 of the Nazi ideology. These camps were designed to remove children from the influence of their parents and attach them to the Nazi regime. Nearing the end of the second world war when the German army began deteriorating, boys as young as 14 and 15 were taken from Hitler's Nazi Youth groups to fight for Germany. These camps continued to have an impact on the perceptions of those who had been involved even decades after the war had ended and denazification had taken place.

The real judgment and foundation for morality is the Bible. Human morality is volatile and varying. The biblical stance on the innocence and vulnerability of children is very clear. Proverbs 22:6 states, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (NKJV). This goes to show that what a child is taught in its developing years is very important, as this goes on to affect their thoughts and behaviors later on. Along the same lines, Matthew 18: 6 warns, "But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." Children are to be treasured and protected, provided for, and taken care of. Psalms 127:3 states, "Children are a gift of the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward." Aristotle's philosophy was there are things that are always universally morally wrong, and the exploitation of children is one of those things. We ignore these truths at our peril, and the impact may be irreversible.

---

<sup>10</sup> Alessandra, Federica. "The Psychological Consequences of Becoming a Child Soldiers: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Major Depression, and Other Forms of Impairment," 2014.  
[https://carrcenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/cchr/files/dalessandra\\_pshychol\\_cons\\_of\\_childsoldiers.pdf](https://carrcenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/cchr/files/dalessandra_pshychol_cons_of_childsoldiers.pdf).

## Bibliography

- Alessandra, Federica. "The Psychological Consequences of Becoming a Child Soldiers: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Major Depression, and Other Forms of Impairment," 2014. [https://carrcenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/cchr/files/dalessandra\\_pshychol\\_cons\\_of\\_childsoldiers.pdf](https://carrcenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/cchr/files/dalessandra_pshychol_cons_of_childsoldiers.pdf).
- Benadum, Caleb. "The Democratic Republic of the Congo - Child Soldiers - End Slavery Now." [endslaverynow.org](https://www.endslaverynow.org/blog/articles/the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-child-soldiers), April 2015. <https://www.endslaverynow.org/blog/articles/the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-child-soldiers>.
- blpglobalanalyst. "Child Soldiers in Colombia: The Latest Threat to Colombian Peace." CTG, April 26, 2021. <https://www.counterterrorismgroup.com/post/child-soldiers-in-colombia-the-latest-threat-to-colombian-peace>.
- The Borgen Project. "Child Soldiers in Syria | the Borgen Project," July 23, 2018. <https://borgenproject.org/child-soldiers-in-syria/>.
- COHA. "From Cradle to Conflict: Child Soldiers' Growing Role in Latin America's Drug Wars," April 24, 2012. <https://www.coha.org/from-cradle-to-conflict-latin-americas-child-soldiers-new-direction-to-drug-wars>.
- Kaplan, Eben. "Child Soldiers around the World." Council on Foreign Relations, 2000. <https://www.cfr.org/background/child-soldiers-around-world>.
- Meshelemiah, Jacquelyn C.A. "Chapter 8: Child Soldiers." Pressbooks.pub. Pressbooks, 2016. <https://ohiostate.pressbooks.pub/humantrafficking/chapter/chapter-8-child-soldiers/>.
- Plattner, Denise. "Protection of Children in International Humanitarian Law - ICRC." International Review of the Red Cross, June 30, 1984. <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/article/other/57jmat.htm>.
- Refworld. "Refworld | Child Soldiers Global Report 2001 - Democratic Republic of the Congo." Child Soldiers International, 2001. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/498806012d.html>.
- Satyendra, Nadesan. "Human Rights - Child Soldiers & the Law." [tamilnation.org](https://tamilnation.org/humanrights/child/index.htm), November 2004. <https://tamilnation.org/humanrights/child/index.htm>.
- UNICEF. "Children Recruited by Armed Forces." UNICEF, September 3, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>.
- . "Convention on the Rights of the Child." Unicef, 1989. <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>.