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**Voluntary Child Soldiering:
A Case-Study of the Anti-Apartheid Struggle**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnic Relations and Sociology

University of Warwick, Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations and
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Voor oma en opa Vain

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Declaration

I, Hanne Beirens, certify that this PhD thesis is my own original work and that it has not been used for another degree. References to other people's work have been properly acknowledged.

Part of my fieldwork in South Africa was conducted within the framework of the ILO *Voices of Young Soldiers Project*, which is supervised by Irma Specht (ILO) and Rachel Brett (QUNO).

Abstract

In this thesis, I present a theoretical framework in which children's voluntary participation in armed conflict becomes a reasonable act within their social environment. I argue that in order to gain a more analytical understanding of why children volunteer, social scientists require an in-depth knowledge of the political, social and economic conditions in which they join up and of the meanings that children attach to those situations and their reactions. Prior quantitative data on the social distribution of child volunteering have often been used to proclaim that 'the most vulnerable of the vulnerable' are recruited. On the basis of a discourse analysis of UNHCR's policies and activities in relation to under-age recruitment, I illustrate my claim that dominant Euro-American conceptualisations of childhood have primarily shaped research and humanitarian aid regarding child soldiering and resulted in the portrayal of child soldiers as innocent victims who are corrupted by adult wars.

I subsequently go on to show how a new paradigm for the study of childhood can enhance contemporary knowledge on the social processes and factors that lead children to consider and eventually join a military group or opt for an alternative mode of action to cope with their dire situation. In my qualitative case-study of child soldiering in the anti-apartheid struggle, I found that in joining a political organisation and subsequently its military wing, young South Africans sought to assert their (political) agency within the structural and cultural features that shaped their social environment. Within the context of changing peer and intergenerational relationships, these children carved out more powerful identities for them to address the social injustices that had affected their personal and collective lives.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ANC = African National Congress
APLA = Azanian People's Liberation Army
ARC = Actions for the Rights of the Child
CCR = Centre for Conflict Resolution
COSAS = Congress of South African Students
CRC = United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
DRC = Democratic Republic of Congo
DRR = Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration programmes
EPAU = Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit
EPLF = Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ESRC = Economic and Social Research Council
ICRC = International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP = Internally Displaced Person
IGO = Intergovernmental organisation
ILO = International Labour Organisation
IOM/FOM = UNHCR Inter-Office and Field-Office Memorandum
LRA = Lord's Resistance Army
LTTE = Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MK = Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation)
MKMVA = MK Military Veterans Association
NGO = Nongovernmental organisation
OSRSG-CAC = Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict
PAC = Pan African Congress
PTSD = Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RUF = Revolutionary United Front
SADF = South African Defence Force
SANDF = South African National Defence Force
SCF = Save the Children Fund
SDU = Self-Defence Unit
SPLA = Sudanese People's Liberation Army

SRC = Students Representative Council

TRC = Truth and Reconciliation Commission

UAMs = Unaccompanied minors

UCT = University of Cape Town

UDF = United Democratic Front

UN = United Nations

UNHCR = United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNICEF = United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UPA = Uganda People's Army

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Children as Weeds

In their book *Theorizing Childhood* James, Prout and Jenks (1998) refer to the layperson's definition of a weed in order to discuss the common-sense understanding of the location of children. As a weed is commonly defined as 'any plant growing in the wrong place', they claim that 'children are peculiarly noticeable in relation to their setting' (James et al. 1998:37). Children are expected to be located within their families, homes, nurseries or schools, and as weeds children stand out when they are discovered in adult territory. This claim emphasises the importance of researching where children *are* in addition to where children *should* be.

Many of today's battlefields have become overgrown with weeds as children under the age of eighteen are increasingly recruited and used in hostilities. The participation of children in armed conflict was brought to the attention of the world as television cameras filmed children in Northern Ireland and in Palestine throwing stones, young soldiers in Afghanistan and Uganda, and the youth of Iraq pledging their faith to, and joining the army of, Saddam Hussein (Yates and Youniss 1999:3). As the international community watched these youths, voices of concern about the consequences of children's exposure to violence arose.

Calls for the protection of future generations resulted in an international campaign, proclaiming that child soldiering *should* be stopped.

In this chapter I define my research question and argue the importance of studying how and why child soldiers *are* recruited. I hereby unfold my research plan and the organisation of the thesis.

1.2 The Research Question

What is known about the children who play a part in the game of war? Though the deployment of children in armed conflict has been recorded in early modern history, the term ‘child soldier’ is relatively new (Tangelder 1999:1). Some might have heard or read about children taking part in armed conflicts, but these children remained largely ‘invisible’ in the eyes of the world until the late eighties (De Temmerman 2002; Yates and Youniss 1999). The war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988), in which more than a hundred thousand children were sent onto the battlefield as minesweepers, would put the spotlight on the recruitment and use of children in warfare (Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad 2002:10). These child martyrs were readily adopted in the western propaganda against Iran and soon filled television screens across the world.

With regard to international law, the 1977 Additional Protocol I and II to the Geneva Conventions are the first to regulate the military recruitment and deployment of children in armed conflict. In line with these Protocols, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) prohibits the recruitment and use

of anyone less than fifteen years of age by government armed groups, informal armed groups or armed opposition groups¹. The 1990s, however, have witnessed international law moving towards the position that the age limit for conscription and voluntary recruitment should be raised to eighteen and that this restriction should equally apply to children performing auxiliary tasks to armed groups or forces (Becker 2000; Brett 1997). At the turn of the millennium, the global campaign to stop the use of child soldiers culminated in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopting the *Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour* and in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopting the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict*².

ILO Convention No.182 obliges its signatories to take measures towards the prohibition and immediate elimination of the worst forms of child labour and is the first in its kind to make reference to the recruitment of child soldiers. Article 3a stipulates that:

‘all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict’

are to be considered as worst forms of child labour. The Optional Protocol bans the compulsory recruitment of children under the age of eighteen in armed conflicts and raises the age of voluntary participation from fifteen to eighteen. However, it allows an exception for:

¹ For more information, see Dutli (1990).

² Henceforward the Optional Protocol.

‘voluntary recruitment by governments between 16 and 18 years with stringent safeguards regarding proof of age, parental or other legal consent, the truly voluntary nature of the commitment and understanding of the duties involved in the military service’.

(UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2001a)

In contrast to the final text of the Optional Protocol adopted in 2000, the ILO Convention extends its protection to those children indirectly participating in hostilities as spies, cooks and messengers (Becker 2000:20; De Meyer 2001:5). Throughout the thesis I employ the term ‘child soldier’ to refer to anyone under the age of eighteen who is part of a regular or irregular armed group in any capacity other than purely as a family member.

The number of child soldiers has dramatically increased in recent times (Brett and McCallin 1996:24; Garbarino et al. 1991:23; UNICEF 1996:5). A glimpse at the regional maps of child soldiering shows the widespread character of this military practice. Current estimates of the global number of child soldiers range from 250,000 (Garbarino et al. 1991:23; Wessels 1997:34) to 300,000 (Amnesty International 1999; De Meyer 2001), with the country of Myanmar topping the list with 50,000 child recruits (De Standaard 2001). In addition, ‘studies of youth involvement in Northern Ireland, South Africa, Mozambique, and China indicate prevalence rates of youth involvement between 9 and 22%’ (Barber 1998:10). While the dominant image of child soldiers is that of ‘boys with guns’ (Honwana 2002; UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2001a), recent research has proved that military groups recruit girls as well (Keairns 2002:9) and use them as wives or sex slaves (De Temmerman 2000; Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad 2002; UN 1996:12; Vermeire 2002).

The roles of children in armed combat range from a direct form – soldiering – to more indirect ones such as cooks, porters, bodyguards, spies, messengers and informants (Lutheran World Federation 1995:6; UN 1996:12; Wessels 1997:33). The advances in modern technology, which resulted in the proliferation of weapons that are light, cheap, and easy to be carried and operated by small children, such as the AK-47 and the M-16, have facilitated this development (Brett and McCallin 1996:24; Garbarino et al. 1991:14; Wessels 1997:33). As Blume (1999:35) claims in the following statement, the military recruitment, training and deployment of children have entered a new stage due to the technological evolution in warfare.

‘Children have been used in war since time immemorial, but as drummers, porters, cooks, messengers, spies, and sex objects. But only recently have weapons become small enough to make any little David a Goliath-killer. When swords were the main weapons available, a ten year old was no match for a 20 year old seasoned soldier. Today a ten year old can fire 600 rounds per minute into his target.’

In addition, military commanders have been reported praising and preferring children’s performance on the battlefield, because of the high level of obedience, loyalty and ‘fierceness’ that they display (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn 1994:27). The harsh military training and the consumption of drugs that child soldiers are subjected to, promote this kind of behaviour (Wessels 1999:111). Several youngsters have reported the horrible orders they had to obey as a form of initiation and training, such killing neighbours or family members (Kourouma 2000; Thompson 1999:193; UNICEF 1996:6). For the military group, this act of violence provides a guarantee of the child’s attachment as s/he no longer has a

home to run to and risks the revenge of the community. These observations have led to an international outcry against the 'large numbers of young teenagers and even small children ... [who] have been put into organised, active, guerrilla conflict, often forced to commit atrocities' (Lutheran World Federation 1995:6-7).

But a particular aspect of child soldiering informs this thesis: *why do children become involved in armed combat?* My PhD departs from the dominant approach to child soldiering, which is to focus on the short- and long-term consequences for child soldiers and the post-conflict societies in which they live. While humanitarian agencies press for demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration (DRR) programmes for child soldiers to become a standard element of peace agreements (see for example Verhey 2001), my research aims to contribute to the relatively small number of studies that pursue the question of why children join armed forces or groups *in the first place*. An inquiry into children's motivations for recruitment is not only relevant to the design of prevention strategies, but also to that of DRR programmes:

'There are few systematic data on the post-conflict reintegration needs from the point of view of the former young combatants and even less data which identify these needs in relation to the reasons why they join armed forces or groups in the first place'.

(Brett and Specht 2001)

The literature on child soldiers distinguishes between compulsory, forced, coercive and voluntary recruitment. Compulsory recruitment consists of the conscription of persons into the military forces by the government. Although the

majority of today's governments have set the legal minimum age for conscription at eighteen, it is often difficult for the captured persons to prove their age³ or to protest against their forced recruitment (Brett and McCallin 1996). Both governmental and armed opposition groups sometimes lapse into forced recruitment when faced with a shortage of recruits (UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2001a:8). In addition to abduction, press-ganging is a popular practice, which predominantly targets the lower classes or the 'potentially rebellious' sections of the society (Garbarino et al. 1991:24). The third type, 'coercive or abusive recruitment', refers to those situations in which the child joins 'voluntarily', but only after a serious threat against him/her or his/her family has been issued. Finally, researchers and practitioners recognise voluntary recruitment which, according to Bennett (1998a:32) and Mendelsohn and Straker (1998:403), applies to the majority of child soldiers.

1.3 Research Plan

In Chapter Two, I show how voluntary recruitment is often poorly understood by a theoretical framework that either questions children's ability to consent to military recruitment or constructs their choices as overwhelmingly determined or constrained by external forces. Children's decision to join an armed group has often been portrayed as essentially a non-choice, a decision that is forced upon children by structural and cultural factors that lay beyond their level of comprehension and sphere of influence. The difficulties of guaranteeing informed consent for persons under the age of eighteen furnish further objections

³ They might not possess a birth certificate to prove their age.

to the military induction and deployment of child volunteers by legal experts⁴ (Amnesty International 2000:9).

Also in Chapter Two, I propose that (the violation of) particular ideas about the abilities and capacities of children, about the nature of childhood and about the requirements for children's normal and healthy development lie at the basis of the recent international call for the protection of the 'future generations'. I seek to develop an explanation of the exponential increase of attention given to the phenomenon of child soldiers and its definition in problematic terms by drawing upon the typology of presociological, transitional and sociological models of the child developed by James et al (1998). In Chapter Two, I give a brief historical overview of the diverse conceptions of childhood that were prominent in western societies in different eras, such as the 'innocent', the 'evil' and the 'naturally developing' child and describe some of the social processes that brought about their dominant position across the globe.

I subsequently turn to the new sociology of childhood, which undermines the dichotomy of 'the innocent versus evil child' and provides a critique of developmental psychology. The new childhood studies argue that childhood and child development are neither natural nor universal, but are instead strongly embedded in the social context. Furthermore, this new paradigm for the study of childhood proclaims that children, as other human beings, have agency; they are conscious and purposeful beings who make decisions and undertake action to

⁴ These legal concerns also arise in relation to the criminal prosecution of child soldiers who committed atrocities and violated international criminal law.

pursue their objectives within the social world. This overview of theories of childhood and child development constitutes the basis for my discussion of the contemporary interest in the military recruitment and use of under-eighteens.

Research on child soldiering has primarily consisted of documenting the number of children that participate indirectly or directly in a particular conflict, the military training and initiation rites they are exposed to, and the kinds of activities they are ordered to do. These descriptive studies have served to raise awareness about the cruel and harsh living conditions and experiences of child soldiers, with which children, because of their biological and intellectual immaturity, are not able to cope. By trampling on what developmental psychology and traditional socialisation theories define as the preconditions for the development of a normal and healthy human being, the military training and deployment of children is perceived as compromising their individual future and that of their societies. Furthermore, the immaturity of children has been put forward to downplay the importance of reports that the majority of child soldiers across the world volunteer for armed conflict. Instead, the limitations to children's cognitive skills and access to information have been identified as preventing children from conceiving and making a rational evaluation of the options available to them, from pursuing their decision and from grasping the activities they are about to engage in. These conceptualisations of the child have rendered the suggestion of children volunteering for armed combat a contradiction in terms.

I argue that, by suspending theoretical assumptions that have governed the study of children and childhood until recently, social scientists could gain a more nuanced sense of the complex reasons behind children's participation. A critical overview of contemporary accounts of child soldiering allows me to identify not only a wide range of reasons for children's decision to join a military group, but also the social processes through which soldiering sometimes becomes a – potential, desirable or socially sanctioned – option for children. The study of children's voluntary decision to join armed combat not only requires an understanding of the structural conditions in which these children grow up and of the processes in which the alternation of those social, economic or political conditions come to be seen by them as salient, but also of how children come to perceive it as their responsibility to make that change.

In the next chapters, I discuss the two fieldwork trips that I undertook to gather support for and refine the theoretical claims developed in Chapter Two. In Chapter Three, I outline the methodological approaches that I adopted, provide a rationale for the choice of the research settings and shed light on the practical and ethical challenges that I encountered.

In Chapter Three, I address the methodological question of how to constitute knowledge on children's motivations for taking up arms. A brief historical overview of the research methods that have been employed to study child soldiering shows that, while quantitative studies increasingly collect information on the social context in which children come to partake in armed combat, only a minority of qualitative studies have produced data on children's subjective

appraisal of their context and the meanings they bestow on their actions. In Chapter Three, I argue that the integration of the latter in the former results in a more complex and analytical understanding of how and why children join military groups.

This discussion informs the methodological approach I adopted in my case-study of children's military participation in the anti-apartheid struggle of the 1980s and 1990s. With regard to the choice of the research setting, I refer to what Ramphela and Wilson (1988:40) wrote about South Africa:

‘There are few countries in the world, at any time in history, where children have found themselves so much in the front line of a determined and violent struggle for change or where so much historical weight has been placed on such young soldiers’.

During my two-month fieldwork period (2001) in Cape Town, I conducted multiple, in-depth interviews and focus groups with former child soldiers. These adults voluntarily joined the armed wings of the anti-apartheid movements between the age of eleven and eighteen. In order to corroborate the rich output of the latter, I consulted secondary resources and arranged meetings with academics who have specialist knowledge of the topic. In addition, I established contacts and conducted formal or informal interviews with the ‘gatekeepers’ of former child soldiers, such as former military commanders and representatives of NGOs working with ex-combatants.

The second part of my fieldwork, which consisted of an internship at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Geneva from November 2000 till March 2001, serves as an illustration of my argument

that contemporary western conceptualisations of childhood primarily inform research and humanitarian aid in relation to child soldiering. In Chapter Three, I describe how my assignments at two UNHCR departments gave me access to internal documents reporting on its policies and activities in relation to child soldiering. In addition, my position at UNHCR headquarters facilitated the organisation of interviews with staff members who, while not formally identified as such, had worked or observed the use and recruitment of children in hostilities. Moreover, the internship could in fact be considered as a form of participant observation. During the first quarter of 2004, I updated and expanded the data I collected during my internship by conducting additional telephone interviews with UNHCR staff members and external consultants.

These sources of information constituted the basis for my discourse analysis of UNHCR's understandings of child soldiering as represented in official documents and policy guidelines, in annual reports and in the accounts of UNHCR staff and which I present in Chapter Four. There, I illustrate that the detrimental effects of soldiering on the physical, psychological and moral development of children are at the centre of UNHCR's discourse on child soldiering. Furthermore, while field officers sometimes bring to Geneva a more complex and in-depth understanding of the social context in which children come to volunteer, I show that the dominant approach of UNHCR to under-age recruitment still fits largely within the theoretical framework of the 'naturally developing' child, of the child as a vulnerable and dependent being who becomes the victim of adult actions. I give examples of how the image of the innocent and ignorant child results in the portrayal of child soldiers as corrupted and

manipulated by the conflicting parties and how the idea of the universal or naturally developing child robs UNHCR policy-makers and programme-developers of one of the keys of grasping how and why children come to join: the social context.

In Chapters Five and Six, I discuss the results of my research in South Africa. I hereby demonstrate that by integrating the principles of the new paradigm for the study of childhood, social scientists can not only enhance theoretical analyses of child recruitment, but also refine existing theories of childhood. For example, on the basis of my case-study of why and how children joined the MK and the APLA, I show that children have the capacity to develop and pursue political views and goals in relation to their social context – they have political agency. In addition, my finding that peers played an essential role in the socialisation and recruitment of children into political and military activities confirms that children are not only able to approach their social environment and relationships as resources for coping with their situation, but also to conceive of and actively defend social and political projects (see for example Boyden 2003; Mann and Ledward 2000).

At a broader level, I expand the borders of child behaviour and potential and, in doing so, challenge the denunciation of the child volunteers as ‘un-child’ or ‘non-child’ (Gittens 1998). These and other conclusions are drawn in Chapter Seven, where I present a summary of my thesis and advance some policy implications for further research and humanitarian aid in relation to child soldiering.

Chapter 2: Child Soldiering – A Contradiction in Terms?

2.1 Introduction

Over the last decade, the issue of child soldiers has risen on the agenda of the international community. The ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour and the Optional Protocol were crucial steps towards the development of an international legal climate that would prohibit the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers undated-a, online article). According to Harvey (2000), the Optional Protocol voices the international community's concern with children's exposure to violence and is to be considered as a leap forward in the protection of 'future generations'. Further indicators of the exponential increase in political and social attention are the high frequency of conferences and workshops on the topic and the boom in research projects and aid programmes focusing on children in war zones represent. In particular, psychosocial or trauma recovery programmes for children are mushrooming in all conflict-ridden areas. Given the recent nature of the attention to child soldiers could one conclude that children's involvement in armed conflict constitutes a new phenomenon?

Social scientists and historians in general agree on the ageless character of child soldiering, in that it is a common phenomenon throughout history (Schmitz 2002:10; Tangelder 1999:1). Historians do not have to go as far back in time as

the Children's Crusade (The Economist 2000) or the child squires in the Middle Ages (Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad 2002:10). 'Adolescents defended Berlin against the Russians in 1945, ships' boys were long a feature of the British navy, and drummer boys thronged in the American civil war' (The Economist 2000:47). In his article *Quand les enfants font la guerre* (When children make war), Audoin-Rouzeau (1993) describes how French boys, as young as thirteen years of age, left their homes to join the men at the front during the First World War. If the use and recruitment of children under the age of eighteen is a time-honoured custom, how can one explain its current prominence on the agenda of politicians and civil society?

Those in favour of a total ban on the use and recruitment of children in armed conflicts have identified the dramatic increase in the global scale of child soldiering, the worrisome shifts in the role of children in armed conflicts together with a growing awareness of their plight brought about by news coverage and by international campaigns as the grounds for the high level of attention and concern directed to the issue of child soldiers (Amnesty International 1999:1; Becker 2003:1; Brett and McCallin 1996:24; Garbarino et al. 1991:23; Horemans and Vervliet 2002:6; UNICEF 1996:5; Willemot 2002). But how comprehensive is this explanation of the problematic characterisation of child soldiering? The above framework builds on the assumption that the participation of children in armed conflicts represents a 'reality out there', waiting to be exposed by the light of the international community. Moreover, the reaction that this 'objective reality' triggers is assumed to be 'normal', 'natural', because 'children have no place in war' (Van der Wildt 2002).

Such a framework takes no account of the heroic depictions of child combatants from Joan of Arc to World War I. Besides pointing to the evidence of a historical, and often European, tradition of children's engagement in armed conflict, Audoin-Rouzeau's (1993) article is revelatory among accounts of child soldiers in two other respects. Firstly, the depictions of children's engagement are invested with an aura of *heroism*. As children joined the armed forces in defiance of their parents and without the inspiration of youth organisations, these youngsters were perceived as acting in accordance with their own free and 'noble' mind (Audoin-Rouzeau 1993:6-7). This stands in stark contrast to current portrayals of child soldiers as passive objects, victims of adult wars (Boyden 1997:91). The French minors were elided from the tragic accounts of the soldiers who died or were wounded (Audoin-Rouzeau 1993:12). This sheds light on the second observation, namely that children's involvement in World War I was neither silenced nor downplayed, but became part of official propaganda. Stories of child heroism, which were authentic, embroidered or invented, circulated amongst young and old. For in the eyes of those French citizens who were living under German occupation, the patriotic behaviour of its younger – read: next – generation signalled the eventual victory and liberation of their nation (Audoin-Rouzeau 1993:11).

In contrast, children fighting in today's wars are often hidden from the eyes of the international community by their military commanders (Brett and McCallin 1996:23-4). Honwana (2002) describes the denial by government officials and leaders of rebel groups, whom the Office of the Special Representative of the UN

Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict (OSRSG-CAC) met in order to address the issue of child recruitment and to plead for the immediate release of child fighters (see also Becker 2003). But why do local newspapers simultaneously praise children's contributions to major battles?⁵ If these contrasting observations suggest different opinions regarding the use of children in armed combat, then how did a particular perspective come to dominate the academic and humanitarian approaches to child soldiering?

In this thesis, I argue that one cannot fully account for the exponential increase of attention to child soldiers and its problematic characterisation without considering the dominant conceptualisations of childhood and children that have constituted the framework for research and humanitarian aid. In order to develop this argument, this chapter presents a mosaic of 'childhood' conceptions, which, although having emerged in different historical and social contexts, continue to exist in present-day text and imagery and inform everyday actions and practices in relation to children. In the next part of this chapter, I rely on this theoretical overview to analyse the contemporary interest in and theoretical approaches to the issue of child soldiering. I show that presociological and transitional models of the child (James et al. 1998) are often used to render the participation of under-eighteens in hostilities a meaningless and barbarous act (see for example *Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad* 2002:3). I subsequently develop the argument

⁵ During a personal communication with a UNHCR colleague in Geneva, I was presented with information regarding the recruitment campaigns of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka. This included articles published in local newspapers, in which the LTTE described their victories and appealed to the Tamil population to join their struggle. These articles testified to an aggressive recruitment campaign, which broke previous agreements with UNHCR personnel and other UN organisations to stop the recruitment and use of child soldiers (Becker 2003:2).

that analyses of child soldiering that hinge upon the principles of the new paradigm for the study of childhood lead researchers and practitioners to more in-depth and complex understandings of children's voluntary engagement in armed combat.

2.2 The Birth of a Concept(ion) of Childhood in Western Societies

It is conceivable that all cultures, at many points in history, used a word or symbol to denote the biological immaturity of human beings. However, the concept of 'children' as signifying a different social group and that of 'childhood' as referring to a specific and delineated period of life have only recently emerged (Gittens 1998:22). The sociology of childhood, which emerged as a distinct sub-discipline in the 1980s and 1990s, deserves the credit for the contemporary insights into the social construction of childhood (James and Prout 1997:ix). As a central tenet of the new paradigm for the study of childhood, the social construction of childhood was developed as a result of historical research into the birth of our western contemporary notion of 'childhood' and into the process of universalising it.

Ariès was one of the first social scientists who considered the construction of the concept of 'childhood' (Gittens 1998:26). On the basis of a historical study of European art and literature in the Middle Ages, he argued that there was no idea or *sentiment* of childhood in the medieval world (Cunningham 1991:1). In addition to the observation that children rarely figured in art and literature, the

deformation of children's bodies, which *were* painted, gave the most important clues to the perception of children in medieval times. Their physical characteristics, such as musculature, were merely reduced to a smaller version of the adult ones (Archard 1993:16; Jenks 1982).

From the thirteenth century onwards, the painting of infant Jesus became more naturalistic and sentimental and other holy childhoods were being depicted. However, it was not until the sixteenth and seventeenth century that lay iconography would take up these themes (Cunningham 1995:31; Shahar 1992:95). Painters now used other symbols than body size to depict children, such as special clothing. Ariès' archaeology of images also revealed the emergence of new themes, in which children were portrayed in a world of toys and play or in the nursing hands of their mothers. Ariès concluded that, while childhood had been undervalued in the Middle Ages, the higher classes had now started to create a separate world – 'childhood' – in which children were encouraged to express their difference, their non-adult characteristics, and where at the same time education was appointed the task of preparing them for 'adulthood' (Cunningham 1995:32).

The pioneering study of Ariès has been criticised on a number of grounds. Historians have argued that Ariès was not only unaware of or ignored other medieval sources showing a naturalistic portrayal of childhood, but also threw caution to the winds when assuming that childhood images depicted in theological art would give insight into lay conceptions of childhood (Archard 1993; Cunningham 1991, 1995; Shahar 1992). In particular, Shahar (1992) has

firmly established the argument that the 'medieval world recognised *infantia*, the first seven years of life, as a separate stage, and accorded it much greater importance than Ariès implied' (Cunningham 1995:34). Shahar (1992:112-5) found a general acknowledgement that children up to the age of seven should be brought up by their mothers and be treated with love and tenderness. In addition to providing evidence of affectionate adult-child interactions, Shahar (1992:106, 149-55) pointed towards the grief that struck parents and communities when young children died. She also referred to a 'body of theory and practice in relation to pregnancy, childbirth, infant feeding, weaning, and early childrearing' that existed in the Middle Ages (Cunningham 1995:33).

While Shahar (1992:1) put forward the continuity in adult-child relations and childrearing and hereby emphasised the biological elements of child development, she concurred with Ariès that 'there was no feeling, as there was to be in later centuries, that the world of childhood should be kept separate from that of adults'(Cunningham 1995:37). Instead, children were socialised into communal life from an early age as they attended church, participated in processions, watched theatrical performances and worked alongside adults on the fields (Shahar 1992:112). Consequently, Ariès' work has stimulated researchers to explore 'the ways in which the immaturity of children is conceived and articulated in particular societies into culturally specific sets of ideas and philosophies, attitudes and practices which combine to define the "nature of childhood"' (James and Prout 1997:1).

In the next section, I discuss in greater detail the conceptualisations of childhood that the élite in western countries developed between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century and which indicated an increasing level of differentiation between childhood and adulthood and a 'heightened sense of the importance of childhood' (Cunningham 1995:41). I hereby pave the way for the subsequent section, in which I examine how and why these conceptualisations were gradually theorised to be equally applicable to 'the children of the poor'.

2.3 Tracing the Origins of the Mosaic of Contemporary Conceptions of Childhood

2.3.1 The Development of a Middle-Class Ideology of Childhood

Proponents of fifteenth and sixteenth-century humanism put forward the idea that children held the key to the future of the state (Cunningham 1995:42). Erasmus claimed that, rather than indulging or pampering the child, parents should provide children with a proper education from an early age. A child ought 'to imbibe, as it were, with the milk that he suckles, the nectar of education' if he or she is not to become an 'unproductive brute' (Erasmus 1985 cited in Cunningham 1995:43). Although the capacity and desire for learning were thought to be inherent in the child, these seeds needed nurturing for optimal growth.

Within the wake of humanism and its emphasis on the early education of children, debates flourished about the most appropriate methods and subjects for

education. Whereas Erasmus had placed the responsibility for the child's education in the hands of the father and proposed a curriculum based upon the classics, Protestantism and Catholicism shifted the emphasis towards religious education. In particular, the Protestant Reformation presented the upbringing of a 'pious, disciplined, obedient and teachable child' as requiring the use of the catechism, conduct books, school ordinances and, if necessary, corporal punishment (Cunningham 1995:48-9). This approach to childrearing stemmed from a belief in St-Augustine of Hippo's idea of Original Sin which portrayed 'children as born weak and innately prone to sin and corruption' (Gittens 1998:23). In their quest for the realisation of the 'good Christian society', Protestantism and the Evangelic Revival warned parents of the vices and evil predisposition of their children, which had to be uprooted or opposed from the very beginning and with determination (Hendrick 1997:38; Archard 1993:37; James et al. 1998:11).

Whereas concern for the future of the church and state and the salvation of the child's soul had been at the heart of the Protestant and Catholic emphasis on religious education, in the eighteenth century the idea that childhood was to be valued as a stage of life *in its own right* caught the imagination of philosophers and writers. According to Cunningham (1995:62), the long-term secularisation of attitudes towards children and childhood played an important part in this trend. As the belief in original sin declined, children's development and growth was increasingly understood as driven by forces of nature. Similarly, the 'art of child-rearing became one of hearkening to nature, giving free rein to growth, rather than bending twigs to a desired shape' (Cunningham 1995:62).

Rather than a corrupt and evil being, Locke described the child as a *tabula rasa*. He assigned education the immense task of writing on this blank slate and of bringing forth an adult who would 'submit to his own Reason' (Locke 1693 cited in Cunningham 1995:63). Whereas Locke's writings highlighted the individuality of each child due to its unique temperament and preferences, Rousseau made the next step towards the child-oriented society by shifting the interest of the child as the adult-in-becoming to the child as a child (Cunningham 1995:65). Rousseau (1762 cited in Cunningham 1995:65) claimed that the 'wisest writers devote themselves to what a man ought to know, without asking what a child is capable of learning'.

Romanticism presented the child as essentially good only to be corrupted by society. 'Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man' (Rousseau 1991:37). Coming into the world as innocent creatures, children were gifted with a predisposition towards the good and the divine, with an innate feeling of justice, with an honest belief in humanity (Archard 1993:38; James et al. 1998:13). Holding the promise of a beautiful future, Rousseau encouraged parents to empower children and to shield them from corruption (Gittens 1998:151). For Rousseau claimed that children had the right to be a child and to achieve, or indulge in, happiness. This was, according to Cunningham (1995:66), 'the first expression of the view that childhood may be the best time of life, something to be looked back to with nostalgia'.

Next, I describe how this move towards the child-centred society, which had been largely confined to the élite (Zelizer 1985:5), was gradually broadened to incorporate the whole society. Rather than giving an account of, what was in an essence, a complex and non-linear process (Cunningham 1991:62,228), I sketch some of the broad lines of change and focus on the conceptions of childhood that mobilised support or opposition for particular childrearing practices, charitable initiatives and government interventions in relation to ‘the children of the poor’.

2.3.2 Movement to Abolish Child Labour: Setting the Train of Universalisation in Motion

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the first protests against child labour surfaced in Britain. At the outset, reformers of child labour not only encountered opposition from the working classes, for whom children’s wages made a vital contribution to the household incomes (Zelizer 1985:68-9), but also from the middle classes (Cunningham 1991:165). The latter were divided between those who perceived child labour as contrary to the ‘true’ nature of childhood and those who considered it a necessary and maybe desirable condition (Zelizer 1985:57). Anxious to preserve one of the cheapest forms of labour, some industrialists legitimised child labour according to the ‘doctrine of the utility of poverty’, which ‘taught there must always be a large mass of people driven to work by want, and that habits of work must be learned at an early age’ (Cunningham 1991:22). While these acted in pursuit of economic interests, the energy and zeal that others showed in securing places for poor children in industries or work-schools derived from an understanding that work experience

was not only an essential preparation for later life, but also provided children with a structure to their daily lives (Zelizer 1985:67).

In addition to the problem of the abandonment of children and infanticide, 'the children of the poor' were identified as constituting a sizeable proportion of criminal gangs and of the 'beggars and vagrants whom the authorities from the sixteenth century onwards were determined to control' (Cunningham 1995:114). Although parents were deemed the most natural source of order for children, reformers were concerned about the ever swelling number of children who were not brought up in family situations and the short- or long-term threats that these might pose to the social order (Cunningham 1991:19,21; Boyden 1997:193,196; Glauser 1997:153). As such, the children of the street were sometimes portrayed as savages, because they 'seemed to have forms of group behaviour which gave them both solidarity and cut them off from the norms of civilisation' (Cunningham 1991:5). Philanthropists and policy-makers proposed that school or work would have to take over parents' responsibility in securing the physical survival of the child, but, more importantly, in providing him/her with the appropriate skills and moral norms to take up his/her later position in life (Cunningham 1991:20,47; Zelizer 1985:10).

The emphasis and celebration of the differences between childhoods of the higher and lower classes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries seem a long way from the contemporary idea that all children are entitled to 'a proper childhood' (Cunningham 1991:1). So why did the western upper classes eventually tear down this barrier between their offspring and those of the lower

classes? Why did they proclaim lower class children to have no place in jobs such as sweeping chimneys or selling matches on the street? A first motive centred on the threats that child labour posed to the physical and moral development of children (Hendrick 1997:40; Cunningham 1991:185-7; Zelizer 1985:89).

‘Schooling could free children from both these forms of slavery [child labour]; physically they would be relieved from the long hours of often dangerous work; morally they would be made aware of the stories and values of Christianity – and perhaps about those of political economy. Equipped with physical strength and moral values, they could be trained to become in adulthood independent wage-earners and domesticated wives and mothers.’
(Cunningham 1991:229)

This quote suggests that, in addition to empathy with the suffering of child labourers, anxiety about the reproduction of society constituted a second motive for joining forces with the child labour reformers or abolitionists. Whereas the provision of work and apprenticeships had once represented the dominant solution for the problem of ‘the children of the poor’, the concern about creating a generation of weak and unproductive men and women resulted in a growing support for schooling (Cunningham 1991:65,133). Furthermore, under the thrust of technical change, the British economy became increasingly reliant on highly skilled and differentiated labour (Boyden 1997:192). These national interests sparked off state interventions through legislation (Hendrick 1997:50). Child welfare legislation, which among other things made education compulsory, stimulated the working classes to set up pressure groups and to call for the improvement of the quality of the schooling for their offspring, which was considerably worse than that for the élite (Gittens 1998:69; Zelizer 1985:6).

Finally, the British abolitionists of the eighteenth century were alarmed by

‘the scale and intensity of the industrialisation process itself, and they regarded the plight of the factory child – since factories were the most vivid representation of this process – as symbolic of profound and often little-understood changes in British society, changes that appeared to threaten what was held to be a *natural* order.’

(Hendrick 1997:40, original emphasis)

As such, those in favour of the abolition of child labour used the concept of childhood as a ‘metaphor for social evolution’ (Prout and James 1997:11). Lamenting the fact that the metaphors of hope and innocence could not be located in childhood, the campaigners fought to recover the ‘true’ state of childhood. The belief that child labour was ‘an offence to humanity, incompatible with the traditions of the nation, and likely [...] to bring down upon it the wrath of God’ inspired their involvement in the abolition movement (Cunningham 1991:72).

In sum, the concerted efforts of philanthropists, of the dominant élite to safeguard its socio-economic interests, of the government to promote the well-being of the ‘children of the Nation’, and of the working classes to demand universal education standards, set the train of universalisation in motion (Hendrick 1997:49,51; Cunningham 1991:233). As the wage-earning child became a minority in western societies, the idea that childhood was incompatible with economic activity and in particular harsh labour became nested in common-sense knowledge. Zelizer (1985:3) has referred to this process as ‘the emergence of the economically “worthless” but emotionally “priceless” child’.

2.3.3 The CRC heralding the Birth of the ‘Universal Child’

In 1989, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) firmly established the idea of the existence of a different social group labelled ‘children’ and of a period of life called ‘childhood’. Moreover, the claim to universality that this treaty makes and the international policies concerning children and childhood that are deduced from it, hinge upon Piaget’s theory of cognitive development (Boyden 2000b:2).

Developmental psychology, of which Piaget was the principal founding figure, centres around three basic ideas: naturalness, universality and rationality (James et al. 1998:17). Starting from the premise that all ‘humans are part of nature and as such are subject to general laws’ (Jahoda 1992 cited in Woodhead 1999:8), developmental psychologists set out to study the natural process of maturation and uncover the laws of human growth (Woodhead 1999:4). Piaget’s theory of the ‘naturally developing’ child (James et al. 1998:17-9) presents child development as consisting of different stages of development, in which clearly defined tasks or cognitive abilities are acquired and constitute the basis for the next hierarchical stage. The cognitively competent and rational adult representing the endpoint of this evolution serves as the golden standard by which to judge a child’s development (James et al 1998:18; Wyness 1999:354) and to infer universal prescriptions of what a child needs (Woodhead 1997:66; Woodhead 1999:4; Zelizer 1985:28).

The last two decades have seen a strong movement towards the global endorsement and institutionalisation of this particular conceptualisation of the

child (Boyden 1997). The finding that the majority of textbook childhoods are portrayed as a period free from social, economic and political responsibilities and as a time when children play, learn and are cared for within the settings of the family and the school, illustrates how developmental psychology has provided the rationale for 'standardised childhoods' (Woodhead 1997:78; Woodhead 1999:7). The CRC has lent additional weight to Piaget's 'authoritative account of what it means to be a child and what is appropriate in terms of quality child care and education' (Woodhead 1999:5) by, for example, emphasising the developmental significance of schooling while denigrating that of work (Woodhead 1997:74).

2.3.4 Conclusion

In the previous sections, I showed how schools of thought, which were prominent in western societies in different eras, gave birth to new conceptions of 'childhood' and created a variety and fluctuation over time. Identifying alternative sets of norms and values as the guiding principles towards the realisation of the 'good society', these strands pitted different notions of childhood – of the 'future generation' – against each other (James and Prout 1997). Rather than unique products of different historical periods, I showed how these conceptions of childhood often coexisted or jointly fuelled political action. Hendrick (1997), for example, claims that Rousseauian, Romantic and Evangelical understandings of childhood underpinned the campaign to abolish child labour.

Rather than having disappeared from our societies, these understandings are still found in the mosaic of 'childhood' conceptions that exists in contemporary text and imagery and informs everyday actions and practices (Cunningham 1991:233). For example, the Romantic understanding of 'childhood' can be picked up in current policy debates and childrearing strategies (James et al. 1998:15). But whereas Rousseau envisaged adults listening to and learning from their children⁶, it is the notion of protection that has been adopted in current childrearing practices and pervades every aspect and experience of contemporary childhood (see for example Figs 2000). Moreover, I have referred to the argument that the principles of developmental psychology have been institutionalised in western societies and, with their embodiment in the CRC, have come to function as universal standards for childhood and the treatment of children (Boyden 1997; Woodhead 1999).

James et al. (1998) have defined particular notions of the child, such as the 'evil', 'innocent' and 'naturally developing' child, as 'presociological' models of the child. According to James et al., the common thread of these models is that the child's perceptions and reactions vis-à-vis the social environment is perceived as in essence determined by characteristics and processes *inherent to the child*. In their typology, James et al. contrast these 'presociological' models of the child with the 'sociological' theory of childhood, which positions the child within the social context. The third ideal-typical form is the 'transitional theorising' of childhood, which represents – as the name suggests – a bridge between the

⁶ The children's tale, 'Le Petit Prince', written by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1949) gave further force to Rousseau's ideas. It recounts the story of a man who meets a little boy – 'Le Petit Prince' – in the Sahara desert. The little prince tells him about his encounters with grownups, who have been corrupted by society.

previous two and primarily refers to the classical socialisation theories. I now go on to discuss the latter two ‘types’ of childhood conceptualisations.

2.4 The New Sociology of Childhood

2.4.1 Introduction

In proclaiming childhood to be socially constructed, the new sociology of childhood launches a direct critique of developmental psychology and challenges its dominion over the study of childhood. The new childhood studies proclaim that childhood and child development are neither natural nor universal, but are instead strongly embedded in the social context (Prout and James 1997:7). While some have acknowledged that social and cultural factors influence the extent to which children’s biological abilities and capacities are stimulated and expressed, practitioners and academics have taken their critique a step further (Boyden 2000b; Woodhead 1997; Woodhead 1999). Bracken (1998:55), for example, argues:

‘Issues of context are not secondary factors that merely impinge on the progress of a universal psychological or biological process. Rather, issues of context in terms of social, political and cultural reality should be seen as central to this experience and response.’

The continuing emphasis on a universal biological or psychological process that realises itself in different ways across social contexts has led to an approach in which

‘patterns of development and conduct that have evolved in one particular cultural and historical context (specifically, Western Europe and the United

States) provide a benchmark against which developmental difference associated with social and cultural diversity is treated as a mere variable or deviation.'

(Boyden 2003:8)

Rather than assuming that biological and psychological factors constitute the primary determinants of children's lives across the globe, social scientists are encouraged to examine how cultural, social, political and economic factors account for the diversity in childhoods across time and space (Woodhead 1997:78). That childhood is a social phenomenon has long been argued by sociology. In fact, as Frones (1994:162) argues, this idea is engrained in the concept of socialisation. Next, I give a brief overview of classical theories and point out how the proponents of the new sociology of childhood have enhanced this 'transitional theorising of childhood' (James et al. 1998:23).

2.4.2 Theories of Socialisation

According to classical sociological theory, human beings acquire norms and values through the process of socialisation. Durkheim describes how social morality, through cultural values, is integrated into the *conscience* of social actors and functions as an internal constraint on their choices and social actions (Ritzer 1992:102-3). Successful socialisation results in the actor learning and internalising physical, intellectual and moral tools to function in the social system. Both Durkheim (1982) and Parsons (1982) see these processes of internalisation and socialisation as integral to the survival of the social system, in the sense that they transfer values and norms to social actors and create an internal policeman – *conscience* – demanding discipline and conformity from the actors within the system (Ritzer 1992:102-3,245). Within this normative

approach, socialisation is conceptualised as a conservative process in which children are passive recipients (Ritzer 1992:245). For as gratification seeking beings, children are assumed to acquire the norms and values of the social system and learn how to act within it.

In considering the process of socialisation as a role-rehearsal for adulthood, as the process in which children learn the skills and knowledge that are necessary to live and become a respected member in a particular community (Apfel and Simon 1996:6; Garbarino and Kostelny 1996:38), sociologists have studied the skills and goals that are valued in different socio-economic contexts and historical epochs (Boyden 2000b:7). These studies have unveiled the bias towards the *western* ideal of reason in Piaget's theory of child development (Archard 1993; Woodhead 1999). While sociologists, as well as cultural psychologists (see for example Woodhead 1997; Woodhead 1999), recognise that normative patterns of childrearing might be socially and culturally adaptive in a particular context, they criticise the inference that these constitute universal prerequisites for children's health, education and well-being (Woodhead 1997:72-3).

However, both developmental psychology and classical socialisation theories suffer from a teleological bias, in that they are respectively oriented towards and prioritise adult cognitive competence and the socialised individual (Woodhead 1997:70). James et al. (1998:18) conclude that 'the supremacy of adulthood [...] ensures that childhood must, of necessity, be viewed as an inadequate precursor to the real state of human being'. Consequently, children are reduced to 'not-yet-

a-person' (Oldman 1994:43) and treated for what they will become, rather than for what they are (Mizen et al. 2001a:2).

In addition, symbolic interactionism criticises the classical sociologists for conceptualising socialisation as a one-way process, in which children are assumed to passively absorb information (Boyden 2000b:3; Ritzer 1992:349).⁷ The proponents of this sociological school present a more dynamic process. As any type of social interaction, socialisation stimulates the development of the capacity for thought and, consequently, allows the actor to influence and adapt the information that the socialisation agents convey. Similarly, ethnomethodology adopts an interpretative approach to socialisation. Mackay (1974 cited in Ritzer 1992:410), for example, rejects the normative approach for conceptualising socialisation as 'merely a series of stages in which "complete" adults teach "incomplete" children the ways of society', hereby ignoring the interaction between children and parents that constitutes the essence of socialisation. Moreover, research interest in the socialisation process of those children who work and live on the streets, were orphaned by a range of circumstances such as war and HIV/AIDS, or are unaccompanied refugees, has been growing. The common denominator of these children is that they have no or limited contact with their family and teachers. The circumstances in which these children grow up have often paved the way for prejudices towards these groups of children as abnormal, as deviants and, as such, posing threats to society (Mann and Ledward 2000).

⁷ Levison (2000:126) claims that a similar conceptualisation of children dominates economics.

‘Although the family is by no means any longer a straightforward, unitary phenomenon, the idea that children “belong” in family frameworks is still an immensely powerful and pervasive one. Underlying this belief is the notion that children are socialised in important ways by the family, as well as by the education system and other ideological systems often seen as more harmful, such as the mass media’

(Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998:9).

2.4.3 Towards a New Paradigm for the Study of Childhood

In sum, the new childhood studies argue that a research interest in the structural and cultural conditions that differentiate childhoods – *the social construction of childhood* – needs to be accompanied with one for children’s own experiences, interpretations and actions in relation to the social world (Becker et al. 2001:52; Brannen and O’Brien 1995:737). The proponents of this new sub-discipline of sociology explore and refine the symbolic interactionists’ and ethnomethodologists’ claim that children make sense of their environment through interaction with significant others, because of their ability to reason and acquire knowledge (Ritzer 1992:410). Not only do children have particular views on their social environment, which might be significantly different from adult perspectives⁸, but they are also capable of pursuing those views and intentions. Discussing the notion of *children’s agency*, Prout and James (1997:8) argue that children:

‘... are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes’.

⁸ Chapter Four discusses the methodological implications of the argument that empirical and theoretical studies can be analytically advanced if these explore or integrate children’s *own* views, beliefs and experiences (see for example Prout 2002:69).

The social construction of childhood and children's agency are intrinsically linked, in the sense that 'how we see children and the ways in which we behave toward them necessarily shape children's experiences of being a child and also their responses to and engagement with the adult world' (James and James 2001:27).

Furthermore, the claim that children constitute a structural category that is affected by, but also acts upon, other categories (Qvortrup 1994) renders *children's social relations worthy of study in their own right* (Becker et al. 2001:52). Mizen et al (2001b:37) argue that to interpret children's behaviour merely in relation to adult goals or future possibilities – as previously was the case when studying the psychological or social development of children – is to miss vital aspects of children's lives and worlds. Children's behaviour often makes sense in their own terms and, consequently, researchers are to seek for the meanings of children's actions in their local context, namely in the immediate space and time (Mizen et al. 2001b:53). This third principle of the new paradigm for the study of childhood constitutes a direct attack on the social sciences, which until recently subsumed children under analytical categories, such as the family and the economic household (Levison 2000:126).

2.4.4 Introducing a Relational Approach to the Study of Childhood

In spite of the fact that this new sociological school has carried out extensive research on how political, economic, social and cultural facts have produced a diversity of childhoods across time and place, some studies of childhood have

merely acknowledged the socially constructed nature of childhood and treated the resulting institutional context of childhood as a given fact, as an independent variable. The problem with adopting the institutional context of childhood as a starting point is that its inhabitants become *de facto* members of a social category. Treating this social category as an independent variable, researchers have become susceptible to the very criticism it originally directed towards those 'pre-sociological' models of childhood: circular reasoning, in which children behave in a particular way because they are children.

Although the structured social relations described in the above are 'logically antecedent and temporally prior to the individual, generating anterior distributions of resources within which individuals [are] involuntaristically placed by the accident of birth' (Sealey and Carter 2001:9), their stability and persistence have to be questioned in the context of rapid social change, such as war and displacement. Furthermore, those who study childhood need to pay more attention, or reconsider their approach, to the dynamic interplay between structure, culture and a strong sense of social agency. As such, children's agency not only refers to their ability to make sense of their social environment, but also to participate in the creation, modification and alteration of the social world they live in, of the social relationships and of the social norms and positions that shape their own and others' lives – including the dominant conceptualisations of childhood and adulthood.

Alanen (1998)⁹ has presented a theoretical approach to the study of childhood

‘in which all social categories are seen as constructions by human (including children's) agency, and equally in need of explanation. An attempt is made to contribute to the development of a more systemic conceptualization of childhood, now understood as a complex set of social relations (generational structures) within which children live their lives while participating in the reproduction/transformation of the specific form of sociality recognized as childhood.’

Having developed a substantial critique of theories of childhood that display ‘forms of thinking in terms of categories of children’ or categorical thinking, Alanen (2000) proposes to treat childhood as a relational concept. She summarises the advantages of relational sociologies, which take relationships amongst people – rather than individuals or their aggregates – as the unit of analysis, as follows:

‘Relations are identified at several levels, they intersect and relate to each other and enduring relations form dynamic structures, which in turn relate to other structures: relational thinking is both structural and processual, and is agential without confining agency exclusively to the level of individual actors.’

(Alanen 2000:500)

Prout (2002:70,71) confirms that this is ‘to be a major and continuing topic of debate in the study of childhood over the next period’. He discusses the concept of ‘generational order’, which was put forward in an ESRC Programme¹⁰ and

⁹ This citation is taken from Alanen's (1998) ISA paper *Actors, agents and generational structures*, of which I only obtained the abstract.

¹⁰ The *ESRC Research Programme on Children 5-16: Growing into the 21st Century* was announced in 1995 and came to an end in 2000. ‘The Programme is concerned with children as social actors – achieved by examining children as active agents and/or through research which treats children as the primary unit of analysis.’ (ESRC Research Programme on Children 5-16 undated, online article)

refers to ‘the systematic pattern of social relationships between adults and children within which children are located and constituted as a social group’. Brannen and O’Brien (1995) also focus on the ‘generational pacts’ that exist between adults and children, in which adults invest in children through childrearing and expect these children to take care of them in their old age. In their study, they discuss how this intergenerational agreement regarding social assistance was reformulated in western societies during the post-war years. This example illustrates how social change affects relationships between generations and how these changes modify social norms of childhood and childrearing practices, but also of adult responsibilities. In the next part of this chapter, I show how this relational approach constitutes an important tool in developing a more analytical and complex understanding of how and why children come to volunteer for armed combat.

2.5 Discussion of the Contemporary Interest in Child

Soldiers

2.5.1 Introduction

In order to launch the discussion of contemporary understandings of children’s participation in armed conflict, I begin by critically assessing the arguments that the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers¹¹ has put forward to mobilise the

¹¹ In Chapter Three, I describe how a coalition of NGOs launched a global campaign against the use and recruitment of children in armed combat as a reaction to the publication of the *Graça Machel* report (UN 1996). This UN report raised global awareness of the millions of children

international community to condemn the use and recruitment of under-age soldiers and use legal instruments to attain this objective. In particular, I draw upon the material generated in the context of the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. At the eighty-sixth session of the International Labour Conference of June 1998, the proposal to include the use and recruitment of children in armed conflict in the ILO Convention No.182 was put forward (De Meyer 2001:3). With the deferral of the issue to the next Conference, NGOs launched an international campaign to define child soldiering as one of the worst forms of child labour. The first argument in favour of this inclusion centred on the physical and mental effects that soldiering has on children. The second argument referred to the research finding that those groups of children who are more prone to work under hazardous conditions in peacetime are more vulnerable to military recruitment in wartime (Brett and McCallin 1996). The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (undated-b, online article) summarises these two arguments concisely: 'Serving in the armed forces is clearly a form of child labour, and it is hard to think of anything more hazardous to a child than being put in the frontline in a combat situation.'

2.5.2 The Physically Impaired, Psychologically Traumatized and Morally Derailed Child as the Typical Child Soldier

Firstly, the relative immaturity of children vis-à-vis adults lies at the heart of the first argument, which describes the physical and mental impairment that child

who are not only caught in armed conflicts as bystanders but also as perpetrators of violence, and of the inadequacy of international humanitarian law to address their plight. For more information on the Coalition, see: <http://www.child-soldiers.org>

soldiers suffer from due to indirect and direct participation in armed combat. The limited cognitive development of child soldiers is said to inhibit them in recognising and correctly assessing the dangers of their actions and the operations they are involved in (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 1998:1; de Silva et al 2001).¹² Military commanders often seek to stimulate this kind of risky or reckless behaviour by providing their soldiers with drugs, alcohol, and religious or cultural symbols of immunity (Barnitz 1997:8).

‘They set us up and provided us with hashish in abundance. We were the first, the avant-garde, “those who light the way” [in the battle]. We were impatient to start fighting. We were as strong as bulls due to the hashish and we all had confidence in our amulets. Behind us the regiment of soldiers and, a bit further away, the major with General Onika in person.’

(Kourouma 2000:119, translation by author)

This behaviour might result in death or serious injury, with children less likely to survive those injuries than adults due to the vicinity of organs (Amnesty International 1999:3). In addition to the perils of the battlefield, the campaigners indicate that the treatment of child soldiers in armed groups or forces is a threat to the health, safety and morals of the children who are affected in the midst of their maturation process (Amnesty International 1999:3-4; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 1998:2). Child soldiers might have to walk for many hours, carry heavy loads or perform other kinds of debilitating work. These hazardous working conditions can cause illnesses, such as respiratory diseases, deformed backs, sexually transmitted diseases and loss of sight. Furthermore, children who

¹² In their analysis of the voluntary participation of adolescents in several war zones, Brett and Specht’s (2004:29-30) identify the rapid physical and intellectual transformations, which girls and boys undergo during adolescence, as stimulating the heightened risk behaviour among this age category. Hormonal changes and a steep learning curve might generate feelings of strength and power and culminate in a sense of invulnerability that prevents adolescents from perceiving or taking into consideration the substantial perils of military combat.

participate in armed conflict are also said to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or other types of mental illness (de Silva et al 2001:126). In sum, the members of the Coalition argued that child soldiering tends to be a full-time occupation in which children are exposed to a wide range of physical and mental hazards, are separated from their families or caregivers, have little opportunity to continue their education and jeopardise their future. Therefore, they recommended it to be explicitly included in the list of worst forms of child labour. In the remainder of this section, I question some of the assumptions that underpin the above claims.

Firstly, in order to assess the psychological impact of growing up in a situation of armed conflict, (clinical) psychologists have traditionally used standardised questionnaires. These pre-coded research instruments measure the level of children's exposure to violence by recording whether children witnessed or experienced gunfire, murder, rape, shelling, and so forth. (see for example De Standaard 2004). Practitioners and researchers subsequently record the different symptoms that appear during and shortly after violent events, such as anxiety, nightmares, and heightened aggressiveness (see for example Semeniuk 1995; Castelo-Branco 1997). In the next chapter, I refer to some of the criticisms that have been put forward over the years in psychology and sociology regarding this theoretical and methodological approach, such as its disregard or insensitivity to the different meanings that individuals or social groups attribute to violence and the diverse forms that distress assumes across communities (see for example Bracken 1998; Bracken and Petty 1998; MacMullin 2004; Summerfield 1998).

For example, according to Jones (1998:242-3), several authors have suggested that

‘labelling the symptoms of intrusive imagery, hyper vigilance, avoidance, numbing and sleep disturbance as a universal response to a wide variety of traumas ranging from sexual abuse to natural disasters to wars, exemplifies the ethnocentric and imperialistic tendencies of western psychiatry. As a result, collective distress is individualised and divorced from the social and political context in which it occurs. The diagnosis of PTSD ignores the fact that many non-western societies do not see the intrapsychic processes of an autonomous and bound individual as their main concern. They place more emphasis on interpersonal relationships and the communal world.’

In the absence of these considerations and of a thorough analysis of the factors that protect or undermine children’s resilience in the face of adversity (see for example Garbarino and Kostelny 1994; Punamäki 1988; Punamäki 1989; Rutter 1985), researchers and practitioners often perceive children growing up in war zones to be vulnerable creatures that are traumatised and manipulated by the conflicting parties – in short: victims (Boyden 2000b:4; Gibbs 1994:270). Furthermore, as developmental psychology conceives the first stages of growth as being of crucial importance to the further development of the child, but also to the adult personality (Boyden 2000b:3; Montgomery 1998), it sparks off great concern about the long-term consequences of children’s involvement in armed combat. For example, in relation to child soldiers in Sri Lanka, a practitioner writes: ‘Our observation has been that children are particularly vulnerable during their impressionable formative period, causing permanent scarring of their developing personality’ (Somasundaram 2002:1270). Starting from an engagement with the reconstruction of post-apartheid society, Ndebele (1995:331) develops an analogous argument regarding the children who grew up

under apartheid and now represent the new South African polity. Ndebele (1995:330) expresses deep concern about the physical and mental state of those children, who were not only victims but often also perpetrators of violence:

‘What can we expect of children who have witnessed the death of parents; who have seen people being stoned; hacked with pan-gas and burnt to death; who have themselves been the direct targets and victims of this violence; who have sometimes participated in these gruesome events?’

This account illustrates that nation-states and the international community often entertain anxieties about how to exercise control over and integrate child soldiers, which are perceived as socialised in a culture of violence and, hence, as a threat to peace and stability (BBC News 2001a). Boyden (2003) claims that the belief that children’s minds are less formed than those of adults and, therefore, more malleable lies at the basis of this concern. Furthermore, children and adolescents are presumed to lack the experience and cognitive skills to foresee and grasp the moral implications of their violent acts (see for example Muscroft 2000:48). The presumption of children’s vulnerability to manipulation is given additional weight due to anecdotal evidence from conflict zones (Boyden 2003:4-5). Military commanders have been reported preferring child soldiers over adults for their blind loyalty, their susceptibility to indoctrination and their unquestioning obedience of commands by letting no moral dilemmas interfere with the fulfilment of their tasks and obligations (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn 1994:27; Thompson 1999:193). For example, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (1998:3) quotes a rebel officer in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) suggesting that children ‘make very good soldiers because they

think of nothing else. They obey without worrying about getting back to their wife or family. And they are not afraid.’

Wessels (1997:35) claims that internal restrictions towards violence normally develop through ‘exposure to positive role models, a healthy family life, the rewards for socially constructive behaviours, and the encouragement of moral reasoning’. Consequently, practitioners and researchers remain pessimistic with regards to the child’s ability (to continue) to develop or protect moral norms and values – that are particularly valued in peacetime – in the absence of parents or caregivers (Castelo-Branco 1997:494). For example, Faulkner (2001:495) sketches the following apocalyptic scene of what happens when the military unit acts *in loco parentis*, namely when it takes over the family’s traditional role of guidance:

‘The end product is a person capable of gratuitous acts of barbarity, often perpetrated with some enthusiasm, who is bereft of normal character traits and who when peace or demobilisation takes effect, is difficult to rehabilitate to the requirements of normal life.’

These examples indicate that the ease and frequency with which child soldiers come to be portrayed as a lost generation in post-conflict societies does not only stem from an uncritical application of (context-specific) trauma theories, but also of traditional socialisation theories. The implications for a child who has been exposed and practised an ideology that drastically reduces the value of life and who has sensed the power of a gun are presumed to be particularly severe in terms of their socialisation. As Straker (1989) illustrates with regard to the media portrayal of youth who participated in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa,

children were not only conceived as having been programmed into killing machines, but also irreversibly damaged in their moral thinking.

‘These studies showed that, in the absence of rehabilitation work, there was every likelihood of the young growing up as militaristic automatons incapable of participating in their own destinies.’

(The Star 1988 cited in Straker 1989:22)

It is within this realm that (traces of) the image of the evil and sinful child enter popular depictions of child soldiers (Peters and Richards 1998:183) and, as the following claim suggests, are taken to extremes:

‘Some writers, observing the apparently uncontrolled and irrational violence of the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, have hypothesised that Africa’s youth are now out of control; [...] a dangerous new class of armed thugs with no agenda other than enjoying themselves at the expense of civilised values, and that the continent is now falling prey to a new “barbarism” (e.g. Kaplan 1994).’

(Argenti 2002:149)

2.5.3 Critical Analysis of Theoretical Accounts of Child Volunteering

The second argument in favour of the inclusion of child soldiering in ILO Convention No.182 sets the stage for an investigation into the causes and motivations that academics and practitioners attribute to the different forms of children’s participation in armed combat. Conducting research as part of the *UN Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* (1996), Brett and McCallin found evidence that the groups of children who have a higher risk of working in peacetime are also the ones more likely to be recruited in wartime (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers undated-a, online article; Save the Children UK

undated, online article). These groups are children separated from their families or with disrupted family backgrounds, economically and social disadvantaged children, other marginalised groups and children from the conflict zones themselves (Brett and McCallin 1996).

2.5.3.1 Child Volunteering: A Decision Forced upon Children by Structural and Cultural Conditions

Although the material generated in the context of this campaign did not advance the theoretical explanation for the connection between child labour and child soldiering, the growing evidence for children's voluntary participation in armed combat has stimulated its exploration. Researchers have come to perceive children who volunteer for military recruitment as often doing so within the context of a struggle for survival, as a response to physical and psychosocial needs (see for example Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad 2002:19). These accounts of child volunteering point towards the changing nature of armed conflicts, in the sense that they are internal rather than international, fought within the community rather than on well-defined battlefields, and involve social groups such as women, children and the elderly rather than (male) soldiers (UN 1996:13; Wallensteen and Sollenberg 1999:593; Wessels 1998:635). In addition to the direct effects, such as killing, disabling and uprooting the population, this type of violent conflicts damages or destroys the infrastructure of the country. Governments in wartime generally curtail spending in health and education to compensate for the disproportionately high expenditure for defence (Garbarino et al. 1991). The withdrawal of foreign investments and a dramatic cutback of tourism further jeopardise the revenues of the government and its economic

programme. In addition to the job losses, the employability of the general population plummets, because the government fails to bolster educational opportunities (de Berry 2001). In war zones, education is often disrupted as institutions are destroyed or shut down (Somasundaram 2002:1268). Furthermore, not only do health care services become sparse (Zwi and Ugalde 1989), but also the safety net and care that social communities might have provided disappears as communities are torn apart and social networks dissolved.

In sum, contemporary warfare is perceived as striking at the heart of communities and as destroying the protective shields that are normally in place to keep children safe from harm (Amnesty International 2003; McNamara 1998:2; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict 2000:12). In addition to referring to the drastically reduced capacities of parents and caregivers to physically protect children from violent assaults and coercion into hazardous forms of labour, the breakdown of traditional protection mechanisms also comprises the ways in which the loss of family livelihoods inhibits parents in providing food, shelter or educational opportunities to their offspring. Others focus on the rupture of social relationships and the destruction of community structures that traditionally convey and enforce norms and values about childrearing, warfare, etc. In the following paragraphs, I critically assess how these different aspects of contemporary violent conflicts are theorised to increase the vulnerability of children to military recruitment.

The group of children who are separated from their parents, habitual caretakers or legal guardians in the context of armed conflict and human displacement has been identified as particularly – or even the most – vulnerable to under-age recruitment (Brett and McCallin 1996:113). In addition to the unfavourable structural conditions that children living in conflict zones face, this group of children are removed from their parents or caregivers and, as such, suffer a double jeopardy (UNHCR 2000c). Without their family, these children are presumed to stand defenceless in the face of aggressive recruitment campaigns. Furthermore, a child's decision to join an armed group might be his/her best chance for 'survival, hope, money, or fulfilment of basic needs for security, belonging, and materials such as food and water' when the family no longer provides him/her with these essentials (Wessels 2002:238; see also Mendelsohn and Straker 1998:403).

'Unfortunately the majority of these children [who have been demobilised in DRC], many of whom have been orphaned or no longer even know if their families are dead or alive, can scarcely keep themselves sheltered and fed, let alone find the means to pay for their education. Faced with homelessness and destitution, many of these children can see no other option but the army' (Amnesty International 2003:1).

Not yet having mastered the cognitive skill of hypothetical thought or abstract thinking, which Piaget assigns to the final stage of child development (Greig and Taylor 1999:28-9), children might not be capable of conceiving alternative survival methods than soldiering when faced with material and social deprivation. Brett and McCallin (1996:114) argue that, in the absence of family discouraging children to take up arms, 'children are more at the mercy of militarist cultures, peer pressure and the inability to conceive of life outside the confines of the conflict'.

The ways in which military groups present soldiering to children as an attractive method to secure food, shelter, protection and prestige constitute just one example of how elements or processes inherent to child development are perceived as either neglected or exploited by those recruiting and deploying children for military purposes (see for example Carroll 2003b). Williams (2002:2) takes up this argument, claiming that children's tendency to fantasise and indulge in irresponsible talk increases their vulnerability to engage in armed combat. While arguing that these forms of child behaviour are an essential part of a healthy maturation process¹³, he cautions against children engaging in role play or steeping themselves in fantasies that are entirely detached from social reality. It is the responsibility of adults to provide occasional reality checks, namely to put narratives that are conveyed to children in, for example, books and films into social and historical perspective. In addition to setting limits to a child's immersion in a fantasy world or new identity, Williams (2002:2) argues that reality checks also provide the child with the reassurance that 'I shan't suddenly be left stranded, bound to a "playing" role that I was only testing. The background world allows me to drop out of a fantasy that's become too dangerous or compulsive'. It is the responsibility of the adult to make sure that certain types of role play are not decoded as a signal of the advanced state of maturation of the individual.

¹³ Williams (2002:2) argues that fantasising and indulging into irresponsible talk allow children to try out adult identities, power and possibilities without being held responsible for verbal or social behaviour. Only when the child is not petrified to make mistakes, will the child be able to explore and learn from role-play.

The now widespread practice of showing films of Rambo¹⁴ to child soldiers demonstrates what can happen when adults cast aside these responsibilities. The use of the Rambo trilogy, of which the first film *First Blood* seems to be the most popular, in the military training of children has been well documented for the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone (Richards 1996:57-9), for God's Army of the Holy Mountain in Burma (O'Kane 2000), Liberia (Tangelder 1999:21) and for the Midland boys in KwaZulu Natal (Nair 1999). In order to describe the kind of heroism that children identifying with Rambo aspire to, I refer to Nair's (1999:18) sketch:

'Rambo is the loner-soldier-rebel whose ultimate achievement of "justice" vindicates and celebrates his use of violence. The action film plot portrays him as a "just" man – the baddies must be stopped and as he is alone against the forces of "evil", he is in the disadvantaged position. Gaining the advantage means eliminating all opponents for "justice" to prevail. This is often signified by poignant military theme music, carrying connotations of patriotism and national approval.'

By fanning children's desire to become a hero and by, simultaneously, leaving out the historical and social context of the film's events – the American involvement in Vietnam – and Rambo's actions and downplaying the practical and ethical challenges of pursuing goals with military means, these adults are deemed guilty of attempting to deceive children. In addition to abusing children's ignorance and tendency to fantasise, Williams (2000:2) claims that those who recruit children push them into adult or pseudo-adult roles for which tasks and responsibilities they are not adequately prepared. Instead, societies need to respect and proactively ensure children's right to a decent childhood, which

¹⁴ The film 'Rambo' was produced in the US in 1982. Director: Ted Kotcheff. Starring actors: Sylvester Stallone, Richard Crenna, Brian Dennehy and others.

consists of a period of economic, political and sexual latency and is a precondition to their healthy development.

2.5.3.2 Child Volunteers Pushed or Pulled by Their Families

Studies of child development that conceive of biological factors as the primary determinants of child well-being and behaviour have come increasingly under fire for bracketing off the social environment in which children grow up (MacMullin 2004; Woodhead 1997; Woodhead 1999). The conceptualisation of childhood as a period of dependency and free of economic, social and political responsibilities belies the empirical evidence that children and adolescents in most parts of the world make a significant contribution to the maintenance of their household (Baker 1998; Levine 1999; Liebel 2003; Mann and Ledward 2000; Zelizer 1985:5). Boyden (2003:7) claims that 'by the time that they reach middle childhood, the life phase when military recruitment becomes a possibility and likelihood in areas affected by conflict', children in most parts of the world have taken on major economic and social responsibilities.

Children are expected to make a contribution to the maintenance of their household from an early age and parental expectations of their household work roles rapidly evolve with the skills and competence that children and adolescents acquire. Furthermore, as they grow older, children might complement or substitute their responsibilities in the household, such as cooking and taking care of siblings, by seeking work outside the family or their village. In Britain, for example, young people's earnings from part-time work sometimes constitute a small, but significant, part of the household income and improve the living

standards of the family as a whole (see for example Becker et al. 2001:50; Middleton and Loumidis 2001:31).

In war affected areas, particular jobs that are 'normally' taken up by child labourers might cease to exist or become less lucrative and, subsequently, lead families and children to redefine their strategies by shifting to the war industry (Richards 2002:256). The argument is that whereas in peacetime or regions removed from violent conflict children from poor or disrupted family backgrounds might seek to appease personal needs through work, in war torn communities soldiering might represent the only available or valid option for them. This partially explains the important link between child soldiering and child labour that was found in research undertaken by Brett and McCallin (1996).

One of the main conclusions that Brett and Specht (2004) drew from their research project *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight*, is that the family functions both as a push and pull factor in relation to a child's decision to join a military group¹⁵. In addition to pushing their children into armed combat to provide for and protect the family, parents or caregivers may stimulate children's participation through their presence in the armed group. Similarly, the *Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad* (2002:19, translation by author) claims that

¹⁵ Whereas this research project examined the motivations of under-eighteens to join military groups, previous work by Brett and McCallin (1996) described how the socio-economic status of the family is an important predictor of the child's vulnerability or exposure to compulsory, forced and voluntary recruitment. The authors found that better-off families had more chances of having the means to send their children abroad for education or to bribe officials to have their children declared "unfit" (Brett and McCallin 1996:103-4). Poorer families often did not dispose of the necessary documentary evidence or financial means to establish their children's age and obtain their release from the armed forces. This might partly explain why poorer and marginalised districts are often the object of targeted recruitment campaigns by armed forces (Brett and McCallin 1996:104).

‘[h]unger and poverty can stimulate parents to sacrifice their children, especially when the armed forces directly give the pay to the parents. Sometimes entire families join armed groups’. While some child soldiers follow their fathers or brothers into combat when the military group retreats from the village or camp, others join to honour a long-standing family tradition of military involvement. Brett and Specht (2004:23) suggest that this might render joining up natural – a normal and acceptable part of family life.

In addition to the economic incentives for child volunteering in Afghanistan (Sellick and Hashemi 1998), Pohly (2002:49) argues that cultural norms have also played an important part in the military deployment of Afghan child soldiers. He contends that the recruitment of children is facilitated by the honouring of these traditional values: *bada* – the duty to take revenge, *enteqam* – the duty to honour the weapon of a deceived family member, and *nang* – the duty to protect one’s family and country (Pohly 2002:49). He concludes that these three values naturalise the immediate entry of a child into the adult world. Reporting on the war between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, Stephen and Giannella (2001) unveiled that this tradition was still being upheld. Whenever the father or a relative would fall in battle, the child would take up his gun and sometimes even the military position of their father. ‘It was as if the death of a family member functioned as an initiation rite’ (Pohly 2002:49, translation by author). In this particular report, Stephen and Giannella interviewed a fifteen-year old boy who had recently become the general of one of the numerous military groups that make up the Northern Alliance. The following

citation underlines the transition from child to adult that coincided with the boy's entry into the military group.

'Mohammed Aqa Humayun has only taken command three months ago, when his father, Aghagan, 40 years old, hero of the resistance against the Russian invasion, was killed by a rocket of the Taleban. ... On that mournful day (*"I was sad, very sad, but in that occasion I understood that I had become a man"*), Humayun inherited the little army of his father.'

(Stephen and Giannella 2001:28, italics in original, translation by author)

The committee of the elderly, which represents and protects the tradition of the social group, subsequently guided the child through the transition from child to adult and prepared the child for its future role. This committee informed him about his tasks and responsibilities, of which the protection of his family, clan and country is vital in wartime. Their guidance did not end with the child's initiation rite, but continued to be there for him/her to draw upon when making decisions. During their visit to the military camp of the child general, Stephen and Giannella met the three uncles who gave Humayun advice in devising military strategies. Provoked by Stephen et al's question that the three uncles were the real brain behind the battles, they answered:

'We only give advice based on the longstanding experience that he, Humayun, does not have yet.

And if he ignores those suggestions?

[...] Our task is to give advice. It is up to him, who is the recognised head, to accept or refute it. Up until now, he has always accepted it.'

(Stephen and Giannella 2001:32, translation by author)

This account of child soldiering emphasises the significant role that is assigned to the elder members of the community in the initiation rites of children and in defining children's position in the adult world. This finding stimulates

researchers to examine whether child recruiters, commanders or mentors might be tempted to mobilise those historical or traditional practices to ‘naturalise’ – and hence, legitimise – the role that children adopt in violent conflict.

While the latter theoretical explanations might be valid for some cases of child volunteering or, at least, represent adults’ perceptions of children’s voluntary recruitment, they overlook the meanings that children themselves attach to their participation and/or fail to incorporate these meanings to achieve a more complex understanding of the phenomenon. Instead, Hutchby (1998:10) argues:

‘In order to understand adequately the properties of children’s social competence in the arenas [of action] in which it is situated, it is necessary to attempt to view the relevant social action ‘from within’, that is, as far as possible, to reveal the procedures by which the participants themselves organise and make sense of their activities in a given social context.’

Punch’s (2001; 2002) fieldwork in rural Bolivia gives an example of how research on child labour has not only raised awareness about the – sometimes hazardous – conditions in which children work, but also about children’s evolving competencies in a particular social arena and the wider contributions they make as members of a community (James 1998). In particular, her research focus on the views and experiences of the children led to the finding that children often accept responsibilities without hesitation or without being told (Punch 2001:27). In addition to the fact that this offers them more satisfaction than when they are asked to do something, children take great pride in their contribution to the household. Similarly, working children’s organisations do not merely conceive of the child as

‘a “contemplative” and “private” subject, who only cares for his or her own personal and individual future, but rather as a responsible social subject, who

is an integral part of society and who, along with others, makes a mark on society with his or her daily actions’
(Liebel 2003:275).

In addition to overlooking the meanings that children attribute to their engagement in different forms of labour or soldiering, the theoretical accounts in the above fail to take adequate notice of the power struggles that occur within the family before and in the wake of the child’s decision. The assumption that a child’s fate lies in the hand of the family still informs many accounts of child soldiering – whether forced or voluntary. Although one cannot ignore that children may sometimes ‘be forced into certain roles by adults who need their assistance as productive workers’ and are ‘expected to uphold the unity and honour of the extended family’ (Baker 1998:47), it is also important to consider that in joining a military group children might seek to assert their agency within the structural and cultural features that shape their social context. Although children’s opportunities for asserting their autonomy, for deciding their use of time and space, is limited by the parameters set by adults and by the structures of adult society, it is essential to investigate how children negotiate their position and actions within those boundaries and constraints (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998; Punch 2001:23). As such, some researchers have recently come to define children’s decision to partake in armed combat, whether the result of a feeling of responsibility towards the family or a tactic for realising their own agendas, as potential indicators and expressions of children’s agency (Beirens 2000:21). Therefore, rather than acting upon the *a priori* assumption that children sign up for military deployment under the pressure of parents or in the absence of their caregivers, prevention and demobilisation strategies might need to be

accompanied by a consideration that children sometimes perceive it as their responsibility to enlist and protect their family (Boyden 2004).

As such, youth might join a military group to enact a family strategy or dream for social mobility. Given the fact that soldiers still take up a high social position in several societies of today's world, becoming a soldier can enhance the social status of the entire family or clan. The following account illustrates how military recruitment not only represents one of the few possibilities for children to transcend their social but also their geographical boundaries. In relation to girls who participated in the anti-colonial struggle in Mozambique, West (2000:187) concludes that:

'Participation in the armed struggle broadened horizons for these young women, just as it did for young men. Upon joining the Destacamento Feminino, many told me, they delighted in the fact that their lives would not be limited to tending agricultural fields, carrying water, cooking, and caring for children. Life as a DF would give them greater range of movement across both social and geographical landscapes. They would experience fears and triumphs unknown to the generation of their parents. They would have tales to tell evenings around the fire, just as their brothers did'.

2.5.3.3 Child Volunteering as a Strategy towards Realising Children's Own Agendas

These discussions of child soldiers show that, while young people might act out of a strong sense of responsibility and obligation to their family, children and adolescents also negotiate the ways in which those responsibilities and obligations are to be fulfilled in order to accompany their own agendas and preferences (Punch 2001:28). As such, Hutchby (1998:18) claims that

'[c]hildren are not simply "socialised" by their involvement in family rules and structures: the family order is an arena of action whose rules and structures themselves represent resources which children competently manipulate in dealing with others' agendas and working out their own'.

In both the minority and majority world, studies have found that children's work provides them with a sense of personal worth and status that is normally not extended to them (Gittens 1998:67). The social attributes that are attached to the profession or position of soldier might constitute the primary motivation or one of many reasons for a child to decide to join a military group. Just as some adults might join the military for the status, prestige and masculinity that is attached to the profession of soldiering, children might be attracted to the job for similar reasons. Furthermore, in volunteering for military recruitment and deployment children might hope to discover new places, pursue a more glamorous and adventurous course in life, or travel beyond the reach of their parents (Richards 2002). A similar argument has been made in relation to some of the boy soldiers serving in the Taliban in Afghanistan:

'Although my organisation makes it a point of not to use any military transport, one time during my stay in Afghanistan I was obliged to accept a lift from a military truck [Taliban]. I sat in the back with some Taliban boy soldiers. Observing them during the trip as they sung, laughed and boasted about their adventures and activities, it became very understandable to me that these boys join the Taliban. Not only does soldiering in Afghanistan represent one of the – limited – ways out of poverty and low status in society, these military groups resemble teenage groups in, for example, the States where peer groups get together and are offered the opportunity to see and experience new things.'¹⁶

¹⁶ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 13 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

Moreover, the ways in which their military engagement transforms them from victims of the conflict, from vulnerable creatures to strong individuals who seek control over their destiny and that of their community, might especially appeal to children. While the literature on child soldiering has extensively documented the methods that military groups use to endow these children with the illusion of power, such as drugs and amulets, the studies that incorporate children's views refer to the respect and freedom that is often granted through the community and is strengthened by the authority that can be demanded through the barrel of a gun. While these child soldiers might also gather wealth and share their wages with their families, the primary value of soldiering lies in the power and status that it bestows on its participants.

In addition to exploring those situations in which children join a military faction for the immediate benefits and advantages that it grants its members, the conceptualisation of children and young people as conscious and purposeful beings stimulates researchers to consider the case in which soldiering constitutes a means to an end and, consequently, to research the long-term objectives that underpin children's decision to join. For example, on the basis of interviews with child soldiers fighting in Sierra Leone's war, Peters and Richards (1998) found that some of them engaged in military activities in order to pay for their education. Whenever these youngsters obtained the necessary funds for another term of schooling, they would leave the military unit, only to return when the term or the money had finished. The argument that soldiering sometimes constitutes a temporary activity or occupation serving a particular purpose, which

is considered difficult to achieve through standard channels, is also illustrated by de Berry's (2001) case-study of Iteso youth in war-torn Uganda.

De Berry describes how Karamojong cattle raiding, which the Iteso people had been subjected to for many decades, adopted a new, fiercer form at the end of the 1970s¹⁷. Not only did the looting endanger the traditional means of subsistence of the Iteso – cattle breeding – it also threatened the rituals marking the social transition from child to adult. 'Cattle are integral to Iteso social reproduction; a man cannot marry a wife and set up a home without the use of cattle in a "bridewealth" transfer' (de Berry 2001:100-101). Although cultural norms prescribed that fathers were responsible for gathering the bride wealth for their sons, they were no longer capable of fulfilling this parental duty and were forced to hand it over to the young males themselves. With the traditional path to adulthood obstructed, de Berry (2001:101-2) claims that young Teso males had to devise alternative – including illegitimate – ways to obtain their bride wealth. Some chose to join the Uganda People's Army (UPA). In sum, while the local understanding of maturity and masculinity framed boy's appraisal of their situation, their subsequent actions were informed by the resources and options that were available to them in this conflict-ridden environment.

¹⁷ During the political unrest of the Amin period, the Karamojong saw the opportunity to expand their weapon arsenal.

2.5.3.4 Shifting Intergenerational Relationships Framing Children's Decision to Volunteer

De Berry (2001:102) hereby frames the decisions of Iteso boys to join armed groups within the shift in intergenerational relations that occurred in the context of the violent conflict. In their analysis of child soldiering in Sierra Leone, Zack-Williams (2001), Richards (1996) and Peters (2000) come to a similar conclusion. Children's recourse to military actions are to be interpreted in relation to a 'rupture in the intergenerational bargain through which in less troubled circumstances one generation provides a nurturing environment for the next' (Zack-Williams 2001:73). It is important to note, however, that de Berry is critical of the apocalyptic image of war that thrives in the media and research, in which the normative system and the social relations that uphold that system are portrayed as in ashes.

'Indeed, the picture of children carrying guns and being forced to fight as underage soldiers is the very image that is taken to confirm that war can be a travesty for the normal and propitious context of childhood, that war is a hell of unrestrained evil and moral breakdown. There is a feeling that war destroys and distorts all social relations so that those who are children during this time cannot help but be part of lost generations faced with the loss of innocence.'
(de Berry 2001:101-2)

De Berry espouses the idea that a more subtle approach to the analysis of societies at war can be conducted if researchers pay more attention to the social relations that reproduce and reconstitute this value system. Knowledge on how the conflict affects those social relations and reorganises the value system will allow researchers to reconstruct the environment in which children conduct their daily lives and come to participate in armed combat. Therefore, rather than

perceiving child soldiering as the product of an ethical vacuum (see for example Hoiskar 2001:344; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict 2000:12), children's actions are framed within social systems that seek a new equilibrium in the wake of war and social upheaval (de Berry 2001:102). This relational approach to the study of childhood in the context of war strives to go beyond the dichotomy of local versus universal norms and values as well as the dichotomy of cultures of violence versus anomie, which have been used to explain children's decision to join a military group. Moreover, children's – individual and collective – agency moves to the centre of the discussion of the impact of violent conflict on children and adults living within a system of relations between generations and on the conceptions of childhood and adulthood that these (re)produce.

Research on child labour has not only pointed towards the significance of work in children's development (Woodhead 1999:8,15), but also to its potential of modifying or altering relationships with parents and other family members (Punch 2001). Children who work often acquire greater independence due to the considerable amount of time spent outside the household, the decline in direct supervision by parents or caregivers and the new relationships with adults and peers that this allows them to establish (Mizen et al. 2001b:44). Furthermore, children's contribution to the household (income) might boost their negotiation power within the family. On the basis of focus groups with children and adolescents in post-war Liberia, McCauley (2002:15) found that they 'are increasingly involved in decision-making in the family, as are women, and there

are reported cases where adults are scared to make decisions without consulting children because their income is vital to family survival.'

Faced with unpredictable household income and family relationships, children might also seek stability outside the home (Mann 2003). Just as the child volunteers in Mozambique and Afghanistan mentioned in the above, the street children that Baker (1998:55) worked with in Nepal sometimes realise that 'the home situation is unlikely to improve and take the opportunity to experience a world of greater possibilities outside an otherwise limited and predictable life course'. While some of these might retain contact with their parents or caretakers, other child volunteers seek to escape the family and the domestic abuse or violence that they experienced at their hands. With regards to girl soldiers, Somasundaram (2002) confirms that their status and treatment in society largely accounts for their volunteering for military recruitment (see also Brett 2002:3).

'For many from the lower castes [in Sri Lanka] joining the militant movement became a way out of this oppressive system. Similarly, for younger women experiencing the widespread sociocultural oppression against their sex joining is a means of escape and "liberation".'

(Somasundaram 2002:1269)

In addition to escaping domestic exploitation or abuse, some girl soldiers perceive their participation as making a significant contribution to gender equality. Cultural prescriptions and social norms about women's position in public life shape the level and type of female involvement (Clark 2002; Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad 2002:9), in the sense that it defines the kind of

roles that women are allowed to take on in the conflict. Although one cannot ignore the fact that girls – regardless of their voluntary status – are sometimes obliged to become the wives or sex slaves of military commanders (De Temmerman 2000; Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad 2002; UN 1996:12; Wax 2003), recent studies suggest that researchers and practitioners must not assume that all girl soldiers are sexually abused¹⁸ (Brett 2002:2; Keairns 2002:10). Research projects provide evidence of girls' and women's important contribution to violent strife and of the way in which their actions actually alter – at least temporarily – the social relations between men and women (Dawes et al. 2004; de Waal 2002:45; West 2000).

As such, girls and boys may choose to join a military group that appears to be organised according to a different social model and/or propagates to apply this different type of social organisation in the society at large if it wins the conflict. While Palestinian boys participating in the first Intifida have sometimes been perceived as criticising the gerontocracy that permeates their society and aspiring to readdress this in the creation of a Palestinian nation-state (Larzillière 2003a; Larzillière 2003b), girl soldiers in Eritrea (Fisher 1999), Sri Lanka (Somasundaram 2002), Sierra Leone (Carroll 2003a), Mozambique (West 2004) and other conflicts may have sought to alter the traditional division of (gender) roles.

¹⁸ Brett (2002:2) claims that to make this assumption 'is to deny the individual experiences of the girls and to treat them as a category of actual or potential sex objects. [...] [It is] likely to further stigmatise the girls and limit their future prospects and status in society.'

2.5.3.5 Child Volunteering to Change Political and Social Systems

This shows how the phenomenon of child volunteering calls for more research on how children, through their participation in political and military groups, aim to criticise and alter the deplorable social, economic and political conditions that their communities face. Richards (1996:xv) and (Peters 2000:57), for example, reject the dominant portrayal of the young people serving in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone as being merely criminals and bandits with no political purpose. Instead, Richards (1996:28) holds the view that the RUF drew upon a 'pool of modernised rural-based youth with few prospects of continuing education and progressive employment through established channels'. Consequently,

'[a]ssumptions regarding the innate "rebelliousness" of children and young people as nothing but a phase or cycle without further implications are therefore inapplicable to the contemporary situation in Africa – young people in Africa address crucial social issues with real political implications.'

(de Waal 2002:20)

Whereas some social scientists perceive ideological commitment as buffering the negative effects of exposure to and participation in violence (see for example Barber 1999; Punamäki 1996; Straker et al. 1992; West 2000), others identify it as a basis for children's involvement in armed conflict (Barber 1998; Marks and McKenzie 1995; Reynolds 1997; Richards 1996; Straker et al. 1992; West 2000). As Barber (1998:21) argues in his research on the 'Children of the Stone', the children who participated in the first Intifada, these theoretical accounts build on the notion of youngsters as having

'the ability to understand political and social history, to make commitments to serving what they perceive to be the legitimate needs of their society, and to

engage in specific actions to achieve these needs for prolonged periods characterised by trauma and great personal risk’.

So what does the literature tell us about children’s political norms and values? The political development of children and adolescents remains an under-theorised and under-researched topic in the literature on war and human displacement (Hart 2002c). The widespread belief that political consciousness emerges only around the age of eighteen continues to legitimise children’s exclusion from the political sphere and accounts for the historical marginalisation of children’s efforts towards self-determination (Ennew 2000a; Rajani 2000). Research interest in the political development of children has been traditionally prompted by the belief that the “primary” norms and values internalised at home and school during childhood form the basis of future – “secondary” – socialisation at work and, therefore, determine adult political attitudes and behaviour. As such, mainstream definitions of political socialisation emphasise the society’s moulding of the child as to assure its allegiance to the political system or as the internalisation of the values constituting the political culture of the child’s environment (see for example Greenberg 1970; Jaros et al. 1968; Lyons 1970; Niemi 1974; Orum and Cohen 1973; Pfretzschner and Borock 1976; Searing et al. 1973; Sears 1975). However, more recent studies have put forward a process of life-long (political) learning and the possibility of dramatic events to re-socialise individuals (Della Porta 1995; Sears and Valentino 1997). More importantly, the new childhood studies have – as mentioned in the above – criticised classical sociology for conceptualising children as mere adults-in-

becoming and socialisation as a one-way and top-down process (Prout and James 1997).

Recent studies, such as Hart's (2002a) research in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, demonstrate how refugee children engage with the discourse and practices of several nationalist projects – the Palestinian nationalist struggle, the Jordanian state and the Islamist movement. This undermines Goodwin-Gill and Cohn's (1994) assertion that children may not have the capacity to sift through competing ideologies to make fully informed choices. Moreover, Hart's (2002a:42-3) conversations with the children pointed towards their 'reinterpretation and reworking of such visions [of national community] in a manner that might properly be called "historical", giving rise to discernible differences between generations'. West (2004:188) extends this argument by claiming that children sometimes make substantial contributions to the narratives that frame their experiences as political or military activists. For example, girl soldiers in Mozambique succeeded in presenting the emancipation of women as a necessary condition to the liberation of colonial domination. As de Waal (2002:22) explains with regards to the Eritrean girls who joined the EPLF, these findings have important implications for DRR programmes:

'If such teenage volunteers can be treated not as misguided child soldiers, but as young adults demanding and requiring progressive social change, we can remove them from the military without demobilising their social and political energy. To treat them merely as deluded or wayward children would be to depoliticise their project and to fail to address their grievances. Much better to give them a real opening in democratic civil politics.'

These studies call for more research on how children and adolescents engage with the political values and norms that caregivers, teachers and political leaders convey to them. Coles (1986:29) gives the following example of how a young black boy in the US critically assesses the political views that his teacher has provided him with:

‘The teacher told us the President is a good man, and he’s from the South, and he’s trying to do good by the white, and by the coloured. To tell the truth, I don’t believe her. My sister, she laughed when I told her what the teacher said. My sister said that if I believe everything I hear teachers say, and the governor, and the president – then I’m still a baby, and I have a lot of growing up to do. Well, I told her I try on something I hear, to see if it fits, but I know when it doesn’t, and I throw it away real fast, because I tell you, if you’re coloured, you’d better learn the difference between a piece of real meat and streak o’lean.’

With regard to child political activists and soldiers, research needs to document how children search, create and defend alternative political understandings to make sense of their everyday experiences (Mendelsohn and Straker 1998:405). Coles’ interview extract suggests that peer socialisation may constitute an important element of that. While theoretical accounts of child soldiering refer to peer relationships as (merely) increasing children’s risk of military recruitment and deployment¹⁹, cutting-edge research on children in armed conflict is increasingly recognising and studying the vital contribution that peer relationships to children’s resilience and coping, especially in situations of adversity (see for example Mann 2003; Mann and Ledward 2000). With regard

¹⁹ Brett and Specht (2004:30) argue that, in addition to attracting those who have acquired a taste for adventure, military group might appeal to those adolescents in search of an identity. Child volunteers might seek the gratification or act under the pressure of peers who proclaim soldiering to be the ultimate proof of allegiance to the youth group and its ideals or as the ritualised entry into a particular group. In sum, adolescent volunteering for armed combat is seen as the result of their craving for exploration, for a cause to lend their strength to, for an identity and as the result of pressure of the peer group that assumes greater importance during adolescence.

to child soldiers, Boyden (2003:17) argues that 'children may be agents of their own moral socialisation and defenders of their own moral values just as much as they are beneficiaries of collective culture and values passed down to them by adults'.

2.6 Conclusion

The sociology of childhood, which emerged as a distinct sub-discipline in the 1980s and 1990s, deserves the credit for the contemporary insights in the historically contingent nature of childhood. On the basis of historical research, this sociological strand has raised awareness and enhanced our knowledge about the birth of western contemporary notions of 'childhood', such as the 'innocent', 'evil' and 'naturally-developing child' and about the processes through which these were universalised. Rather than considering childhood as a universal phenomenon, the claim towards the socially constructed nature of childhood stimulates researchers to analyse, or at least show an awareness of, the 'historically reproduced social relations, practices and powers which stand as the already formed social circumstances that confront people in their everyday lives but which have a relative independence from the activities they undoubtedly influence' (Layder 1998:97). In addition to underscoring the importance of studying the structural and cultural conditions that differentiate childhoods, the new childhood studies have strengthened the call for more research on children's own perceptions, interpretations and actions in relation to the social world. The proponents of this sociological strand have proclaimed children to have agency,

to be not only part of a social structure, but also to participate in the reproduction of it.

The second part of this chapter, in which I discussed the contemporary interest in child soldiering, started with an investigation into the key arguments that the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and its member organisations have put forward to obtain a global ban on child soldiering. I showed that dominant, Euro-American conceptualisations of children and childhood have not only inspired, but also constituted the predominant international framework for, humanitarian action and research in relation to child soldiers. While child soldiering has been successfully pushed to the top of the agenda of the international community, I argued that the conceptualisations of the 'innocent', 'evil' and 'naturally developing' child actually make it difficult to conceive of, and develop explanations for, children's (voluntary) participation in armed conflict. Hence, the title of this chapter: a paradox lies embedded in the concept of 'child soldiers'. In Chapter Four, I continue to gather support for this argument on the basis of a discourse analysis of public and internal documents, policy guidelines, programme reports and interviews with personnel of UNHCR, an affiliated member of the Coalition.

In order to gain a better understanding of children's involvement in violent conflicts, I turned to the new sociology of childhood. The wider variety of causes and incentives for children's voluntary participation in armed combat, which this new paradigm for the study for childhood and especially its more relational approach is expected to bring to light, could be organised along several criteria.

Firstly, they could be placed along a continuum ranging from child soldiering as a family strategy, in which the child had little input, to a child's autonomous decision. This criterion reflects the decision-making power of the child within the family and, consequently, assesses the ways in which s/he realises his/her agency within one particular social arena (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis 1998). Furthermore, it might shed light on how children draw upon old and new relationships outside the family to realise their own agendas.

Secondly, the research findings could be categorised according to the meanings that the child attaches to (the choice and experiences of) soldiering. In this chapter, I discussed different theories of child volunteering. While some voluntary child soldiers might seek to improve the living standards of their family, either by securing an additional income or leaving home to lighten the family's burden, others escape domestic abuse or might actually seek to challenge traditional role patterns and hierarchies in society. In discussing different theories of child volunteering, I paid particular attention to the political motivations for children's participation in armed conflict – motivations that are often thrust aside on the basis of traditional (political) socialisation theories. This discussion informs my case-study of child soldiering in South Africa under apartheid, which constitutes the subject of Chapter Five and Six.

Having argued that the concepts of 'child' and 'child soldier' need a sociological as well as legal understanding, I use the CRC's definition of the 'child' – anyone less than eighteen years of age – and the Optional Protocol's definition of 'child soldier' – anyone under the age of eighteen who is part of a regular or irregular

armed group in any capacity other than purely as a family member – to delineate the topic of my research. Similarly, although the term ‘youth’ is often used to indicate a particular social status or political attitude and, subsequently, might resist the imposition of clear-cut age limits (Seekings 1993; de Waal 2002), I employ the terms ‘youth’ or ‘adolescents’ in this thesis to refer to persons who are between the age of eleven and eighteen.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters I laid the theoretical foundations for this thesis by identifying and exploring the major debates that surround the issue of child soldiering. This allowed me to define my research question. Until recently, the assumption that child soldiers are forcibly or coercively recruited has made a theoretical debate on why children join armed groups or forces redundant. The scale and shape that child soldiering assumes across the different conflict zones has been constructed as a reflection of macro-level factors, such as the state and evolution of warfare, the military recruitment laws and practices of states and armed opposition groups, the political and economic landscape of the region and the position of the international community on the issue. In short, children growing up in armed conflict have been predominantly constructed as the victims of powerful factors or agents, especially of adult violence (Boyden 1997:191).

However, the growing evidence of children voluntarily joining military groups and the heated debate it sparked off concerning the definition of 'volunteering' has allowed for the emergence of an alternative approach to the phenomenon of child soldiering. Influenced by, and often working within, the theoretical framework of the sociology of childhood, researchers are gradually moving towards perceiving child soldiers as social agents who act and react within a

social environment and according to their – limited – powers. New questions are being raised, such as what factors and experiences informed children’s decisions to join military forces? Who played a significant role in the decision-making process? Were the reasons for staying on in the revolutionary or governmental armies similar to the ones leading up to their initial participation?

In the remainder of the thesis, I discuss the two parts of my fieldwork. While the current chapter explains how I sought to obtain empirical data to illustrate and make a contribution to the theoretical debates I introduced in Chapter Two, Chapters Four to Six present the main findings of these two sets of fieldwork. The first section of this chapter describes how I gathered evidence for the first part of my theoretical argument, which claims that modern conceptualisations of childhood and children have sparked off international attention to the military recruitment and deployment of children in armed conflict and have informed the definition of child soldiering in problematic terms. I explain why I decided to undertake an internship at UNHCR and go on to discuss the methodological approach I adopted to explore the theoretical understandings of child soldiering that inform policy-making in an international humanitarian organisation. I describe the different methods I employed and the kind of data these provided me with. This discussion comprises an account of some of the obstacles that affected the quality and quantity of my data.

The theoretical and common-sense understandings of child soldiering that come to the forefront in my research at UNHCR are subsequently contrasted with the findings of my case-study in South Africa, which are presented in Chapters Five

and Six. In this second part of my fieldwork, I set out to study the causes and motivations for former child soldiers to fight in the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, the following sections of this chapter take up the thread of Chapter Two by asking the epistemological question of what can be known about children's motivations for joining armed groups or forces. The answer to the latter question in turn provokes the methodological question of how to collect data that will enhance that knowledge. Having identified child soldiering as the focus of my research, I cannot merely assume that data about child combatants, in general, and about their motivations for enrolment, in particular, are 'out there', merely awaiting my attention (Pole and Lampard 2002:7). Therefore, a methodological investigation, in which I identify the sources of data required, goes hand in hand with questions regarding the accessibility of those sources of information (Pole and Lampard 2002:7). For example, some military institutions or organisations might keep records of the number of children who have undergone military training or been engaged in combat. However, the fact that information on the strength and constitution of the armed forces or groups is always of high interest to enemy or foreign intelligence in their (propaganda) war explains why these data are generally well protected or are as quickly destroyed as generated (Boyden 2000a:70). Moreover, the current climate of condemnation of states and political movements with an established military practice of child recruitment renders access to that kind of data even more unlikely²⁰.

²⁰ In relation to the propaganda war waged between Israel and Palestine since September 2000, Abdelhadi (2002) makes the following comment: 'Now the Israeli army has taken its war of images a step further by releasing the picture of a Palestinian toddler with mock explosives strapped to its body. The argument is that they are not only up against individual suicide bombers but a whole culture that glorifies suicide bombings.'

The practical and ethical challenges of conducting research into – what is in essence – a sensitive topic, constitutes the subject of the third part of this chapter. This section on the fieldwork in South Africa addresses issues, such as access, political neutrality, safety and anonymity, which arise when conducting research into children’s involvement in armed conflict. These discussions in turn shed light on the methodological questions of the reliability, validity and representativeness of my research. In parallel to my discussion of the fieldwork in Geneva, I show how the triangulation of methods, such as analysis of second-hand sources, participant observation and semi-structured interviews, is geared towards the corroboration of my research findings and, ultimately, of the theoretical statements I make in the following chapters.

3.2 Fieldwork in Geneva

3.2.1 The Choice of UNHCR

While the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has acquired a central position in UN policy-making and programming programmes for child soldiers, UNHCR is often one of the first humanitarian organisations to arrive on the scene of military upheaval and mass movement. The very context in which UNHCR operates – refugee camps in the vicinity of war zones – and a significant proportion of the target group it serves – refugee children, have been identified in the literature as fuelling, or being at risk for, child recruitment. Furthermore, UNHCR has been involved in a range of activities and campaigns organised by

the UN and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. For example, in Chapter Four, I draw upon the submissions that UNHCR made to the Working Group responsible for the drafting of the Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflicts. These factors render a study of UNHCR's position and work in relation to children's participation in armed conflict of particular interest to my thesis, because the conceptualisations of child soldiers that dominate the international community as well as those held by UNHCR field officers and their local partners might influence UNHCR's actions.

The start of my three-month internship coincided with an important stage in the development of a UNHCR approach to child soldiering. On 29 November 2000, a UNHCR Inter-Office and Field-Office Memorandum (IOM/FOM) was issued to raise awareness about the two Optional Protocols to the CRC that the UN had adopted earlier that year. More importantly, it reemphasised the problem of the military recruitment and use of children and adolescents from refugee and IDP camps and the nature of the agency's engagement with child soldiers. This internal memorandum was the first of its kind to stipulate the responsibilities of the Protection Officers. In addition, UNHCR in collaboration with Save the Children had been setting up guidelines for general staff confronted with child soldiering. These guidelines were developed in the format of an Action for the Rights of Children (ARC) manual or resource pack. In general, the level of information on UNHCR's confrontation with the recruitment and use of (refugee) children and adolescents for military purposes had been augmenting significantly since the follow-up report to the Machel study of 1997. In addition to identifying the prevention and monitoring of child recruitment as one of

UNHCR's five key priorities in relation to refugee children, this follow-up strategy stipulated that particular reports of field and branch offices have to incorporate information on the issue of under-age recruitment.

3.2.2 Research Methodology and Methods

In order to examine the extent to which UNHCR's policy documents and guidelines reflect recent developments in the literature on child soldiering, I chose to undertake a review of these and other documents reporting on UNHCR's policies and activities in relation to child soldiering. Furthermore, I intended to make a list of field offices and key persons at UNHCR to be contacted for further inquiry. The next step would have been to conduct semi-structured interviews with these staff members at headquarters and to send questionnaires to the selected field offices to test and refine the hypotheses I had developed on the basis of the literature review. The quantitative research was aimed at producing (baseline) data on the extent and contexts in which this humanitarian agency has been confronted with under-age recruitment. It also sought to gain an overview of the ways in which UNHCR field offices portray and approach the issue of child soldiering. The qualitative research was geared towards exploring the conceptualisations of children and childhood that underpin UNHCR's perceptions, analyses and responses to child soldiering in greater depth. My internship at UNHCR allowed me to employ not only the method of interviewing, but also of participant observation. I intended to use these qualitative research methods to gather data on the official position of UNHCR on the topic and on the conceptualisations that UNHCR staff members hold. The latter may sometimes differ from the official discourse, because staff members

might not thoroughly read the many guidelines sent out by headquarters and might continue to devise responses to children's military recruitment and deployment on the basis of their common-sense understandings of children and child soldiers. In the following paragraphs, I describe in greater detail how I went about using these different research methods during my internship.

I conducted the literature review in the framework of the *Independent Evaluation on the Impact of UNHCR's Activities in Relation to the Protection Needs and Rights of Refugee Children*, which was commissioned by the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU) in the autumn of 2000. As an intern at EPAU and part of the group supporting the independent evaluation team, one of my first tasks was to compile a bibliography of UNHCR documents, which shed light on the agency's engagement with the rights and protection needs of refugee children. My task not only consisted of searching the internal and public databases, but also of contacting different departments in UNHCR and going through their stock pile of old pamphlets and grey documents. The fact that many of those documents could only be accessed by a member of UNHCR staff suggests that an internship – and the duties I assumed at EPAU – constituted one of the few ways to collect data and gain knowledge of the issue. For example, Country Reports and Annual Protection Report provided me with the data that Protection Officers collect on the military (recruitment) practices or laws of the warring factions and of the host country, with descriptions of the factors that Protection Officers perceive as fuelling child soldiering, and of the ways in which UNHCR and its partners respond to the problem.

Although my original research plan had been to send questionnaires to selected field offices and to seek interviews with key UNHCR staff at headquarters, the Children's Unit did not extend its approval to this research project. The Senior Coordinator expressed serious concerns about burdening field staff, who were already overwhelmed with demands for report production, and about duplicating or anticipating the follow-up report to the Machel study, which was due six months later. This situation obliged me to reconsider my research strategies. By drawing upon informal contacts and employing the snowball technique, I was able to interview seven UNHCR staff members who had either worked with or observed child soldiers as protection officers, legal advisors or policy officers. My interviews nevertheless covered field operations in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo-Brazzaville, Eritrea, Tanzania, Thailand, Pakistan and Afghanistan. As can be seen from my questionnaire, which is attached to this thesis as Appendix 1, I asked my interviewees questions such as why under-age recruitment is relevant to UNHCR's operations, how refugee or IDP children and adolescents become involved in armed combat, what UNHCR has done to address the issue and how its approach could be improved. The interviews took place in the offices of the interviewees or in the cafeteria. They were scheduled during lunch or coffee breaks and lasted an hour on average.

In addition to the consultation of secondary resources and of undertaking semi-structured interviews, the research method of participant observation would prove invaluable in my investigation. My responsibility at the Children's Unit²¹

²¹ In order to optimise the time spent at UNHCR, the director of EPAU suggested that I also work on a part-time basis for the ARC programme under the supervision of UNHCR's Senior Co-

to revise and update modules of the ARC project provided me with another position from which to analyse the conceptualisations of children and child development that inform policy-making and programming – at least, at headquarters level. The module *Child and Adolescent Development* (UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2001b) is entirely dedicated to unfolding a theoretical perspective on children and childhood. Although this module had already been completed when I arrived at the Children’s Unit, my supervisor would ask me to review it in the course of the internship. This review consisted of giving feedback on the extent to which it reflected recent developments in the sociology of childhood, suggesting additional references, and so on. The discussions that I held with my supervisors at the Children’s Unit in the context of the revision of the ARC modules shed light on the conceptions of childhood and political violence that informed the thinking of UNHCR personnel working in relation to refugee children. These debates touched upon issues, such as children’s capacities, their interpretations of the social world, their coping methods and reactions in the face of adversity, the resources available to them, the solutions to their plight and the long-term consequences of UNHCR’s interventions.

In addition to participating and taking minutes of the meetings of the Steering Group of the EPAU Evaluation, my informal discussions with individual

ordinator for Refugee Children – also known as the Children’s Unit. Consequently, my internship at both departments presented me with a golden opportunity to gain access to both an insider’s perspective and critical appraisal of UNHCR’s engagement with refugee children, including child soldiers.

Steering Group members²² allowed me to gain insights in how particular theoretical approaches to children and child soldiers affect the definition and implementation of UNHCR's role in relation to child soldiers. Furthermore, the weekly meetings with EPAU and the Children's Unit, in which project plans and developments were on the agenda, constituted a further source of information. This triangulation of methods allowed me to complement and reconfirm my research findings.

Finally, I sought the view of other intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) that either worked with or were familiar with UNHCR's involvement in the issue: International Labour Organisation, Defence for Children International and International Organisation for Migration. My discussions with representatives of these IGOs produced additional perspectives on the conceptualisations of childhood and child development that affect the definition and implementation of UNHCR's role in relation to the prevention of child soldiering.

In the first months of 2004, I arranged additional telephone interviews with staff members and external consultants of UNHCR to update and upgrade the information I collected during my internship in 2000-2001. Since my departure from UNHCR, several evaluations of UNHCR's activities, such as those in relation to the rights and protection needs of refugee children, had been drawn to a close and the resulting reports and recommendations had been made public. In 2003-2004, UNHCR presented its response to these recommendations and began

²² The Steering Group represented different UNHCR departments with interests in the evaluation on refugee children.

with its implementation. For one thing, the Department of International Protection decided to fuse the departments of refugee children, women, education and community services to promote more collaboration²³.

In my interviews, I sought to gain an understanding of whether and how these evaluation reports and the structural reorganisations these had provoked, had affected the ways in which UNHCR deals with the issue of child soldiering. These additional interviews would prove to be particularly enlightening as they came at a time when (former) UNHCR staff members seemed to have more space and liberty to respond to my questions. I interviewed five persons, two of whom work for UNHCR, two who have recently left the organisation and one external consultant who worked as the team leader of the evaluation on UNHCR's work relating refugee children. Two respondents were interviewed twice, which amounts to a total of seven interviews. The duration of the telephone interviews was between one and two hours each.

In sum, the compiling of a bibliography on UNHCR documents on the agency's policy objectives and actions in relation to the protection needs and rights of refugee children, the revision of the ARC modules and the discussions held in its wake, the participant observation in relation to the Steering Group of the evaluation, my interviews with UNHCR personnel and my discussions with representatives of other IGOs, gave me insight in some of the conceptualisations of children and child soldiers that inform the definition and implementation of

²³ Telephone interviews with former UNHCR staff member, 12 and 18 March 2004. Telephone interview with UNHCR staff member, 24 February 2004.

UNHCR's role in relation to the prevention of child soldiering. My main findings are presented in Chapter Four.

3.3 Relevance and Problems of Gathering Quantitative

Data on Child Soldiering

I now turn to the second part of this chapter, which pursues the question of how can I gain knowledge of children's motivations for joining armed groups. I begin by exploring the shifts that have taken place in research on children in armed conflict, in general, and on child soldiers, in particular. This brief historical overview demonstrates the relationship between the nature of the data that has been produced so far and the theoretical and, especially, ideological interests that have shaped the project designs.

Boyden (1994:255) claims that interest in children's experiences of political strife has taken considerable time to surface. '[E]ver since records were first kept during periods of conflict, the tendency has been to grossly underplay the effect on civilians, and especially on children' (Boyden 1994:255). While primarily attributing this knowledge gap to the fact that children traditionally were of little significance to the business of war or politics, Boyden (1994:256) also points towards the input of research and aid agencies. The latter deemed need assessments for children to be obstructing the effective delivery of emergency assistance. Moreover, they often considered children's own assessments to be superfluous as their needs were understood to be universal.

However, two international developments turned the tide, putting children at the centre of studies of armed conflict. Firstly, the global shift in the nature of warfare placed civilians, including children, on the frontlines of conflict. Secondly, both from within psychology and sociology, critiques of the universalist models of childhood and child development underpinning policies and humanitarian interventions were formulated. While the evolution of warfare is explored below as a key element in researchers' tendency to employ quantitative research instruments, I go into the second development in the next section 4.3.

As interstate conflicts became a feature of the past and were replaced by intrastate conflicts, the international community gradually acknowledged the need for more research about the impact of internal conflict on civilians. In 1994, the General Assembly of the UN commissioned the first global study of the impact of armed conflict on children. The Graça Machel report – named after the expert appointed by the UN – stated that millions of children were not only caught up in conflicts as bystanders but also as targets, sent a shock wave through the international community (UN 1996). In the face of this humanitarian ordeal and the inadequacy of international humanitarian law, which had been drawn up according to the model of international conflicts (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn 1994:10), a coalition of NGOs launched a global campaign against the use and recruitment of children in military strife (Bennett 1998a:30). The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child soldiers and their supporters were the first to call for reliable quantitative data on the international scale of the phenomenon.

Human rights advocates have chosen quantitative research methods as a pivotal element in their strategy to put child soldiering on the conceptual map of social scientists and on the agenda of policy makers. Firstly, the research finding that more than three hundred thousand children under the age of eighteen were fighting in thirty-one conflicts around the world (UN 1996)²⁴ lent numerical support to the voices of international organisations and practitioners addressing this (as a) social problem. Secondly, the fact that the production of quantitative data on child soldiers was internationally coordinated by, and remained the property of, IGOs and NGOs, contributed to the representation of child soldiering as a global, human rights problem. Once child soldiering had been successfully positioned within the human rights framework, the quantitative data on child soldiers served the Coalition in its diplomatic endeavours of pressurising governments that draft under-eighteens (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 1998:45-6).

For example, Mann (1987:53-4) describes how in 1983 the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran had to confront the accusation that children's induction into state forces constituted an established practice. Arguing that 'no evidence of this practice had been documented by reliable sources, including the ICRC²⁵', (Mann 1987:54), the Mission obliged the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities to withdraw its statement. This incident demonstrates the futility of campaigns for international condemnation in the absence of hard evidence, which can now be provided by

²⁴ According to Judit Arenas of the Coalition, the number of armed conflicts in which children participate as combatants has increased since 1996 to forty-one (De Standaard 2001).

²⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross

the global reporting and monitoring system. For example, with regard to the abduction and deployment of children in the Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army in north-eastern Uganda and southern Sudan, Bennett (1998a:57) acknowledges the achievements of UNICEF.

'UNICEF has been active in creating awareness of these abductions and sufferings of the victims. Thanks in part to UNICEF's publicity campaign, the UN Human Rights Commission passed a resolution on April 22, 1998 condemning the "abduction of children from northern Uganda" '.

In addition to being sources of information on the national, regional or global scale of child soldiering, quantitative studies can be geared to produce data about the distribution of a phenomenon according to various social factors, such as class, family organisation and level of education (Pole and Lampard 2002:37). As discussed in Chapter Two, the Child Soldiers Research Project (Brett 1995)²⁶ found that the same groups of children who tend to work in peacetime, are the ones more likely to be recruited in wartime (Brett and McCallin 1996; De Meyer 2001). Figure 1 contains some of the issues addressed in the questionnaire²⁷:

²⁶ This project was undertaken by Brett and McCallin under the auspices of the Secretary General for Children in Armed Conflict, Ms. Graça Machel, between 1994 and 1996.

²⁷ Brett (1995) adopted a more qualitative methodological approach in the design of the second part of the Child Soldiers Research Project, in which children's reasons for military involvement and their fate in the post-conflict situations were explored.

- Recruitment:
 - Numbers in armed forces, with a breakdown of ages and gender;
 - Types of activities performed;
 - Type of armed forces (e.g. governmental, revolutionary);
 - Method of recruitment (compulsory, forced, voluntary or induced);
 - Which social categories (e.g. poor, less educated, separated children) were more vulnerable to recruitment than others?
- Treatment in armed forces:
 - Conditions of work;
 - Duration of involvement;
 - Numbers killed and injured and types of injuries
- Numbers and reasons for demobilisation other than at the end of armed conflict (e.g. invalidity, capture).

Figure 1 (Source: adapted from Brett 1995)

In sum, any evaluation of the contribution that quantitative studies have made to the knowledge on child soldiering must acknowledge their important role in quantifying and describing the phenomenon. Moreover, from a moral perspective, quantitative data have proven to be invaluable in the quest to put child recruitment and use in hostilities on the agenda of human rights advocates and policy-makers around the world (Brett 2000:18). It *is* an issue, a human rights issue that politicians can no longer close their eyes to. The following

statement by Mizen, Bolton and Pole (1999:425) suggests that research on child labour in Britain bears a close resemblance to that on child soldiering, especially with regards to the drives of the research agenda.

‘Until recently, the paucity of reliable data of children’s employment activities, combined with a political reluctance to acknowledge its existence, was in a sense an understandable justification for a research agenda largely driven by audit and the need for base line data. [...] attempts to quantify and define the nature and extent of contemporary children’s work have been invaluable. Nevertheless, the failure to progress beyond the limitations of this agenda has threatened to run research into a cul-de-sac.’

But Mizen et al also indicate the constraints that the *exclusive use of quantitative methodology* could impose upon the generation and development of knowledge about child soldiering.

Boyden (2000a:71) claims that social scientists focussing on children in armed conflict tend ‘to use research instruments that rely heavily on researchers’ interpretation’ and reflect their professional or moral preoccupations. Starting from the assumption that children in war zones are at the mercy of military commanders, researchers and practitioners have often prioritised the collection of data on military recruitment laws and the practices of states and armed opposition groups and on the demographic profiles of the children recruited. Quantitative methods were generally held to be the most suitable instruments to provide this kind of descriptive data. The argument that these research methods are not particularly sensitive to the meanings and motivations for children’s engagement in violent conflicts, might have seemed insignificant to researchers and practitioners working within the moral or theoretical framework that child soldiers are forcibly or coercively recruited.

Chapter Two stated that evidence challenging the dominant theories of child participation in armed conflict has been reaching the academic community and general public in the form of interviews with child soldiers and testimonies by practitioners. While debates on the definition of ‘voluntary’ military conscription continue unabated, some social scientists have gone as far as to argue that ‘[n]ot all children are forcibly conscripted. In fact, the *majority* enlist more or less of their own volition’ (Bennett 1998a:32, my emphasis). This empirical finding has provided one of the most important incentives for research on children’s motivations for joining. Therefore, although the predominant emphasis on the common or general elements of child soldiering in war zones has served to draw attention to the scale of this social problem, research on child soldiers has now come to the point where we need to study and theoretically integrate the range of contexts in which children get involved in armed combat and the plethora of child soldiers’ experiences before, during and after the conflict. Although some studies have attempted to address this lacuna (see for example Brett and McCallin 1996; Goodwin-Gill and Cohn 1994), Brett and Specht (2001) recognise that these have unveiled merely a glimpse of the social dynamics that are responsible for child soldiering and that more in-depth analysis is necessary.

‘However, very little is known about the real motivations of young people to join the armed forces when called upon. [...] There are limited data on the experience of young soldiers based on in-depth descriptions by adolescents who have lived through the experience.’

(Brett and Specht 2001:1)

In order to fill this research gap and, ultimately, to gain a better sense of the complexity of both the reality in which children decide to join military factions

and of the decision-making process itself, quantitative studies on child soldiering need to be complemented by qualitative research.

3.4 Relevance and Problems of Generating Qualitative

Data on Child Soldiering

As outlined in Chapter Two, the new sociology of childhood considers childhood and child development to be neither natural nor universal, but instead strongly embedded in the social context. Hence, not only the great diversity of contexts in which children are recruited into military groups, but also the significant changes that occur within a conflict-ridden society, warrants the attention of researchers and practitioners. The fact that social scientists, such as Flick (1998), are increasingly asserting the relevance of qualitative research when studying the pluralisation of social reality, confirms that qualitative research methods constitute important tools in the analysis of child soldiering.

In addition, in Chapter Two I discussed how the new sociology of childhood has taken further symbolic interactionism's critique of classical socialisation theories. This new sub-discipline of sociology argues that children not only have the capacity to make sense of experiences in interaction with others, but also that the resulting meanings and symbols might significantly differ from those of adults – or those that adults believe are held by children. In particular, a situation of armed conflict may sow or stir up discord between parents and children on the ways to deal with the conflict at an individual, family or community level. As intergenerational relationships turn sour, the youth might decide to step up

action, take recourse to more violent means and, hereby, defy their parents and social norms. This argument reinforces the idea that children

‘are not merely “actors” – people who do things, who enact, who have perspectives on their lives. They are also to be understood as agents whose powers, or lack of powers, to influence and organise events – to engage with the structures which shape their lives – are to be studied.’

Mayall (2001:3)

Consequently, children have to be considered as research subjects rather than mere objects of enquiry by whoever wishes to gain a better understanding of their actions and perceptions.

As such, the ‘child-centred’ or ‘child-focused’ research approach (Boyden 2000b:16; Mizen et al. 2001a:2) has undermined the assumption that knowledge on children is preferably obtained from adults and that this adult expertise legitimises the methodological approach of presenting adults with questionnaires on child related issues. This overt reliance on adult knowledge was often justified by portraying children as inarticulate, illogical or inconsistent in the expression of their views, as vulnerable to manipulation by both peers and adults, as lying, or as too traumatised to speak at all (Boyden 2000a:71; Boyden 2000b:14; James et al. 1998:173; Masson 2000:34). Instead, Prout (2002:69) proclaims children to be ‘competent commentators’ on their experiences at home, at school and in the society at large. In his reflections on the ESRC 5-16 programme, Prout (2001:195; 2002:68) writes that children’s viewpoints on social reality represent significant, or even core, empirical material that, in addition to the perspectives of significant others, such as parents, teachers, employers, can greatly enrich our understanding of social processes and facts. Prout (2001:195; 2002:71) concludes

that children are not only competent, but also thoughtful commentators: they have a sociological standpoint.

Cairns and Dawes (1996) and Boyden (2000a; 2000b) support these arguments in their evaluation of recent studies of children in armed conflict. They criticise social scientists' and practitioners' primary reliance on adults as informants, which goes against the research finding that the emotional state of adults filters his/her observations and interpretations of the child's behaviour (Boyden 2000a:71-2). Moreover, in choosing quantitative surveys researchers forgo the opportunity to collect data on children's perceptions of the violence they are exposed to. For 'even if political violence may appear to be "mindless" to outside observers, children will construct their own meaning out of such experiences' (Cairns and Dawes 1996:131), meanings that need not be negative. Furthermore, the

'use of pre-coded research instruments, in itself, acts as a barrier to understanding children's responses to political violence. [...] Researchers may be completely unaware of events and situations that children find important, while circumstances researchers regard as deeply disturbing may in fact be of far less concern to children.'

(Boyden 2000b:15).

The critique of standardised questionnaires also arises from social scientists' growing interest in conducting research that is culturally sensitive. This is particularly relevant to studies that aim to uncover children's psychological and social reactions to violence. Cairns and Dawes (1996:135) urge researchers to reflect upon the question: 'Do we know what they [standardised scales or measures] are actually measuring in non-western cultures?' Bracken (1998) has in the meantime well established his critique of the dominant theoretical model

of PTSD, which is built upon the principles of biomedicine. Not only does Bracken support Cairns and Dawes' (1996:135) suggestion that 'distress may take a particular form in a particular community', but he also underscores Punamäki's (1996) argument that the *meaning* of violent events constitutes an important intermediate factor in the relationship between violence and trauma.

In sum, the growing commitment to conducting culturally sensitive research and the heightened interest in the 'child-centred' research approach has resulted in the increased use and adoption of research methods that facilitate the expression and capture of children's motivations and experiences. Qualitative research methods lend themselves well to this objective, as they build on the idea that 'people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions' constitute valid data upon which to construct knowledge about social reality²⁸ (Mason 1996 cited in Pole and Lampard 2002:131). Moreover, qualitative research methods are particularly suitable for studies of sensitive topics, or topics that inevitably touch upon sensitive issues (Lee 1993). Therefore, a growing number of social scientists have called for more ethnographic studies of children's experiences of political strife. These and other qualitative research methods allow us to generate data to tackle questions, such as how do *children* define voluntary participation.

²⁸ The methodological postulate that data and knowledge on social behaviour can be yielded by examining the subjective experience of individuals derives from symbolic interactionism (Pole and Lampard 2002:131).

3.5 Fieldwork in Cape Town

3.5.1 Practical and Ethical Challenges in the Fieldwork

In spite of the choice to study child soldiers in a *post*-conflict situation, I faced several research obstacles and constraints during my fieldwork in South Africa. The process of negotiating access to the research subjects proved to be the most difficult and time-consuming part of the fieldwork. In fact, the problem of access to child soldiers is so pertinent to research and aid agencies that Brett and McCallin (1996) have dubbed their research subjects the ‘invisible soldiers’. The presence of child soldiers in the armed forces is often denied by military commanders and they are carefully removed from the eyes of those brokering peace agreements. Moreover, their placement in remote conflict areas, where low-intensity warfare is waged, explains their relative absence from the world media and academic journals²⁹ (Brett and McCallin 1996:23-4). In addition to physical and psychological dangers and ethical issues, such as confidentiality and political neutrality, Wessels (1998:636) refers to the daunting task of negotiating access to research subjects who have learned that suspicion is one of the elementary rules to survive. Youngsters often show reluctance to speak out about their soldiering experiences, because they – rightly – fear revenge from their victims’ families and rejection by their communities (Brett and McCallin 1996:103; De Temmerman 2000; World Bank Findings 2002:2). Furthermore, as the previous section outlined, child soldiers’ expressions or silence have to be positioned within a framework that acknowledges cultures’ ‘different norms

²⁹ However, the success of the global campaign to stop the use of child soldiers has resulted in more continuous media coverage of the problem.

about inter-personal communication’ (UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2001c:6). These issues, and others, should be taken into consideration when planning – and consulting – quantitative or qualitative studies in conflict-ridden areas as these affect the feasibility, validity and reliability of the research. The following sections show how these practical difficulties had a significant impact on the research design and process in South Africa.

3.5.1.1 Negotiating Access

In order to steer clear of the obvious peril of conducting fieldwork in a war zone, I had abandoned my original choice of Palestine as a case study when the violence erupted in September 2000. Despite these alterations to my research design, physical dangers to the researcher still complicated the organisation of interviews and, ultimately, the collection of data in South Africa. With regard to the issue of personal safety, Lee (1995:28) claims that

‘in situations of violent conflict the researcher, like others in the setting, becomes a “routine coward” [...]; someone, in other words, who copes with ambient danger by developing a sensitivity to potentially hazardous situations and utilising preventive strategies for avoiding them.’

Because my research participants lived in the townships of Cape Town, I became – as did several other foreign researchers working there – highly dependent on others to guide and accompany me through those areas. It is a well known fact that the soaring crime rates and growing insecurity are amongst the most acute problems of post-apartheid South Africa. Crime is particularly rampant in the townships on the periphery of South Africa’s largest cities.

Furthermore, researchers seeking access to child soldiers – even in a post-conflict context – often fall into the clutches of the military. With the help of the Centre for Conflict Resolution³⁰ (CCR), which hosted me during my stay in Cape Town, my research partner³¹ and I succeeded in establishing contact with former commanders of the revolutionary armies Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA)³². The commanders’ role in the liberation struggle and their particular relationship with former revolutionary soldiers enabled them to identify and introduce us to those recruits who joined in their teens.

For each association, we set up a meeting with the commander and some of his ‘comrades’ – as for me child soldiers were known – at his home or office in the townships in order to set out the purpose of the research and the potential benefits to the former revolutionary soldiers. This included a discussion of the arrangements that had been made to reduce the risk of inflicting harm and to deal with problems arising from their participation (Masson 2000:36). The role of the gatekeeper is to balance the legal responsibility of safeguarding children’s/adults’ welfare with their rights to express their views and concerns (Masson 2000:36). While these two considerations need not contradict or

³⁰ The Centre for Conflict Resolution is a research and advocacy group based at the University of Cape Town (UCT). CCR is not, however, a department of UCT. For more information, consult CCR’s website: <http://ccrweb.ccr.uct.ac.za/>

³¹ Mafole Mokalobe is a research member at CCR and is working on the Project on Peace and Security, which is, amongst other things, concerned with the fate of soldiers of the former revolutionary armies. Mafole joined my research for the *Voices of Young Soldiers* project. As I have described at the outset of this thesis, I conducted the pilot study for this ILO project, which was supervised by Irma Specht (ILO) and Rachel Brett (QUNO), as part of my fieldwork in South Africa. Mafole’s networks were very important in establishing contacts and organising meetings and interviews with former child soldiers.

³² While the MK constituted the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), the APLA represented the military division of the Pan African Congress (PAC).

compete with one another, Pole and Lampard (2002:45) warn of powerful gatekeepers who can limit access to marginal groups or subordinate persons in the research setting.

While the representative of the APLA Veterans Association welcomed the research project enthusiastically and shook hands with us on the support and collaboration of his organisation, the working relationship with the MK Military Veterans Association (MKMVA) proved to be more difficult than was anticipated and did not yield me any interviewees with former child soldiers. This was not due to the lack of goodwill of the MK veterans who we were in contact with, but to the level of bureaucracy and hierarchy that characterised the organisational structure and shaped the culture of the ANC and the MK. An introductory meeting with members of the MKMVA developed from bad to worse, because the convenor of the meeting had not been adequately briefed on the goals of the research project by our first contact person. Furthermore, some members expressed concern about the effects that this research project might have on the image of the organisation (see Witz 1990:381 for a similar example). What if some of the interviewees would give information that discredited or shamed the ANC and the MK? What if the interviewer raised 'taboo' or inappropriate questions?

Lee (1995:20) explains that in military organisations, 'where a strongly embedded internal normative order provides a source of identity for its members, outsiders whose values are thought to be unsympathetic, or even just different, may be feared or greeted with suspicion'. Whereas some gatekeepers avert this

threat by prohibiting or preventing the research, others give the go-ahead under restricted conditions (Lee 1995:20). In order to appease the gathering the convenor decided that the regional office of MKMVA would have to consider the aims of our research project and review our questionnaire before participation could be guaranteed to us.

In the light of this experience, I reconsidered my strategies to gain access to former child soldiers and decided to contact them through advocacy and support groups for former combatants or for victims of human rights violations. The two trauma counselling centres that I approached declined the offer to participate in the research project out of concern for the negative effects that the interviews might have. The support and advocacy groups for former combatants, however, acclaimed this research project for its potential of documenting individual accounts of the 'foot soldiers' – as opposed to the famous leaders such as Nelson Mandela – of the liberation struggle. Not only did they introduce me to former combatants, but they also enhanced my knowledge of the liberation struggle.

3.5.1.2 Working in a Highly Politicised Area

Working in a highly politicised area brings along a number of ethical problems. Jones (1998:240) warns against the naïve belief that political neutrality will ensure ethical neutrality and substantiates her claim on the following grounds. Firstly, she deconstructs ethical codes of medical conduct and the structures of (ideal-type or actual) health systems as essentially reflections of particular sets of values regarding the nature of medicine, health care and social organisation. Secondly, drawing upon the ethical dilemmas she faced as a psychiatrist working

in the war zone of Bosnia, she reveals the untenable position of neutrality when conducting research in a context of political violence.

Jones' argument that psychosocial workers need to be psychologically sensitive and politically informed, has also been put forward by Fanon (1990; 1993) in the Algerian liberation struggle and Straker (1996) in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle³³. Questioning and acknowledging one's political values about the conflict helps psychotherapists to separate their political from therapeutic engagements (Jones 1998:244; Straker 1996:28). Furthermore, political education on the part of the mental health professional can also benefit his/her counselling of survivors of violence, in the sense that it might enhance the practitioner's or researcher's understanding of the social and political causes of distress (Goodham 2000; Jones 1998:244; Straker 1996:28). Moreover, whoever operates in a highly politicised context has to acknowledge and deal with the fact that his/her actions *will* have political implications (Goodham 2000; Jones 1998:246). In relation to the issue of child participation in the anti-apartheid struggle, Straker (1996:21) concisely formulates the dilemma that researchers and practitioners sometimes have to confront:

'Where does the therapist's first responsibility lie: with the liberation movement [...], with the individual [here: a boy who is active in the liberation movement], with the individual's parents, or with the UN, whose conventions dictate that individuals under the age of fifteen should not be involved in war?'

In representing child soldiering in the anti-apartheid struggle as voluntary, am I implicitly providing a legitimate excuse for the South African or international

³³ Both are renowned in the literary world for their sharp pen and in their communities for their strong contribution to the liberation struggle as mental health professionals.

policy-makers to move away from the dire circumstances of these young people with clean hands?

Finally, while ethical codes might demand that social scientists pursue a position of political neutrality in their research projects, the actual research subjects and their gatekeepers might be unaware of or even unsympathetic to this social conduct. According to Lee (1995:22), research subjects and gatekeepers will often test the trustworthiness and (political) sympathies of the researchers. Those academics or practitioners coming from outside community or context should anticipate such challenges and be aware that neutrality or scientific objectivity in the face of gross human rights violations can be interpreted by the research subjects as silent approval or even complicity with the aggressor or opponent (Jones 1998:242; Lee 1995:23). Jones (1998:243) illustrates this in relation to her work with Bosnian adolescent refugees in a camp in Slovenia, where she was asked about her views on the war and on the involvement of the western powers. Similarly, the former South African child soldiers used to gauge my knowledge and views upon the history of their country and the philosophy and actions of the revolutionary armies.

3.5.1.3 Expectations of Research Participants

However, social scientists who express their sympathy to the individuals or social groups, which they are studying, might raise – unconsciously or willingly – expectations.

‘Out of anxiety to offer sympathy and support, it is easy for the researchers to engender false hope or to make promises that cannot realistically be fulfilled.

Fulfilling moral responsibility towards children means that whilst their distress must be acknowledged and they should be given reassurance whenever appropriate, it is vital not to mislead them or to raise unrealistic expectations.'

(Boyden 2000a:71)

Therefore, social scientists need to reflect upon the projects or propaganda objectives that these individuals or groups might be serving in agreeing to participate in the research project. These reflections should be taken into account when undertaking and interpreting the content of interviews, because it will affect the validity of one's findings (Goodham 2000). What kind of information are interviewees interested in giving us and why?

In relation to my interviews with the former South African child soldiers, two reasons for participating in the research project were clear from the outset. Firstly, the majority of these young people were interested in documenting their own stories. Given the interest of the History Department of UCT in the interview transcripts, this research could contribute to the small but significant oral and written histories of the foot soldiers of the anti-apartheid struggle. Secondly, and most importantly, the former child soldiers aimed to bring attention to the difficulties they experienced in surviving in the new South Africa. I was able to confirm this expectation by linking up with Mafole Mokalobe, a researcher at CCR and working on the Project on Peace and Security. This research partnership allowed me to conduct my fieldwork as part of this research project, which follows the fate of soldiers of the former revolutionary armies.

3.5.1.4 Anonymity

At the beginning of each interview with the former child soldiers, I stressed the anonymous nature of this research project. The majority of the research participants, however, saw no need for anonymity. The interest that numerous former comrades had in documenting their stories and contributions to the liberation struggle and the fact that more than five years had passed since the disbanding of the revolutionary armies explain this relaxation. However, this did not necessarily imply a relaxation regarding the military activities that they were once engaged in.

The secrecy that continues to surround the military operations of the revolutionary armies is partly caused by concern for the image of the organisations. The reluctance of research participants to share this kind of information should also be understood in the light of the negotiations between the ANC and the National Party in the early 1990s. There, it was agreed that all armies, namely the South African Defence Force and the armed wings of the resistance movements, such as MK and APLA, could be prosecuted for human rights violations committed during the apartheid period. Only on the basis of a submission or testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) could one apply for amnesty.³⁴ Although at least one of the former child soldiers had participated in operations presented before the TRC, none of my research participants had testified before the TRC. Hence, in principle, they could still be prosecuted.

³⁴ For more information on the TRC submissions, the applications for amnesty and the heated debates that these regulations sparked off, I refer to Krog (1999).

I did not insist on this question, because additional information provided by their former military commanders confirmed that the former child soldiers had participated in some form of combat before the age of eighteen. Moreover, several studies have shown the negative – even disastrous – effects that the question of ‘did you kill anyone while being part of the armed group or forces’ has on the child soldiers. The risk of negative effects especially increases when it is posed without consideration for culture and traditions and without a framework of care and healing (Honwana 1999:32; Verhey 2002:3).

3.5.2 Methodological Issues Arising from the Research

In the first part of this chapter, I argued that the current state of research on children’s motivations for joining armed groups or forces is neither extensive nor analytically advanced. This observation informed my decision to adopt a predominantly qualitative methodological approach in my fieldwork to refine existing and optimise the generation of new knowledge on the military recruitment and use of children. In order to gather information on children’s motivations for joining the armed struggle in South Africa and on their subsequent experiences, I identified semi-structured interviews and focus groups with former child soldiers as the most appropriate research methods.

The research instrument of focus groups has repeatedly proven its suitability for studying delicate or sensitive issues (Jones and Tannock 2000:90). The collective solidarity that arises from the gathering of people with similar experiences puts

the informants at ease and creates an environment in which the speakers feel they can be open. Secondly, the discussions that are sparked off in the focus groups can support the content of individual interviews or, alternatively, can point out to the researcher some issues that need to be (re)addressed. A third (and related) reason for employing focus groups in my fieldwork stemmed from the concern that the accounts of the former child soldiers might be coloured by events occurring in the post-apartheid period, such as the TRC. While a later section of this chapter deals with the issue of memory in undertaking research on a historical case study, at this stage it suffices to say that focus groups represent an opportunity to explore the relationship between individual and social memory.

However, as focus groups may impose a consensus on the discussion topic, this research methods need to be complemented by semi-structured interviews. These interviews tend to be very rewarding for explorative research, because they claim the space and time for the research participant to give his/her account of events, to use his/her own terminology and to explain or define the terms that s/he uses. This in turn allows for more in-depth analysis on the research topic. Furthermore, by establishing a relationship of trust with the research participants and undertaking multiple interviews, the researcher can optimise this space for definition and exploration and the quality of the time spent together.

3.5.2.1 Representativeness

While in-depth analysis and the organisational demands of interviews and focus groups partly explains the small size of my research sample, the latter was further constrained by the time limitations of my fieldwork in Cape Town and the

difficulties that I experienced in identifying potential research subjects. Working within these research restrictions, I opted for the method of theoretical sampling, in which research participants are selected on the basis of their relevance to the research topic (Pole and Lampard 2002:38). Theoretical sampling is defined in opposition to statistical sampling, in which the composition of a research sample aims to be representative of the target population. However, Pole et al (2002:38-9) warn that

‘selecting a sample using the notion of theoretical sampling as a sole guiding light results in a sample from which the researcher may be able to generalise to a population in terms of theory but from which it would be extremely dangerous to generalise in terms of distributions of characteristics, experiences, etc.’

My research sample consisted of twelve research participants, of whom eleven were male and one was female. Eight former child soldiers were born and spent a part of their childhood in the rural areas; the other four grew up in the urban areas. The entire research sample, except for one, now lived in the townships of Cape Town. In terms of their political affiliation, seven were members of the ANC and five of the PAC. With regards to the military grouping they had joined, five were recruited by the APLA, four by the MK and two had remained in Self-Defence Units (SDUs) of the ANC. One interviewee was introduced to me as a former child soldier. Although this information was incorrect, I decided to interview him, because his experience of imprisonment at the age of sixteen for a political activity seemed to provide a different angle on the issue of children’s political development under apartheid.

They joined the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s and 1990s when they were between eleven and eighteen years old. Consequently, when I interviewed them they were in their twenties or early thirties. Regarding their military training, some of the research participants were trained in exile, others received crash courses within the country³⁵. Finally, the types of military operations in which they were involved varied as well, with MK members having participated in attacks on government buildings or in battles fought in neighbouring countries. The APLA, on the other hand, did not shy away from killing civilians. Of the twelve research participants, three were interviewed twice. Child soldier Simon was interviewed three times.

How representative are the findings of my research in relation to the experiences and motivations of the former child soldiers of South Africa? It is almost impossible to draw up a rough estimate of the number of child soldiers who were recruited in the military operations of the revolutionary armies. The political negotiations, which took place before the first general elections in 1994 and blueprinted the new South African National Defence Force (SANDF), would soon spark off a heated debate on the size of the MK, APLA and other resistance armies. In response to the proposal that the SANDF would be composed on the basis of proportionality, the MK boosted its numbers and launched a significant military recruitment and training campaign (Williams 2000:30). This campaign biased the original or 'actual' size of MK forces at the height of the anti-

³⁵ 'A variety of military training programmes were initiated in newly established MK camps in Angola in the post-1976 period [after the flood of young people joining the MK in exile] for MK personnel. In addition to basic training (drill, musketry, typography, tactics, political education), a number of shorter, specialised courses were offered in, amongst others, communications, intelligence, engineering and general "crash" courses. Hundreds of young recruits were also sent abroad for advanced engineering, intelligence and artillery training.' (Williams 2000:21)

apartheid struggle. Furthermore, despite the thorough screening procedure that new members of the ANC were subjected to, the headquarters of ANC and the camps of the MK in exile kept no or few records of their members and recruits (Davis 1987:53). Finally, I believe that researchers interested in approximating the actual figures of child soldiers under apartheid will only experience increasing constraints over time. The international legal climate, in which the use and recruitment of children under the age of eighteen in armed conflict has been included in the list of war crimes, is already discouraging (former) military personnel in South Africa to disclose information regarding the level of child soldiering under their command.

3.5.2.2 Secondary Material

Although the higher proportion of ANC members and of male persons in my research sample does reflect the real distribution of armed opposition groups, it is clear that I cannot generalise the distribution of characteristics of my research participants to the general population of (former) child soldiers in South Africa. However, as Pole and Lampard (2002:38-9) claimed in the above, the method of theoretical sampling does allow me to develop or refine theoretical arguments on the basis of my research findings, *if* I can gather further evidence that corroborates my observations and statements. In fact, one of the reasons for choosing South Africa – and originally also Palestine – as a case study, was its long history of political violence, in which children and youth have been at the forefront. The huge interest in this phenomenon on the part of national and international researchers and practitioners allowed me to consult an extensive collection of secondary material on children's participation in the anti-apartheid

struggle, which was stored in the libraries of the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of the Western Cape and in some of the organisations I worked with.

Next, I set up meetings with those authors who are now working at the UCT. In those informal meetings, the academics gave me an overview of their research history and key findings, shared their views on my research techniques and hypotheses, and provided me with additional references and contacts. This snowball technique resulted in a research sample of fifteen researchers, who covered disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, law and literature. In addition, my position at CCR gave me the opportunity to draw upon an extensive network of NGOs and to establish contacts with professional gatekeepers who have worked with former youth activists in the anti-apartheid struggle. Not only did their longstanding relationship with former child soldiers proved to be vital in identifying potential research subjects, but it also gave me access to the biographies of the interviewees and the history of the township in which they lived. Moreover, these practitioners and human rights activists often reflected on their personal role and experiences of the anti-apartheid struggle, presented their views on the reasons for youth participation and the contribution they made, and shed light on the internal position(s) of former revolutionary armies on youth recruitment. I observed meetings of NGOs that fight for compensation for the victims of human rights violations under apartheid, in which participants told of their bitter encounters with the apartheid system and complained about their fruitless attempts to obtain recognition and retribution for their suffering. I watched persons shift between hope, anger and frustration and

listened to what it means to have testified in the TRC or live as an ex-revolutionary in the new South Africa. In sum, these contacts allowed me to conduct my fieldwork in close collaboration with organisations and institutions with expertise on the participation of youth in the military struggle against apartheid. In addition to the invaluable help in constituting a research sample, their knowledge and views on children's involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle gave me a reasonable grounding in the field before proceeding to the interviews. Ultimately, this wealth of information provided me with a good basis to assess the validity and reliability of my research findings.

Finally, I would like to position the type of child soldiering that I have studied in South Africa within the larger picture of child soldiering. In particular, are the child soldiers studied here typical of child soldiering more generally? In order to develop an answer to this question a global survey of the current figures and types of child soldiering would be required. Although the *Global Report on Child Soldiers* (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001) is a significant step in that direction, the specific timeframe of this global report, which covered the period of June 1998 – April 2001, is restricted. For example, South Africa was adopted in this survey, but was accompanied by the comment that 'There are no indications of under-18s in government armed forces' (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001:336). The perception that the experiences and the reasons for participation of the South African child soldiers might be perceived as not representative for the global phenomenon of child soldiers was presented to me during some of the interviews with researchers and practitioners in Cape Town. At the outset of these meetings, I would outline the focus of my PhD

research and the aims of the ILO project *Voices of Young Soldiers* for which I was undertaking a pilot study. In relation to the latter, some would ask me for the consequences that the South African conflict as the pilot study might have on the whole research project. What kind of consequences would the study of persons, who as children participated *voluntarily* in armed conflict, have on the further course of the ILO project? Was there no danger that I was exploring a form of child soldiering, which was or had become atypical in the current global phenomenon? It was not only the voluntary nature of the child soldiering, but also the ideological issues that had been identified by the resistance movements and by the (former) soldiers themselves as the basis for their military recruitment that concerned my discussion partners. It was the fact that my research might confirm the research hypothesis that political, religious or other beliefs sometimes underpin children's decision to participate in armed struggle, which alarmed my discussion partners.

3.5.2.3 Interview Setting

The literature on conducting qualitative interviews advises researchers to choose an interview setting in which the interviewee feels comfortable (Pole and Lampard 2002:42). With regards to the South African case study, this meant that the community centre of the township Guguletu constituted a good location for the first interviews with the APLA comrades. The fact that the schedule of the interviews coincided with a regular meeting of APLA veterans created a social, amicable and relaxed atmosphere. The second interviews of APLA comrades took place in CCR, which is located in the city centre of Cape Town. Having established a certain relationship of trust, I chose to interview them in a separate

room and to attempt to increase the personal character of their accounts. Other former child soldiers chose the office where they were working or the Centre where I was staying as the place for interview.

It might have been worthwhile to conduct some of the interviews with the former child soldiers in their homes. However, I was concerned that the tensions that characterised some of their households and the negative views that their family members held regarding their past involvement in the armed struggle would have rendered it a problematic setting. Some of the research participants shared with me the difficulties they experienced at home, because their parents were disappointed or disapproved of his/her past activism. The parents argued that the child had not only exposed him/herself to great dangers, but had also forgone educational and other opportunities and currently could not provide for his/her family.

3.5.2.4 Issues of Memory Arising in Conducting a Historical Case Study

‘A child can change in a moment. You turn your back for a couple of seconds, and when you look again you find they have already grown into someone else.’

(Parsons 1999:41)

As the little boy who goes in search of his recently befriended caterpillar only to find that a butterfly has taken its place, researchers of children often find the elapsing of time to be their worst enemy. In order to study children, who change rapidly, social scientists need to tackle several methodological challenges, such as the reliability and validity of their research projects. While asking a young adult about past events, experiences and opinions is not as daunting a task as

questioning a butterfly about its past life as a caterpillar, there are additional issues that arise when conducting research on a *historical* case study. As such, the decision to study child soldiering during the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, which came to an end with the first national elections in 1994, rendered the validity of my research findings partly subject to the reliability of interviewees' memories of the events.

This problem requires me to address the question whether researchers can gain knowledge about childhood experiences by drawing upon the recollections of adults. Firstly, Brown, Goldstein and Bjorklund (2000:12) proclaim a contemporary consensus on the unstable character of early infancy and early childhood memories. The concept of 'infantile amnesia' not only refers to adults' inability to remember events that occurred before the age of three, but also to a limited accessibility to memories of things that happened between the age of three and six. As my research aimed at uncovering a period in the child soldiers' lives between the age of eleven and eighteen, and some more general experiences preceding that, the problem of infantile amnesia did not affect this study.

Secondly, Brown et al (2000:10) outline how several studies, using the false-memory paradigm, have found that both children and adults are capable of creating false memories of entire events. Participants in these scientific experiments are typically asked to recall events. While some of these events are true and have been obtained from relatives or friends, others are invented by the researcher. The researcher subsequently seeks to present these true and false events in the same manner across multiple interviews by using different

suggestive techniques, such as the misinformation effect. These studies have found that suggestive 'techniques can lead to a variety of memory distortions' (Brown et al. 2000:10-11). For example, phrasing the question in particular ways may bias the respondents' answers. In addition to taking account of this research finding when interviewing the former child soldiers, I compared their statements with the background information given by their former commanders and current supervisors in order to control for this effect.

Thirdly, Oakes and Hyman (2000) discuss the vital role that memories play in the development, identification and confirmation of the self. 'To create these identity narratives, people must be able to access a vast network of information about their lives' (Oakes and Hyman 2000:45). However, just as Brown et al did in their study, Oakes and Hyman point to factors that might render those memories unreliable. Not only can the process of remembering be distorted by recent interactions or events, by the creation of false memories, but also the self in its turn impacts upon the construction of memories (Oakes and Hyman 2000:46). In the process of developing an integrated narrative, the self might modify or suppress the recollection of certain events that do not fit with the narrative. This argument could be relevant to the analysis of accounts of child soldiers, because these children might have identified with the image of 'victims of war' or 'national heroes' to boost their self-esteem. For example, there is the argument that, in hindsight, the South African children and youth who joined the armed struggle against apartheid were victors and heroes and that this might have affected their memories of the struggle. The former youth members of the armed wings of ANC or PAC might glorify and embellish their actions and emphasise

their voluntary participation. Chapter Six describes how the euphoria of victory for the South African 'freedom fighters' did not last very long.

Finally, Brown et al (2000:9) refer to the important relationship between stress and memory. Freud, for example, 'predicted a negative relationship between stress and memory, with traumatic events being accessible to memory only within highly supportive contexts, such as the therapeutic atmosphere' (Brown et al. 2000:9). This argument increases the importance of establishing a relationship of trust with the research participants in order to gain as complex a picture of the events or period of life as possible *without* causing psychological strain to the interviewee. Trust should also enable research participants to communicate (verbally or physically) to the researcher that the question or the type of questioning needs to be abandoned or that the interview has to be stopped completely.

To conclude, theories on false memory creation have identified a number of factors that might distort children's, but also adults', recollections of past events. Although my research is not affected by the problem of infantile amnesia, issues such as stress or trauma and the distorting influence of self development need to be taken into account when interpreting the data of my interviews. The latter statement emphasises again the importance of corroborating my research observations and claims.

In addition to the question of the reliability of adults' memories of childhood, this research project urged me to take account of the potential impact of social

memory. To what extent are the memories of the former child soldiers coloured by their victories over the apartheid regime, the outcome of the 1994 elections and the current situation in South Africa? The literature has increasingly covered and engaged with the debates surrounding the creation of social memory in South Africa in the post-1994 period and especially with the profound effect of the TRC on the (re)constitution of the official history of apartheid (see for example Krog 1999; Nuttall and Coetzee 1998; Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd 2000). Krog (1999:127), for example, writes:

‘But there is also the invisible audience [of the TRC hearings] – the imagined audience on the horizon somewhere – the narrator’s family, colleagues, the new Government. And every listener decodes the story in terms of truth. Telling is therefore never neutral, and the selection and ordering try to determine the interpretation.’

In order to investigate the relationship between individual and social memory, I not only relied upon the method of focus groups, but also explored different techniques in the semi-structured interviews. On the basis of the literature review, I developed a subset of topics that could help me to examine different kinds of oppression, which the former child soldiers might have suffered from but which had become part of the common-sense knowledge in the post-apartheid period. Hence, the questionnaire³⁶ addressed issues such as education, housing conditions, family relations, employment, and extra-curricular activities. Furthermore, the question ‘could you describe the first time you became aware of

³⁶ Appendices 1 and 2 contain the questionnaires that I used in the fieldwork in Geneva and Cape Town. In order to prepare for my interviews, I drafted a detailed questionnaire. I hereby tried to anticipate one of the problems that characterises the research method of semi-structured interviews. For the latter assumes a research participant who is a fluent speaker, who has – or perceives that s/he has - his/her own perspective on the topic and who is eager or insists upon sharing it with the interviewer.

apartheid?’ was asked at times to gain insight into the child’s first experiences and encounters with the machine of oppression – or to provide an external or ‘beginner’s’ perspective on living in the then South African society. In subsequent interviews, I sometimes posed the questions: How would you describe life in South Africa under the apartheid regime to someone who is not familiar with its history? How would you describe the impact it had on your life? The former question forced parts of the common-sense understanding regarding the conditions under the apartheid regime to become explicit. The latter stimulated former child soldiers to discuss those issues that represented, *for him or her*, the core of apartheid, or the core of his/her life under apartheid.

Finally, I discovered that asking the ‘wrong’ questions also triggered more vivid and detailed answers. Wrong questions or contentious statements aim to challenge popular beliefs or facts. For example, a question such as ‘did you discuss your involvement in the liberation struggle with your parents?’ was generally answered with an amazed ‘No’. While this technique allowed me to gain a better insight into children’s experiences before recruitment, it could have conveyed an image of ignorance or of opposition to the interviewee. Lee (1995:24-5) claims that such caution is particularly warranted when the researcher is benefiting from an insider’s status, because it might negatively affect the dynamics and the course of the interview.

‘[I]nsider status can [...] limit the researcher’s ability to ask questions. The researcher who is a member of a particular culture may invite only incredulity by asking questions about it’.

3.5.3 The Case-Study and Its Relation to the Thesis

My case-study of child soldiering in the anti-apartheid struggle has strengthened my argument that in order to gain a more analytical understanding of why children volunteer, social scientists require an in-depth understanding of the political, social and economic conditions in which they join up and of the meanings that children attach to those situations and their reactions. Although quantitative methods can be geared to gather data on the former and create information on the social distribution of child volunteering, these data have often been used by academics, practitioners and policy-makers to proclaim that ‘the most vulnerable of the vulnerable’ are recruited. The data, which I present in Chapter Five and Six, show that qualitative research constitutes an essential element of the study of children’s participation in armed combat, because it has the potential to uncover the link between macro-, meso- and micro-level factors that increase the risk for members of particular groups of children to be recruited. Moreover, I demonstrate how the data produced by qualitative research methods can strengthen knowledge on the social processes that lead children to consider and, ultimately, opt for a certain mode of action and coping with their dire situation.

However, in reflecting upon the methodology I employed to develop an analytical account of why children volunteer for military participation in a particular context, there are a number of issues to be addressed and which may contribute to future research on the topic. Firstly, I have extensively discussed the limitations of conducting a historical case-study to gain access to children’s motivations for joining an armed group in this chapter. Conducting semi-

structured interviews and focus groups with adults who were recruited and deployed as soldiers during their childhood may have inhibited me from gaining a more accurate or detailed understanding of the dynamic interactions between different factors and of the fluctuating nature of children's social relationships at the time.

However, rather than favouring contemporary analyses of child soldiering, I believe that a combination of historical and contemporary analyses – a longitudinal study – would constitute the most enriching approach. My research experiences suggested that the elapsing of time allowed the former child soldiers to reflect upon their past actions and on what were the underlying causes that made them willing to consider a particular line of action³⁷. On the one hand, the (idiosyncratic) events that triggered their military participation might have come better to the forefront in contemporaneous studies. On the other hand, these events might have overshadowed other factors that at the time seemed ever- and all-present – a constant factor, such as poverty, racism or governmental violence, that could hardly explain variation in behavioural patterns unless the meaning that the child and the peer group s/he joined attributed to those experiences were taken into account (and were taken an interest in). Consequently, both types of research are needed. While I was not able to conduct a study during or immediately after the children's participation in the anti-apartheid struggle, the extensive interest that academics, practitioners and human rights advocates took in the case of apartheid and its terrible impact on civilians, including children,

³⁷ In his research on youth participation in the first *Intifada*, Barber (2000) has used a similar approach.

allowed me to compare and corroborate my findings with previous studies and to discuss my findings with persons who undertook similar research in the 1980s and 1990s, when the child soldiers I interviewed became active.

In addition to gaining knowledge of the factors that informed children's view that the system had to be reformed and, later, overthrown, I could study the evolution of the social relationships between children and adults or their peers. The research method of semi-structured interviews with former child soldiers allowed me to investigate how these relationships changed over time, how children established or renewed their relationships, and who they consulted or engaged in discussions with to make sense and respond to their social environment. For example, while adults in other case-studies of child soldiering have referred to the intergenerational conflicts that were exacerbated in the context of war and human displacement, they have sometimes portrayed children's participation in armed conflict as disobedience, as the product of a-socialised human beings, of persons out of control, as casting aside family responsibilities and as acting in their own interest (Boyden 2003). The interviews with the former child soldiers in South Africa are in line with other studies (see for example McCauley 2002), in that they show that children often perceive themselves as taking on the caring, nurturing role in the family – emotionally or financially. They define their actions – political and later military – as acting in the interest of their families and larger community. These constitute significant data for the development of a more in-depth and complex understanding of why children come to volunteer for armed combat, why they stay on in the military group and how they perceive demobilisation.

My research did not exclude the voices of adults, in that I conducted formal or informal interviews with researchers, practitioners, political and military leaders. While I have criticised the sole or overt reliance of accounts of child soldiers on adult information, the information they gave me was particularly useful in getting a more detailed portrait of the social environment of the children I interviewed and of their peers. The value of this information and of their views on why the children participated reinforces the claim that while the voices of children have been often ignored and urgently require more attention, this should not lead to the exclusion of adult voices, who have another sociological standpoint that help us to complete the picture of factors and processes that lead to under-age recruitment. These different types of data are particularly useful in uncovering the dynamics of events and power struggles that framed children's decision to join the political and later military struggle. Hence, in addition to the greater contribution that a large research sample could have made to the theoretical understanding of child volunteering, a more formal or in-depth study of the adults that had worked or lived with the former child soldiers would have provided me with additional, interesting sources of data.

3.6 Conclusion

I commenced this chapter with a discussion of the first part of my fieldwork, which was set up to illustrate my argument that dominant, western conceptualisations of childhood and children have mobilised high levels of attention and concern regarding child soldiering in the international community. I

subsequently outlined the methodological approach I adopted to examine the theoretical understandings of child soldiering that inform policy-making and programme development at UNHCR. My internship at UNHCR gave me the opportunity to conduct a case-study of a humanitarian organisation that has identified under-age recruitment as one of its five priority concerns in relation to refugee children. Furthermore, I described how my assignments at the two UNHCR departments gave me access to internal documents reporting on its policies and activities in relation to child soldiering. In addition, my position at UNHCR headquarters facilitated the organisation of formal and informal interviews with staff members who, while not formally identified as such, had worked or observed the use and recruitment of children in hostilities. Moreover, the internship could in fact be considered as a form of participant observation that allowed me to explore in greater depth the conceptualisations of children and childhood that underpin UNHCR's perceptions, analyses and responses to child soldiering. Finally, in the first months of 2004, I arranged additional telephone interviews with staff members and external consultants of UNHCR to update and upgrade the information I collected during my internship in 2000-2001. In particular, I explored the extent to which recently accomplished evaluation projects had (re)shaped UNHCR's approach the issue of child soldiering.

Next, I presented a review of the research that has been conducted on child soldiering in order to examine some of the theoretical and ideological interests that have guided it. I showed how the shift from international to intrastate warfare rendered international humanitarian law inadequate to deal with the human tragedies across the globe, in which civilians often constituted the first

casualties. In particular, the UN finding that children had not only become the primary sufferers of those wars, but were also being deployed in military operations, caused international outrage. Human rights activists embarked on a moral quest to ban child soldiering and identified the reporting and monitoring of children's recruitment and use in hostilities as a global priority. The objectives of this global campaign to stop the use of child soldiers and the belief that children were being forcibly or coercively recruited triggered the conflation of what can and should be known about child soldiering. This situation gave way to almost a decade of research into child soldiering that was dominated by quantitative surveys, which served to place this social problem on the conceptual map of social scientists and policy-makers. In addition, these quantitative studies enhanced the general knowledge of the topic by providing information on relative and absolute numbers of child soldiers in different conflict zones and on the social distribution of the phenomenon.

While recognising these positive contributions, I subsequently discussed some of the constraints that the exclusive use of quantitative research methods had on the breadth and depth of research projects. Arguing for a more analytical understanding of children's motivations and experiences of soldiering, I turned to investigate the potential benefits of adopting a qualitative methodological approach. Qualitative methodology has increasingly been considered appropriate when studying social diversity and rapid social change, characteristics of the phenomenon of child soldiering that are increasingly acknowledged. In addition, while the proponents of symbolic interactionism put forward the importance of the meanings that human beings attribute to things and events when studying

social behaviour, the new sociology of childhood took this argument further in stating that children not only have the capacity to make sense of experiences in interaction with others, but also that the resulting meanings might be significantly different from those of adults. This theoretical argument underscored the importance of setting up research studies, which would aim to explore the meanings that children *themselves* attribute to their involvement in armed combat and their own experiences. As qualitative methods are valued for generating and accessing data on the motivation of human action, I decided to opt for a predominantly qualitative approach in my case studies.

The final part of this chapter touched upon a number of practical and ethical challenges that affected the feasibility, validity and representativeness of my research findings and interpretations. While the process of identifying and negotiating access to former child soldiers proved to be the most challenging part of the fieldwork in South Africa, issues of personal safety constrained my freedom in contacting and organising the actual interviews and focus groups. Next, I examined the extent to which a position of political neutrality ensures ethical neutrality in a highly politicised research setting. My experience with former South African child soldiers confirmed the argument of other practitioners and researchers that a position of political neutrality is not only untenable in this kind of context, but might also be considered unacceptable or unethical by the research participants and their gatekeepers. There is, however, a delicate balance between showing one's sympathies to the research participants and engendering false hopes or promising help that cannot be given. I subsequently examined the extent to which those practical and ethical challenges

affected the eventual size, constitution and, ultimately, representativeness of the research sample. Although I could not generalise my findings to the entire population of child soldiers in South Africa, they did allow me to refine theoretical arguments. Relying on the method of theoretical sampling, I subsequently discussed the strategies that I adopted in order to corroborate my research findings and analysis.

It is easy to imagine how the sheer number of factors shaping (and potentially distorting) research on children's *own* motivations for joining military groups and their experiences could discourage researchers and practitioners to engage time and money in qualitative research projects. For if their data and theoretical claims are in the end subjected to the rigorous criteria of sociological research will their theory be blessed or burnt at the stake? The decision to explore such an extensive list of methodological, practical and ethical challenges was not in any way intended to provide further disincentives to those interested in pursuing questions regarding children's reasons for joining armed groups. Instead, it aimed to strengthen the call for a more extensive discussion of methodological questions regarding child soldiering. If researchers and practitioners around the globe are committed to addressing this human rights issue and preventing child soldiering, a more detailed research guide that will yield analytical knowledge on child soldiering is required.

Chapter 4: Conceptualisations of Childhood and Child Soldiering Informing the UNHCR's Approach to Under-Age Recruitment

4.1 Introduction

During the interbellum years (1919-1939) violent conflicts and political turmoil, such as the October revolution in Russia and the Graeco-Turkish war, uprooted over five million people in Europe (UNHCR 2000d:15). Vast movements of population ensued as the Nazi policies regarding Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals and the disabled were enforced in Germany, its annexed and conquered territories. Following World War II, the civil war in Greece and the Cold War produced further refugee flows. In addition to the dire conditions that refugees and displaced persons were living in, NGOs and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were alerted by their legal vulnerability.

'Destitute and unable to earn a living, displaced people and refugees not only found themselves in desperate situations, but also discovered that they could not move on to improve their lot because they had lost the protection of their state of origin. As a consequence they were unable to obtain the necessary travel documents to cross national borders.'

(Joly 1996:2)

In 1923, the League of Nations had appointed Fridtjof Nansen of Norway 'High Commissioner on behalf of the League in connection with the problem of Russian refugees in Europe'. Not only had Nansen obtained the issuing of travel

and identity documents for refugees, but he had also worked towards securing legal status for those who could not be repatriated (UNHCR 2000d:15). The refugee flows in the wake of the First World War and the subsequent legal actions undertaken to redress refugees' loss of *de jure* state protection, laid the foundations of the *UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or Geneva Convention* adopted in 1951 (Joly 1996). In the same year, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly under Article 22 of the UN Charter (UNHCR 2000d:19). 'Together they [the 1951 Geneva Convention and the UNHCR] provided, for the first time, a formal structure for responding to the needs of refugees and standards for the protection of refugees under international law' (UNHCR 2000d:2). In the following years, UNHCR's originally three-year mandate was infinitely extended and the *1967 Protocol* removed both the historical (post-WWII) and geographical ('events occurring in Europe') limitations of the Geneva Convention to make it universally applicable. Although UNHCR's core mandate has not changed since its creation, the scale of UNHCR's operations and the scope of its activities and beneficiaries have gradually increased (Telford 2001; The Economist 2001).

Children and adolescents under the age of eighteen account for more than half of the persons assisted by UNHCR (McNamara 1998:1). Towards the end of the 1980s, refugee children and adolescents came to the forefront of the organisation. The *1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* and the *Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care* (UNHCR 1994) make up the child protection framework for the agency. According to these standards, UNHCR's

policies and programmes should address the special protection needs and rights of refugee children, because ‘their needs, legal status and social status can be significantly different from those of adults, and from each other as well, due to age-related developmental differences’ (UNHCR 1997). The important position of UNHCR in the protection and care of refugee children finds additional support in the observation that it is often one of the first humanitarian organisations to arrive at the scene of mass movement, civil strife and other emergencies (UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2002:1). The latter finding and the fact that UNICEF³⁸ is generally notified of and invited to deal with the problem of child soldiering in a particular area by NGOs and IGOs on the ground, make UNHCR a potential candidate for monitoring governments and armed opposition groups that draft under-aged soldiers in their ranks. But what role has the UNHCR played in the global fight against child soldiering?

4.2 Refugee Children as a Vulnerable Group for Under-Age Recruitment

The preliminary question to ask is why the phenomenon of child soldiers should be of any relevance and interest to UNHCR. In the wake of the two World Wars, the international community granted UNHCR the authority not only to protect and respond to the needs of refugees, but also to devise durable solutions for their plight (UNHCR 2002:21). In developing long-lasting solutions for refugee populations, UNHCR aims to protect them from future uprooting or even from

³⁸ In Chapter Three, I referred to the central position that UNICEF has acquired within UN policy-making and programming programmes for child soldiers.

becoming the cause of further upheaval and violence. It is within this context of tackling the root causes of forced migration and of working towards enduring peace and durable development, that the prevention of child soldiering becomes a key priority for UNHCR.

‘Because the major cause of refugee movements is war, military recruitment of minors is also of concern to UNHCR as a prevention issue. Under-age soldiers are often used to perpetrate atrocities against civilian populations. Recruitment of minors is a highly exploitative practice and is sometimes the precipitating cause of flight.’

(UNHCR 1997:3)

More importantly, because refugee and returnee children are among those with the highest risk of illegal recruitment, UNHCR has a strong mandated interest in ensuring the protection of these children (Office of the Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Children 2000:3; UNHCR Undated-a:1). But why are refugee children at risk of military recruitment and deployment by armed groups? Why are refugee children often referred to as ‘the most vulnerable of the vulnerable’ (Ameratunga 1998:3)?

Brett and McCallin (1996) have identified children living in or in the vicinity of war zones as particularly at risk of military recruitment. Brett and Specht (2004:11; see also Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2004) argue that very few youngsters go looking for war to fight. Instead, ‘[m]ost children get involved because the war comes to them – to their town, village, school, family and takes over their lives’ (Brett 2003:2). As the former Director of UNHCR’s Division of International Protection explains, refugee children suffer a form of a double jeopardy.

‘A denial of their human rights made them refugees in the first place; and as child refugees they are also frequently abused, as the most vulnerable category of an already vulnerable population. Tragically, the risk of human rights violations against refugee children therefore does not end at the crossing of international borders, even where they may have left behind them a series of traumatic experiences.’

(McNamara 1998:2)

The military infiltration of refugee and IDP³⁹ camps, which by humanitarian law should be civilian sites, illustrates how flight from conflict-ridden regions and settlement into camps might not necessarily protect displaced persons from violence and military harassment. Some would even go as far as Blume (1999:35) who describes refugee camps as ‘warehouses of potential [child] soldiers for all sides in conflicts’. My interviews with UNHCR colleagues and communications with branch offices provided me with several reports of military infiltration of refugee and IDP camps, such as in Ethiopia, Sudan, Thailand, Eastern Tanzania and Rwanda. The following example is taken from the case of Thailand, where UNHCR established camps in 1997 in response to the refugee influx from Cambodia. In this particular extract, the interviewee makes reference to entire villages, which escaped the upsurge of violence in Cambodia and resettled in the refugee camps.

‘It soon became clear to UNHCR staff that these villages were still – despite the end of the Pol Pot regime – ruled by the Khmer Rouge. These villages had been located in remote areas of Cambodia and, throughout their entire life, their inhabitants had never come into contact with outsiders. In the refugee camps, they would hardly exchange a word with UNHCR staff and would live in strict accordance to the rules and discipline set by the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge leaders extended their control over this group of refugees from

³⁹ Internally Displaced Person

outside, namely from the Thai-Cambodian border where they were fighting against Cambodian armed forces. *Rumours* in the refugee camp were that Khmer Rouge military leaders or soldiers would regularly infiltrate the camp in order to join their family members, rest and obtain food rations and then return to the frontline. [...] The disappearance of children aged seventeen or eighteen during the night or in the early morning gave an indication that the Khmer Rouge was recruiting children. In addition, camp inhabitants would signal the presence of boy soldiers.’⁴⁰

Both UNHCR staff members and official documents recognise the recruitment of refugee children as a consequence or a primary objective of military infiltration. Those refugee camps, which are located close to conflict zones and state borders, are particularly exposed to such military practices (UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2001a). This is due to the fact that rebel groups often operate from outside the country or immediate war zone. Armed opposition groups, such as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, have set up military training camps and launched attacks from, and often with, the logistic support of neighbouring governments sympathetic to their cause. The recruitment and use of child soldiers have not escaped these developments, as the following account shows:

‘The rebel SPLA⁴¹ has long had a policy of separating boys from their homes and families for military training [...] Thousands of [Sudanese] boys went to the Ethiopian refugee camps hoping for an education and received mostly military training in segregated facilities for “unaccompanied boys”. The SPLA inducted boys as young as eleven into their ranks. The separation of unaccompanied boys from their families continued when the refugees fled back into Sudan in 1991 [...] boys in “unaccompanied minors” schools in Eastern Equatoria were called up in 1994 and 1995, while the SPLA

⁴⁰ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 8 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

⁴¹ The Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA)

continued to recruit minors, a practice it denies. The “unaccompanied boys” under its control now number about 4,500.’

(Hoile 2001:2-3)

Reports of the UNHCR Branch Office Ethiopia confirmed this account. This Office repeatedly expressed its concerns about under-age recruitment in these refugee camps and noted that ‘one group particularly at risk of being recruited are the unaccompanied minor (UAMs) refugees’ (Pouwels 2000, cited from Country Report).

UNHCR headquarters has flagged the problem of the military recruitment and deployment of refugee children and adolescents in the Inter-Office and Field-Office Memorandum of 29 November 2000⁴²:

‘In conflict situations armed groups (State and non-State) seeking new recruits into their armies prey upon minors. This phenomenon is particularly rampant in refugee camps located in close proximity to conflict zones.’

(UNHCR 2000c)

Yu (2002:1) argues that the shift towards internal warfare is increasingly confronting UNHCR with the problem of ‘mixed populations’, in which civilians, combatants and criminals seek refuge from the violent conflict. While some soldiers might be willing to demobilise and apply for refugee status,

‘others may wish to return to their country of origin to continue to fight. Those bent on returning to war may view refugee camps as a place to gain rest and respite between attacks, or as recruiting and/or training ground’.

(Yu 2002:1-2)

⁴² Henceforward referred to as the IOM/FOM of November 2000.

Their presence in the camp not only constitutes a serious security threat to the refugee population, camp personnel and the host state, but also complicates UNHCR's operations as it cannot provide assistance to soldiers (Yu 2002:1,10).

'UNHCR would like to ensure that the camps – refugee or IDP camps – are of, would maintain the humanitarian character and the neutral character, i.e. not influenced by any of the conflict parties and so forth. So from that perspective, UNHCR should, regardless of their age, ensure that nobody will be recruited for military purposes or that nobody would come into the refugee camp for military purposes.'⁴³

Although the exponential increase in intra-State conflicts might have aggravated the problem, UNHCR operations have been affected by the military infiltration of refugee and IDP camps and by under-age recruitment long before the Follow-Up Report to the Machel Study in 1997 identified child combatants as one of the priority areas in relation to refugee children⁴⁴. One of my interviewees gave an account of the arrival of sixty child EPLF⁴⁵ soldiers in a Sudanese refugee camp during the Ethiopia-Eritrea war. When I asked about UNHCR's position, policy or guidelines in relation to the military recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts at the time, the UNHCR staff member gave the following answer:

'These events took place ten years ago. The UNHCR had neither policies nor programmes in relation to child soldiering. Any actions undertaken were the product of common-sense thinking, a sense of humanity and our mandate of protection. Our engagement with the issue was sparked off by the situation of the children and by our commitment to protect them.'⁴⁶

⁴³ Telephone interview with UNHCR staff member, 24 February 2004.

⁴⁴ The *Guidelines on the Protection and Care of Refugee Children* (1994) makes reference to the problem of under-age recruitment and outlines some of the procedures that UNHCR staff should take up to address it.

⁴⁵ Eritrean People's Liberation Front

⁴⁶ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 6 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

This statement raises the question of why has UNHCR moved the issue of child soldiering to the centre of its international protection and assistance to refugee children and adolescents. Why has UNHCR headquarters defined it as one of the five key issues that UNHCR personnel working with refugee youth have to address?

4.3 Child Soldiers Scoring High on the International Agenda – UNHCR’s Response

UNHCR constitutes an example of a humanitarian agency that has been significantly influenced by the child rights movement⁴⁷. As mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter, the CRC and 1994 *Guidelines on the Protection and Care of Refugee Children*, which were commissioned in the wake of the CRC, continue to provide the international protection and assistance framework for UNHCR’s actions in relation to refugee children and youth (Office of the Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Children 2000:1). In compiling a bibliography of UNHCR documents on refugee children, which constituted one of my tasks as an intern in EPAU⁴⁸, I found that, before the publication of the 1993 or 1994 guidelines, such documents were scarce.

This changed significantly with the release of the *UN Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* in 1996 and the subsequent launch of the

⁴⁷ Telephone interview with Beth Verhey, 10 February 2004.

⁴⁸ Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit

international Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers⁴⁹. In UNHCR, the profile of the rights and protection needs of war-affected children rose and triggered an exponential growth of official documents and guidelines, such as the 1997 *UNHCR Strategy for Follow-Up to the Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*⁵⁰. Under the framework of the agency's follow-up strategy to the Machel Study, the Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Children identified five priorities in the organisation's actions towards refugee children: education, separation, sexual exploitation, adolescents and military recruitment.

The document 'Short note on child soldiers', which was prepared by the Office of the Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Children (2001), gives a concise overview of UNHCR's position, activities and achievements with regards to the issue of under-age recruitment. It outlines UNHCR's engagement at the international level, such as advocacy and contribution to the drafting and adoption of the Optional Protocol, and at the field level, such as the creation of 'children's zones of peace' in Sri Lanka. This document follows from the IOM/FOM of 29 November 2000, which flagged the adoption by the UN General Assembly of two Optional Protocols to the CRC⁵¹, explained the ways in which they modified humanitarian law and set out UNHCR's position and role vis-à-vis the prevention of child soldiering. In the same period, the Office of the Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Children also completed the ARC⁵² module on child soldiers (UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2001a). In 1997, the

⁴⁹ For more information, see Chapter Three.

⁵⁰ Telephone interview with Beth Verhey, 10 February 2004.

⁵¹ Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. For further information, see: <http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm>.

⁵² Action for the Rights of the Child

Office had launched the ARC training and capacity-building programme in partnership with Save the Children Alliance to 'improve the capacity and effectiveness of field personnel in identifying and addressing the protection and assistance needs for refugee children' (Valid International 2002:6; see also UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2002). Finally, the production of internal documents, which report the use and recruitment of minors in conflict zones where UNHCR operates and accentuate how UNHCR as an organisation can help to prevent or alleviate this child rights violation, increased.

While the CRC has been widely accepted as one of the sets of standards for the evaluation of UNHCR's protection and assistance activities in relation to refugee children (Office of the Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Children 2002), the Machel study and the international Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers have provided the theoretical framework in which UNHCR's policies and activities regarding child soldiering were to be developed. The recent nomination of under-age recruitment as a policy priority in relation to refugee children and the exponential increase in UNHCR public and internal documents on the topic provide evidence towards this claim. In the remainder of this chapter, I illustrate my argument that the use of dominant, Euro-American conceptualisations of childhood and children in the analysis of children in armed conflict has triggered international attention to the military recruitment and deployment of under-eighteens and have informed the definition of child soldiering in problematic terms. I hereby draw upon a discourse analysis of UNHCR's public and internal documents and of the transcripts of the interviews I undertook with UNHCR

personnel who worked or came in contact with child soldiers during their field operations.

4.4 Discourse Analysis of UNHCR Documents and Texts in Relation to the Prevention of the Use of Child Soldiers

4.4.1 Working Group on a Draft Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict

I start this discussion with the documents that were produced in relation to the drafting of the *Optional Protocol*. UNHCR assisted the drafting of the Optional Protocol through the submission of comments to the inter-sessional open-ended Working Group (UNHCR 2000c) and motivated this as follows.

‘Refugee children, and those recently having voluntarily repatriated to their countries of origin, are among those at highest risk of illegal recruitment. UNHCR thus has a strong mandated interest in well-grounded international legal standards for the protection of children affected by armed conflict.’
(UNHCR Undated-a:1)

This illustrates how UNHCR, as a member of the UN, can engage in humanitarian advocacy and, as such, play an

‘active role in the political arena, encouraging States and non-State actors to acknowledge their responsibility for the causes and consequences of forced population movements and the protection of displaced people’.
(Forsythe 2001:11)

The comments that UNHCR submitted to the Working Group add support to the view that a clearly designated age limit of 18 for all forms of participation is needed, because ‘the risks encountered and the fundamental rights denied are similar, whether direct or indirect and whether involving compulsory or voluntary recruitment’ (UNHCR Undated-a:1). As such, UNHCR concurred with the predominant view in the Working Group that ‘any participation should be precluded, as non-combat participation of children could be just as, or more, dangerous to the child than combat duty’ (UN Economic and Social Council 1997:6; see also UN Economic and Social Council 1995:6). Non-governmental organisations working with refugee children and other war-affected groups pointed out that child soldiers ‘suffered physically and psychologically to the detriment of the full enjoyment of their most fundamental rights’ and asserted that an Optional Protocol to the CRC would ‘strengthen the levels of protection and respect for the rights of the child’ (UN Economic and Social Council 1997:5).

In addition, the emphasis that UNHCR places upon the creation, adoption and ratification of legal instruments in the global fight against child soldiering derives from the assumption that most child soldiers are forcibly or coercively recruited.

‘During the process of the drafting of the Optional Protocol, the UNHCR, UNICEF and the High Commissioner for Human Rights jointly prepared and submitted statements to ban the recruitment and use of children under the age of eighteen in war. However, some State Parties in the Working Group, such as the United States, objected to the total ban of recruitment of under-age persons and ensured that the final draft of the Optional Protocol still allowed

voluntary recruitment by state entities under the age of eighteen. I think the Optional Protocol is nevertheless a useful instrument as we are mostly confronted with forced recruitment when dealing with child soldiering.⁵³

The following extract of UNHCR's submissions to the Working Group on a draft Optional Protocol reinforces this claim:

'The true nature of "voluntary" recruitment is often open to question, especially in refugee or general displacement situations. Many young people in these situations join groups not through the exercise of free choice but rather are coerced through factors such as the need for physical protection, lack of food and care, destitution, indoctrination and pressure, and the hope of making up for loss of family and community.'

(UNHCR Undated-a:1)

In the remainder of the chapter, I examine these different claims about child soldiering in greater depth by assessing the extent to which these resonate in a wider range of documents published by UNHCR and in the views of its staff. I hereby illustrate my argument, developed in Chapter Two, that the theoretical and programmatic significance of child volunteering has been downplayed on the basis of pre-sociological conceptualisations of childhood and child development and/or structuralist theories of social behaviour.

4.4.2 Child Soldiering Leading to Physical Impairment

The physical effects of children's participation in armed combat are at the centre of UNHCR's discourse on child soldiering. The following seminar extract from the former Director of UNHCR's Department of International Protection gives a

⁵³ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 7 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

concise example of how under-age recruitment calls to mind the risks of death, injury and physical disablement:

‘From the Congo, Sierra Leone, and northern Uganda, to Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Colombia, and the Thai/Myanmar border, military and armed groups actively recruit children, either to take direct part in active hostilities, or to carry out different forced activities, such as acting as military porters. ... The recruitment of the girl child into armed conflict, as suicide bombers in Sri Lanka, as human shields in northern Uganda, or as mine-clearers in Iraq, is equally disturbing.’

(McNamara 1998:2)

Country Reports, Annual Protection Reports and my interviews reflect the concerns that staff members have regarding the harsh and brutal nature of fighting that children are involved in and the high number of casualties that result from that. Field officers in Thai refugee camps and in Sri Lankan IDP camps expressed great concern about the consistently lowering of the age of recruits as the conflicts in Sri Lanka and on the Thai-Cambodian borders raged on and the ranks of the LTTE and Khmer Rouge depleted⁵⁴. With regards to Sri Lanka, my interviewee described how field staff regularly saw child corpses on the tractors carrying bodies of army and LTTE cadres and lying in the morgues with gun wounds. In addition to the confirmation given by medical personnel working in the morgues, field officers reported on their visits to hospitals where LTTE child soldiers, who had been captured by the Sri Lankan army, were receiving care for their wounds.

⁵⁴ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 8 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters. Interview with UNHCR staff member, 9 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

In addition to these physical effects of children's direct participation in combat activities, the ARC manual refers to those of children's military training and work in auxiliary positions to the military group (UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2001a). The negative effects of a poor diet, unsanitary living conditions and physical abuse are not only assumed to be particularly high, but also of a long-lasting nature, because children and adolescents are affected in the midst of their physiological and physical maturation processes. The ARC manual goes on to describe the sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies that girl soldiers suffer from and refers to 'added health complications associated with self-administered or incompetent abortions' (UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2001a:39). Finally, several of my interviewees stressed the need for detoxification programmes to deal with former boy soldiers who had been given drugs during their time with the military groups in Sierra Leone and Guinea⁵⁵.

4.4.3 Child Soldiering Resulting in Psychological Impairment

The psychological state of (former) child soldiers constituted a second concern among the UNHCR staff I interviewed. In line with the dominant view in the Working Group on a draft Optional Protocol (UN Economic and Social Council 1997:6), they deemed minors not to have the maturity to cope with horrid experiences of soldiering. For example, in reflecting upon their visits of LTTE girl soldiers who had been captured by the government army, UNHCR field officers in Sri Lanka wrote in their reports that the girls were suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and were urgently requiring

⁵⁵ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 19 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters. Interview with UNHCR staff member, 20 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

psychotherapeutic counselling⁵⁶. An article on child soldiers in Sierra Leone, which was published by UNHCR's *Refugees Magazine* (2003:26), not only reiterates this anxiety about the traumatising experiences of child soldiering, but also about the possibilities of eventual recovery: 'These youngsters became little more than highly dangerous zombies who, even if they survived and escaped the war, were in need of months or years of specialized care'.

The idea that psychosocial counselling constitutes an essential part of any strategy towards the demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of former child combatants is put across in UNHCR official documents and guidelines. The 1997 evaluation report proclaimed psychotherapy to be particularly important for adolescents, who were identified as the age group that is the most psychologically affected by war. 'They are old enough to understand the dangers of war but have not developed the maturity to cope with the stress, are less receptive to family support than younger children and experience life in extremes' (Inspection and Evaluation Service 1997:17). In fact, the UNHCR Executive Committee (2000:5) has described counselling as the primary way in which UNHCR can provide assistance to demobilised soldiers. It gives the example of West Timor, where

'UNHCR and other agencies are also working with former youth militia members to help them come to terms with their past and establish realistic new plans and priorities.'

(UNHCR Executive Committee 2000:5)

Similarly, Annual Protection Reports stress the psychosocial programmes that UNHCR field and branch offices set up for child soldiers in collaboration with

⁵⁶ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 9 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

UNICEF, Save the Children Fund (SCF) and local NGOs (Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme 1998:5). The 1999 Liberia Annual Protection Report, for example, refers to:

'[...] Sierra Leonean children who were forcibly conscripted by various rebel groups. SCF (UK) continued working with this group during the reporting period. They have been identified and their special needs are addressed in order to facilitate their reintegration back into their communities.'

(UNHCR 2000b:9)

The belief that psychological counselling should be a standard element of any humanitarian intervention organised for regions or communities affected by under-age recruitment was also put forward in several of my interviews with UNHCR staff. For example, the interviewee familiar with the situation in Sri Lanka called for the extension of UNHCR initiatives from advocacy to rehabilitation and, as such, for the allocation of more human and financial resources to child soldiers who had been released from the LTTE and who had 'no knowledge, no family outside the LTTE'⁵⁷. The following interview extract shows the frustration that arises when this is not the case:

'In Cambodia, after the Pol Pot regime, the humanitarian agencies were confronted with a totally traumatised population. The psychosocial rehabilitation programmes that were set up to deal with the situation were inadequate. Similarly in Liberia, the programmes that were suggested by UNICEF to address the needs and rights of the ex-child soldiers were too superficial. UNICEF provided vocational training, but no psychosocial counselling that damaged kids need.'⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 20 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

⁵⁸ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 19 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

This shows that, while the monitoring, documenting and reporting of under-age recruitment and advocacy initiatives to sensitise governmental and rebel armed groups are considered important, the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers who arrive in refugee or IDP camps seem to be a recurring and/or higher priority concern for UNHCR personnel.

4.4.4 Child Soldiering Provoking Moral Derailment and Social Deviance

UNHCR personnel are not only preoccupied with the post-traumatic stress that child soldiers are presumed to suffer from, but also with their moral development. My interviewees would often describe the horrific acts of violence that child soldiers had perpetrated in the conflict zone they had been stationed, such as in Sierra Leone and Liberia⁵⁹.

‘Under the influence of drugs, the pressure of adults and fear, these child combatants had been responsible for committing the most – and also the most cruel – atrocities during the civil war in Liberia. A similar observation was made during the reign of terror under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. The type of military training that these children receive robs them from the civilising experiences that are required to become an adult and, as such, diverts them from the normal path of growing up. Instead, the military training and life turns the children into killing machines with no conscience. These children commit atrocities and do things that adults would find very hard to do.’⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 20 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.
Interview with UNHCR staff member, 21 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

⁶⁰ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 19 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

In a discussion of the social characteristics of the children and adolescents that the Taliban recruited and the tasks they were assigned, a UNHCR staff member, who formerly worked in Afghanistan, referred to

‘those boys who did not belong to or serve the army, but the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Elimination of Vice. These boy combatants were hated and despised by both the Afghan people and by members of the Taliban as they committed terrible acts against men, women, children and the elderly. For example, this group of boys would beat up in public women whose ankles were not covered, or men whose hairstyles resembled Western models. This behaviour stands in stark contrast to the norms dominating Afghan – and, in general, Muslim – societies where women are highly respected and would never be hit, especially in public. These groups of boys obeyed different norms. They were very young – a similar observation was made in Cambodia with regards to the Khmer Rouge.’⁶¹

These interview excerpts illustrate the concerns that UNHCR have about the norms and values that these children are exposed to during their time with the military group. UNHCR personnel not only suggested the ease with which children can be morally moulded by adults or adult-instigated actions, but also implied the (pre-sociological) conception that children, without the proper forms of education and discipline, are tempted to engage in evil or abnormal behaviour. Will these children be able to function outside the military group or in a peaceful society? Some practitioners and researchers argue that child recruits undergo a process of ‘asocialisation’ in the military group and, consequently, require a period of ‘resocialisation’ in the wake of military involvement (Verhey 2001). For example, the ARC manual suggests that child soldiers

‘have spent a significant part of their childhood in a strictly hierarchical structure and have experienced a socialisation process which serves the purposes of a military command. Clearly such experiences may make it

⁶¹ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 13 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

difficult for children, upon release, to adjust and to re-learn new codes of behaviour and how to develop relationships not based on power and fear.’
(UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2001a:29)

In addition to the immaturity of the child, UNHCR staff members sometimes pointed towards other (socio)biological factors that are presumed to interact with the process of manipulation and indoctrination of child combatants. For example, the following interviewee referred to the ways in which gender identities interfered with the demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration of former boy soldiers in Sierra Leone.

‘By the time that I left Sierra Leone, more progress had been achieved with the girls than with the boys who had been involved in the civil war. There are several reasons for this difference. Firstly, girl soldiers were one of the first groups to be released by the rebel groups and, therefore, there had been more time to work with them. Secondly, the girls had been less involved in the power struggle of the military group and were not under the same influences as the boys were. The boy soldiers had been subjected to manipulation and brainwashing. They had been offered, and eventually became addicted to, drugs. In addition, the combination of their masculine identity and their yearning for authority had stimulated them to affiliate with – what seemed at the time – a winning cause.’⁶²

Finally, several interviewees referred to the physical and social isolation of the wider society that typifies the location and organisation of military (training) camps and is assumed to maximise the potential for indoctrination. In the above, I inserted an extract with an UNHCR staff member who described how the extreme isolation of some Cambodian villages had allowed the Khmer Rouge to

⁶² Interview with UNHCR staff member, 20 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

retain its power over the communities – even when these settled in refugee camps in Thailand⁶³. The child combatant's separation or isolation from parents, caregivers or family – a common feature of under-age recruitment and training⁶⁴ – is perceived as particularly problematic within the theoretical framework that allocates an essential role to parents in stimulating and safeguarding children's developmental processes. On the basis of the following account of LTTE girl soldiers in Sri Lanka, the interviewee highlights the negative outcome of this kind of socialisation.

On the basis of their interviews with captured girl soldiers in hospitals and detention centres, UNHCR personnel in Sri Lanka reported⁶⁵ that, although some expressed remorse about the activities they had engaged in and were burdened by feelings of guilt and shame, others claimed that they would continue to fight upon their release. In addition to referring to the LTTE leader as the saviour of the Tamil people, these girls often portrayed their military unit as a closely knit group, as a family. Former girl soldiers would describe how the members of the military unit looked after each other and they would still burst into tears when talking about the ones lost in battle. The UNHCR staff member explained that 'the children who join the LTTE often do so at a very young age and,

⁶³ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 8 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

⁶⁴ For example, reports of UNHCR staff in Sri Lanka referred to cases where parents had searched for children who disappeared from school and had pleaded with commanders at military posts, but who had been denied access to their children. On the part of the children, former LTTE soldiers confirmed that they were not given permission to see their parents unless they had engaged significantly in battle. In relation to the sixty EPLF child soldiers who had arrived in a Sudanese refugee camp, the UNHCR interviewee described EPLF's prohibition of contact with parents as the primary reason for children's departure or escape of the training camps.

⁶⁵ Due to the confidential nature of the documents that were given to me, I cannot provide direct citations.

consequently, are mostly educated and trained by the LTTE'⁶⁶. The interviewee continued that, because of their premature separation of parents or caregivers, these children emotionally attach themselves to members of the military group. In addition to the negative effects that children's moral development is assumed to suffer when military commanders step into the shoes of parents or traditional caregivers, the lack of emotional bonds and social networks outside the LTTE is seen as a major obstacle to child combatants' rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Having no recollection of their biological family due to early separation or having been rejected by them because of their military engagement, some of the LTTE children were eager to rejoin their military group.

This overview of (explicit) statements on child soldiering that UNHCR official document and personnel have made shows that presociological conceptualisations of the child often inform UNHCR's discourses on child soldiering. In the following interview excerpt, an external consultant to UNHCR confirms this finding:

'It's all about psychosocial and physical effects, so very "child as victim, as helpless, mouldable, not an actor in their own right"-conceptualisation. [...] for the most part you will see the conceptualisation of children as something you *deal with*, rather than *work with*.'⁶⁷

Next, I examine those understandings of childhood and child soldiering that are embedded in UNHCR's strategies to prevent under-age recruitment.

⁶⁶ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 9 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

⁶⁷ Telephone interview with Beth Verhey, 8 March 2004.

4.4.5 Monitoring, Documenting and Reporting the Use and Recruitment of Children by Armed Groups or Forces

The memo of guidance sent out by DIP in November 2000 defined UNHCR's role as preventing the use and recruitment of children under the age of eighteen and assigned Protection Officers of UNHCR field offices the task of monitoring, documenting and reporting any violations of the Optional Protocol (UNHCR 2000c).

'As is set out in the Follow-Up to the Machel study, this is because they [UNHCR] are the first to go in situations of mass displacement and armed conflict and they have offices that are out there and can gather first-hand data on the extent of the under-age recruitment. So the message sent out by this IOM/FOM, in particular, and by UNHCR headquarters, in general, is that field officers should monitor, that when they are walking in the camps and surrounding areas and are talking to the implementing partners who might have access to areas where UNHCR doesn't have any presence, that they should make sure that the issue of under-age recruitment is on the agenda, that reports are being made, and that appropriate actions is undertaken. Furthermore, as this data on under-age recruitment is being gathered, Protection Officers need to link in within the system, which consists of the NGOs and IGOs in the field or outside who have specialist knowledge on the issue and/or are the appropriate bodies to provide information on under-age recruitment to so that it can be publicised or used for advocacy campaigns.'⁶⁸

The following interview excerpt illustrates the kind of activities that field staff have undertaken towards fulfilling this responsibility.

'As a Protection Officer, I engaged in activities to raise awareness about under-age recruitment and children's rights and co-operated with the Tanzanian police in order to arrest the recruiters. On one occasion, we knew about a hundred and seventy children who had been recruited and were being transferred to Burundi and Congo to fight for armed forces or groups. We

⁶⁸ Telephone interview with former UNHCR staff member, 12 March 2004.

succeeded in capturing the recruiters and reclaiming the children. Those children, who were under the age of sixteen, were returned to their parents. The others, who according to the Tanzanian Penal Court are responsible for their acts, received corporal punishment (eight lashes).⁶⁹

However, in spite of the 1997 Follow-Up Strategy to the Machel Study identifying child recruitment as a priority concern regarding refugee children and the IOM/FOM requiring Protection Officers to report on any related activities undertaken⁷⁰, Annual Protection or Country Reports included few examples of the actions carried out by UNHCR field staff to prevent the military recruitment and use of children⁷¹. If the issue did appear, the comments of Protection Officers would often be short and vague and predominantly signal the involvement of UNHCR in DRR programmes. A former UNHCR staff member, with whom I shared this observation, underscored the validity of this finding and explained that:

‘The fact that the issue of under-age recruitment is included as an element in Annual Protection Reports is the result of the guidelines. In light of the guidelines provided by DIP that reporting in the Annual Protection reports should include information on, or be organised on the basis of, the five priority areas, Protection Officers in the field might think: “We should at least put three lines on under-age recruitment”. But the question is: “Is it a real strategy on the part of the field or branch office based on a coherent analysis?”. Even if under-age recruitment is not an issue of concern in the country, it would be interesting if field and/or Protection Officers would

⁶⁹ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 7 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

⁷⁰ Telephone interview with UNHCR staff member, 24 February 2004.

⁷¹ Although I make this claim on the basis of my consultation of Annual Protection and Country Reports up until 1999, my telephone interviews at the beginning of 2004 allowed me to confirm that the state of reporting on under-age recruitment has not changed significantly since then.

provide an explanation along the lines of: "Under-age recruitment is not an issue of concern to the local office, because of this, this and this reason".⁷²

Some of the UNHCR staff members or associates whom I interviewed at the beginning of 2004 acknowledged that the limited number of UNHCR activities in relation to under-age recruitment and the absence of a coherent and holistic approach partly derived from an inadequate, common-sense understanding of child soldiering.

'A lot of the writing and promotion in the last less than ten years on the topic of child soldiers and [the claim] that more attention needs to be paid to it, has very much been from child rights organisations and the idea that they [children] are especially vulnerable [to military recruitment and deployment], that there are these particular physical and psychosocial effects, and that's what should mobilise our sympathy and our actions. And some of that is true, but then, especially I feel for an effective response, without child participation we don't know best what to do, we overlook what their own decisions were and in joining, if that was the case, rather than being more forcibly recruited.'⁷³

On the contrary, the interviewees of 2001 would repeatedly emphasise the lack of political will and of financial and human resources as the main obstacles to UNHCR's prevention of children's military recruitment.

'Then there is the issue of politics... The UNHCR wishes to have a significant impact on the prevention of under-age recruitment, but armed groups look upon refugee camps as sources of recruits. For example, in Colombia children serve as combatants in the national army as well as in the armed opposition groups. In Sudan, the SPLA guaranteed UNICEF that they would refrain from recruiting any soldiers under the age of eighteen and

⁷² Telephone interview with former UNHCR staff member, 12 March 2004.

⁷³ Telephone interview with Beth Verhey, external consultant to UNHCR, 8 March 2004.

would demobilise the under-age soldiers currently present in their ranks. They did not live up to that promise. In contrast, the United States is determined to recruit anyone above the age of sixteen who voluntarily joins with the consent of their parents.’⁷⁴

They would frequently express their frustration about the negotiations that their offices started with armed groups or forces to create ‘children’s zones of peace’, but which had only led to broken promises⁷⁵. In line with this finding, the 1997 evaluation team concluded that the military recruitment of children and adolescents is ‘a common concern among UNHCR personnel in the field, but little preventative action has been taken, due largely to the view that nothing much can be done beyond appealing to local authorities’ (Inspection and Evaluation Service 1997:10). The following interviewee sheds light on this finding by claiming that, because of the legal orientation of UNHCR, the lack of political will to sign, ratify and enforce the Optional Protocol is seen as a major obstacle to the (effective) prevention of under-age recruitment.

‘I can also understand from another angle, UNHCR being a protection or more legally oriented organisation, what we tend to do is that, when we do have a report of children being recruited from the camp, we normally bring that issue up with the relevant authorities in that country. Our focus would be on the negotiation on information supply and hopefully the authorities would take action. UNHCR does not normally directly get involved in taking some actions in preventing the military recruitment. [...] We sometimes entirely have to depend on the willingness and preparedness of the host country, host government to work on this issue.’⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 7 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

⁷⁵ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 9 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

⁷⁶ Telephone interview with UNHCR staff member, 24 February 2001.

In the wake of the 2002 evaluation of UNHCR's activities in relation to refugee children, the idea that UNHCR has to go beyond the legal and physical aspects of protection has gained greater ground⁷⁷. In the next sections, I analyse the two other elements of UNHCR's official strategy towards the prevention of under-age recruitment, which consist of family tracing and reunification and education and which could represent a move towards the *social* protection of refugee children and adolescents. Although the actual extent to which these strategies are employed by UNHCR staff in the field might be limited or remain largely unknown to the organisation's headquarters⁷⁸, I examine these strategies to grasp how and why UNHCR personnel perceive them as inhibiting the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict.

4.4.6 Family Tracing and Reunification

UNHCR headquarters present family tracing and reunification as a key strategy in relation to under-age recruitment. 'UNHCR programmes in several countries have ... shown that family reunification is a principal means of rehabilitating child soldiers.' (UNHCR Undated-b:5). The 1997 evaluation report recommended that projects for war-affected children incorporate measures to strengthen and restore family relationships in order to 'establish a safe, normal and dependable environment for minors' (Inspection and Evaluation Service 1997:17). The importance attached to family tracing and reunification not only derives from children's presumed need to establish stable and enduring emotional relationships (UNHCR and Save the Children Alliance 2001a:35), but

⁷⁷ Telephone interview with UNHCR staff member, 24 February 2001.

⁷⁸ Telephone interview with UNHCR staff member, 24 February 2001.

also from the claim that most children who are recruited in armed groups are unaccompanied children. For example, a UNHCR interviewee states that:

‘the advisor [for refugee children] in West-Africa once said: ‘If possible, we don’t have a special programme for these children [child soldiers] to avoid stigmatisation. We try to treat them as other unaccompanied children and aim at family reunification.’⁷⁹

Although no one would dispute the crucial role that parents play in securing the physical survival and personal development of their children, it seems that the ‘question whether the family environment is invariably the best context for all children and whether it always furthers the best interests of the child’ is sometimes overlooked in UNHCR’s policy-making and programme-development in relation to child soldiering (Mann and Ledward 2000). The latter often fails to taken into account the reports of UNHCR field officers and the considerable experience of UNHCR staff at headquarters who were confronted with the issue of under-age recruitment in the field. Whereas the Sri Lanka office observed the difficulty of reintegrating (former) child soldiers who have no recollection or emotional ties with their biological family or community of origin, the account of the EPLF child soldiers who arrived in the refugee camps in Sudan provided evidence towards the argument that children are sometimes recruited with the consent of their parents or caregivers. Rather than presuming neglect on the part of these parents or caregivers, my interviewee proposed that in entrusting the care and education of their children to the EPLF, these parents had the best interests of their children at heart.

⁷⁹ Telephone interview with UNHCR staff member, 30 March 2004.

‘As the parents of these children were often very poor, the recruitment of their children cannot merely be portrayed as kidnapping or abduction. Parents were often convinced that the EPLF would improve the living conditions of their children, such as food or a more nutritious diet. In addition, they believed that it would provide their children with better prospects for the future. For example, the education that the EPLF offered their new recruits was perceived amongst the population as a being model for education.’⁸⁰

4.4.7 Education

Education constitutes the third component of UNHCR’s strategy in relation to former child soldiers. UNHCR considers the access to education to be a right of all refugee children and adolescents and an important tool of protection (Valid International 2002:20). When asked about the ways in which UNHCR protects refugee children and adolescents from military recruitment and deployment, a staff member at headquarters argued that: ‘Protection is of course providing the regular programmes for children, i.e. mainly education. First, education is knowledge is power, knowledge is empowerment.’⁸¹ Several interviewees emphasised the positive impact that education can have on the lives of children by helping them make sense of their day-to-day experiences and reaching out alternative views and sources of information on the conflict. As such, education is construed as a buffer against the malicious attempts of community leaders and military commanders to indoctrinate children and feed them to the hungry-for-soldiers armed groups.

‘The LTTE employs a very subtle strategy of recruitment. A couple of LTTE members who have dynamic personalities pay several visits to a family where they ask for a meal. These dynamic persons start making conversation with a

⁸⁰ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 6 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

⁸¹ Telephone interview with UNHCR staff member, 30 March 2004.

child of the house and try to make them enthusiastic about joining the movement. For example, they would ask the child: "Don't you know we are fighting for the Tamil cause? Aren't you proud to be a Tamil?" This psychological strategy leaves the child wishing to be part of the crowd, of the movement, and willing to fight for his/her country or people. This recruitment strategy and the children's reason for joining the movement are similar to the case of Palestinian children and their participation in the conflict. On the face of it, this recruitment of children seems voluntary, but children should not be recruited.'⁸²

With regards to the 'voluntary' participation of Pakistani youth in the war in Afghanistan, the following interviewee pinpoints religious or political indoctrination as accounting for the behaviour of children and their caregivers.

'Parents in Pakistan send their children to the Madrasat School, which is a Koran school where children learn discipline and the law of the Koran. After the children have finished this school and high school, they go to the frontline in Afghanistan where they fight for Allah. They start fighting between the age of sixteen to eighteen. When they are made prisoners of war, they do not know what they are doing there.'⁸³

Recognising how schools can contribute to the perpetuation of the conflict through the selective teaching of history, religion and culture (Inspection and Evaluation Service 1997:10), UNHCR (Undated-b:10) proclaims that the 'strategic use of education can [...] help prevent conflict'. In particular, UNHCR considers peace education and campaigns to raise awareness about child rights to be an important element in the prevention of the military recruitment of refugee children. The 1999 Annual Protection Report of the Democratic Republic of

⁸² Interview with UNHCR staff member, 9 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

⁸³ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 6 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

Congo describes how a 'programme on Peace Education has just begun in the schools of the sites hosting refugees. It aims to promote a culture of peace among the child refugees in cooperation with UNESCO' (UNHCR 2000a:10). Similarly, in order to prevent refugee and internally displaced children from being used and recruited in armed combat, Brett [, 2001 #470:19; translation by author] claims that they require an enhanced form of protection, which should comprise initiatives, such as

'the systematic declaration and registration of all births, the prevention of family separations and, if it is already too late, measures towards family reunion, education for everyone (and this includes all girls), even during conflicts. Without forgetting a key element: the children need to know their rights.'

The underlying assumption is that if (refugee and IDP) communities, families and children are aware of children's rights, children will refrain from participating voluntarily in armed combat and communities will explore methods to prevent or obstruct forced or coercive recruitment of under-age children⁸⁴ (Verhey 2002:2).

UNHCR also describes education and vocational training as providing refugee children and youth with structured activities, which promote a sense of stability and children's healthy development. Moreover, the significance of education for work with war-affected children has recently received a boost in UNHCR as studies of child volunteering show that, by keeping adolescents busy, these programmes neutralise one of the most important reasons for adolescents volunteering for armed combat: boredom and idleness.

⁸⁴ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 9 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

‘Education at the same time is a strategy to prevent idleness and boredom and redundancy. Most kids are recruited at the age of adolescence when they are active and when they need something to do. So, regular education programmes and vocational skills training programmes are the main practical prevention strategies.’⁸⁵

In addition to preventing children from falling into the clutches of the military, the following account of activities organised for former boy soldiers in Sierra Leone shows how education and – here – vocational training are also used as strategies to prevent demobilised soldiers from returning to their military groups (see also UNHCR Undated-b:5; Inspection and Evaluation Service 1997:10):

‘Some of the former boy soldiers were involved in building a car in body shops. They would construct these cars from scratch by using burnt or old cars that were scattered in the neighbourhood. This kind of vocational training was beneficial to the boys, because it kept them occupied and taught them certain skills. To keep these children away from the cause, I think that more efforts to organise similar activities is needed.’⁸⁶

The vulnerability of bored refugee adolescents to military recruitment campaigns was reiterated in an article published by Refugees magazine. The article describes how the refugee camp Nicla in Ivory Coast, which is located in the vicinity of a hot border and an ongoing conflict, has become a warehouse for military recruits.

‘It is easy to understand what young refugees find attractive about a soldier’s life. [...] The surrounding areas of Nicla have become *off limits*. Piled together in their camp, they do not have a job, they do not have money, poverty spreads, there are scarce possibilities of education and few other activities are offered to refugees, for whom only boredom, growing frustration and fear remain. In those circumstances many come to the conclusion that

⁸⁵ Telephone interview with UNHCR staff member, 30 March 2004.

⁸⁶ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 20 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

they have no other choice but to “join”. Others are attracted by the prospect of an exciting life and brutal power yielded by who(m)ever holds a gun.’

(Rifugiati 2003:19, translation by author)

While the significance of providing access to education for refugee children in order to create a sense of stability and routine and to fight boredom should not be downplayed, the meanings that children, families and communities attach to (different forms of) education in relation to their social context needs to be taken into account when developing strategies to prevent under-age recruitment.

‘And I think in the case of child soldiers, it is fundamental – certainly in the example you are trying to explore about volunteering – the various socio-cultural dynamics that lead to a child actually having a positive experience in terms of empowerment, or stature or value and in terms of having volunteered [...], are very *different*. And I think we’re *kidding* ourselves if we really think that, if we could get a 100% secondary education in refugee camps, it would actually prevent child soldiering. H’m ... those things *are* important, but they are important in terms of the *environment* that’s there for children.’⁸⁷

In line with the account of the EPLF child soldiers who arrived in a Sudanese refugee camp, the following interviewee shows that a recurrent incentive for children to (voluntarily) join a military group is ‘good’ education, i.e. education that holds the promise of social mobility.

‘Jamiat al Islami, a small political party in Pakistan, has organised schools for Afghan orphans in Pakistan. It gives orphans the opportunity to go to school, to get a “good” education, which in turn ensures them of a better status in society and future prospects. They are educated in a certain way, in that they receive a lot of religious and political classes. The latter explains the high level of recruitment or participation of these youngsters in the conflict in Afghanistan. The society and culture of the Pashtuns is based upon a clan

⁸⁷ Telephone interview with Beth Verhey, external consultant to UNHCR, 10 February 2004.

system and, subsequently, one way to gain a higher social status is by receiving a good education.’⁸⁸

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter takes up the thread of Chapter Two, in that it presents a case-study of how dominant Euro-American conceptions of childhood and children have not only triggered a heightened interest in the issue of child soldiers, but have also informed its definition as a social problem. This chapter began by explaining why the use or recruitment of children in hostilities is a matter of concern to UNHCR. The shift towards internal warfare has resulted in the uprooting of ‘mixed populations’, in that not only civilians, but also armed elements, seek refuge. While some of the latter might renounce their military status and apply for refugee status in neighbouring states, UNHCR personnel are increasingly confronted with the presence of armed elements in camps who seek rest, food and additional recruits. The recruitment of refugee children is a consequence, or sometimes primary objective, of these kinds of military infiltration. Given that UNHCR’s mandate obliges it to protect and find durable solutions for refugees, of whom more than half are children, and that refugee children have been identified as particularly at risk of military recruitment, it raises expectations of UNHCR’s involvement in the global fight against child soldiering.

In order to examine the accounts of child soldiering that underpin the way in which UNHCR perceives and responds to the issue, I drew upon the literature

⁸⁸ Interview with UNHCR staff member, 13 February 2001, Geneva: UNHCR headquarters.

review and semi-structured interviews that I conducted during and after my internship at UNHCR. On the basis of a discourse analysis of these documents and texts, I found that UNHCR, as many other humanitarian organisations, has been markedly influenced by the child rights movement and, of particular relevance to this thesis, by the international campaigns launched by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. The latter not only triggered an exponential increase in UNHCR documents and guidelines on the topic, but also had a profound impact on the conceptualisations of the child and child development that affect UNHCR's perceptions, analyses and reactions to children's participation in armed combat. In Chapter Two, I argued that pre-sociological notions of the child, such as the 'innocent', 'evil' and 'naturally developing' child, can still be traced among the dominant Euro-American conceptualisations of children and, as such, continue to inform contemporary childrearing norms and practices in the West. Furthermore, I have referred to the argument that some of these conceptualisations, such as that of the 'naturally developing' or 'universal' child have become embedded into the CRC. By using the CRC as a benchmark for evaluating the state of children around the world, these context- or culturally-specific theories have been exported and used for the study of childhood in other regions in the world (see for example Boyden 1997; Reynolds 1998).

The *1994 Guidelines on the Protection and Care of Children* constitutes one of the first UNHCR documents to make reference to the problem of under-age recruitment and testifies that the CRC continues to set the standards for UNHCR's work in relation to refugee children. A further analysis of UNHCR

documents strengthened my argument⁸⁹ that the documentation of the physical and psychosocial effects of child soldiering has been so significant in raising awareness and gathering global support for the abolition movement that the humanitarian and academic community have allocated more financial and human resources to this aspect of child soldiering than to any other. The detrimental impact of children's indirect or direct participation in armed combat is at the centre of UNHCR's discourse on child soldiering and stems from an understanding of children as cognitively and physically immature. Precisely because the UNHCR sees children across the globe going through a predetermined set of biological and cognitive learning stages, the (malevolent and long-term) effects that soldiering has on children can be universalised or, alternatively, rendered independent of the social context in which children take up arms. As my analysis of the submissions that UNHCR made to the Working Group drafting the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict illustrated, this has favoured the argument that all forms of child soldiering should be prohibited.

The argument that child soldiers suffer these effects regardless of the circumstances in which they were recruited, has in turn reduced the incentive for humanitarian organisations to gain a more analytical and contextualised understanding of why children participate and especially volunteer (Nkudabagenzi 2002:93, translation by author). Moreover, my findings that UNHCR's official documents define under-age recruitment as a 'highly exploitative practice' (UNHCR 1997:3), typify the activities that child soldiers

⁸⁹ See Chapter Three.

undertake as 'forced' and 'disturbing' (McNamara 1998:2) and portray military groups as 'preying on minors' (UNHCR 2000c) go further towards illustrating the argument that this humanitarian agency considers the conception of children's voluntary participation as highly problematic or false. As in the following citation, children are widely perceived as more likely to succumb to the pressure of adults to partake in hazardous activities, because of their physical and cognitive immaturity (UNHCR Executive Committee 2000:1).

'During flight, they are often the first to die on the road, victims of disease and exhaustion. They are sexually exploited and many young girls are forced into prostitution. An estimated 250,000 youngsters have been dragooned into becoming fighters in civil wars across the globe.'

(Ameratunga 1998:3)

In the final part of the chapter, I demonstrated how the three elements of UNHCR's official strategy towards child soldiering, namely monitoring, documenting and reporting under-age recruitment, education and family tracing and reunification, reflected these conceptualisations of child soldiering and childhood. While recognising the importance of these strategies to prevent under-age recruitment, I argued that the meanings that refugee children, families and communities attach to particular forms of, for example, education and relationships between children and parents/caregivers needed to be taken into account.

In Chapter Five and Six, I discuss the second part of my fieldwork, which consisted of a case-study of children's military participation in the South African anti-apartheid. In my analysis, I integrate the social context and voices of

Chapter 5: Child Soldiering in South Africa - The Role of the Family and the Education System

5.1 Introduction

In the autumn of 2001 I spent two months in the city of Cape Town, the most southern point of the African continent⁹⁰. Over a cup of Rooibos tea or a glass of Windhoek beer, South Africans introduced me to the history of this nation. They taught me how to pick up and follow the scent of the legacy of the apartheid period. I travelled along a trail of blood and destruction, pain and humiliation that the apartheid system had left in pursuit of race segregation and white dominion as I searched for an understanding of the complex social reality of South Africa. I unflaggingly sought answers to questions that seemed to multiply overnight. As a stranger arriving in this country, I was immediately struck by the poverty and inequality that colours the landscape from Cape Town airport to the city centre. My arrival coincided with the climax of what had been an exceptionally wet winter. A storm was blowing up over the Cape Peninsula and, in the next twenty-four hours, waves of more than fifteen meters would be registered on the Atlantic seaside. While the storm was wailing outside my room in All Africa House, a university residence, the rain was flooding the township areas and the wind was tearing at its shacks – its matchbox houses. Thousands of

⁹⁰ ... after Cape Agulhas.

Cape Townians woke up to a period of staying in shelters as the storm left them without a home.

The 'cardboard cities' arose as a result of the unequal land distribution in the apartheid period. The Group Areas Act and the pass laws had restricted black movement to the city under apartheid⁹¹. After 1994, when this legislation disappeared, poor blacks, mainly from the Eastern Cape, had drifted into the city and made rough shelters. These shanty towns surround the sub-standard housing and glaring poverty of the Langa and Khayelitsha townships. This revealed the true – *man-made* – nature of this disaster to me. For the land, upon which the black unemployed erected their shelters, had been known to the white minority government as wetlands. It was the first of many confrontations with the legacy of the apartheid throughout my stay in South Africa.

But while the horrendous and unsettling face of inequality would lurk behind every corner, new and old friends made a concerted attempt to show the miracle of South Africa. For the unthinkable had happened in the wake of apartheid, of a period of sheer oppression and violence: a peaceful hand-over of government office had taken place. As South Africans from all different kind of cultural backgrounds live together – rather than coexist – in harmony and successfully strive towards the creation of a multicultural society and of a South African *nation*, they tower above the apartheid period and claim one of their greatest victories over it. Moreover, the intense hope of a better future that lives in the

⁹¹ For more elaboration I refer to the next section of this chapter, which gives a brief historical overview of South Africa under apartheid.

hearts of so many South Africans is the greatest miracle of all. It amazed – and inspired – me time and again. They shared with me their belief that maybe not their generation, but the one of their children or grandchildren would reap the fruits of their struggle against apartheid and yield the benefits of this new society. They pinned their hope on the new generation to realise the new nation’s dreams.

As anywhere else in the world, the halls and corridors of South Africa resound with the slogan that the children and youth are the future of the nation. In the apartheid era, the youth – a very ambiguous category – could refer to anyone up to the age of thirty-five and membership of this social group was primarily determined by political activism and involvement in the liberation struggle (Seekings 1993)⁹². However, with South Africa’s adoption of the CRC in the post-1994 period, the definition of the child changed to anyone under the age of eighteen. Nina (2000:152) claims that this redefinition of the word ‘child’ went hand in hand with a rethinking of the social groups that need government attention and assistance in post-apartheid era. In official discourse, the future of the South African nation *now* seems to have been largely reduced to the group of school-going children, namely the generation growing up in the *post-apartheid* period. Hence, I sometimes had the impression that the youth, who participated in the popular uprising against the regime and made a significant contribution to its downfall, had disappeared from the equation of how to make the new South

⁹² In my fieldwork I chose to confine my interview sample to those South African children and youth who were recruited under the age of eighteen and, subsequently, brought my research in line with the dominant international definition of child soldiers. The fact that some social scientists adopted the popular understanding of the concept of youth (see Seekings above) could render my use of historical and sociological studies of children and youth in that era problematic. I deal with this problem by making explicit the authors’ definitions of these concepts when theoretical clarity requires it.

Africa work for all its citizens. It seemed that somewhere along the process of societal reconstruction some politicians, who *nota bene* often commanded and fought alongside those very child activists, had come to the conclusion that

‘it might not be in the state interest now to take care of this generation which has been highly traumatised by South Africa’s own type of civil war, and which now faces an emerging crisis of marginalisation, social oblivion and identity’.

(Nina 2000:175)

Moreover, this group has not only disappeared from the equation, they are also perceived as posing a threat to the realisation of the new South African dream. Seekings (1993:4) wrote in the mid 1990s: ‘The spectre of an apocalyptic “lost generation” or “marginalised youth” looms menacingly over any political and constitutional settlement, threatening to devour a post-apartheid democracy’. Belonging to the same generation as the research participants, the meaning of the concept ‘lost generation’ troubles me. Does it mean that society has lost its grip on this generation? Has it no more solutions for these young people, no more strong and long branches to hold out to them as they are swept in the current? Or has the wider community and the government dimmed the searchlights and given up all hope? The former child soldiers are apparently believed to no longer fit in with the perfect world that South Africans have created or are hoping to create in the post-conflict period. This is, after all, the society that they helped to attain, which they helped to lay the foundations for.

5.2 Research Question

In order to address the question of why and how did these children come to take part in the armed struggle against apartheid, my analysis of child soldiering in South Africa draws upon Chapter Two. There, I developed a critique of ‘pre-sociological’ and ‘transitional’ notions of childhood, discussed the new paradigm for the study of childhood and investigated how these theories have informed explanations of child soldiering. Subsequently, in Chapter Three, I put forward the thesis that researchers need to map the local context of child soldiers and examine it for the structural and cultural facts that shape their childhood experiences. Furthermore, the suggestion that the voluntary participation of children in armed combat often makes sense in their own terms, renders the research of children’s subjective appraisal of their social context and their reactions to it a crucial step towards a more analytical understanding of the phenomenon. I argued that children need to be treated as research subjects and that qualitative research methods constitute important instruments to gather data on the meanings that child soldiers attribute to their day-to-day experiences and on the rational reflections that precede and inform their decision to join the military group.

Therefore, in order to develop an understanding of why former South African child soldiers joined the armed wings of the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan African Congress (PAC), this chapter relies upon the explanations that former child soldiers, who are now adults, shared with me during my fieldwork in Cape Town. In addition to discussing the factors that shaped the lives of these South African children during the era of white supremacy, I focus upon the

processes through which the children bestowed meaning on their experiences of life under apartheid. I hereby pay special attention to their – shifting – relationships with significant others.

But, first, I give a concise description of the history of apartheid, covering the period from its creation in 1948 to its demise in the early nineties. While the legacy of imperialism and colonialism in South Africa constituted a significant factor in the rise of the apartheid system and in the shape it assumed, this historical overview focuses upon the period in which the child soldiers, who I interviewed, grew up and were involved in the conflict. It seeks to contextualise the structural and cultural factors, which the former child soldiers themselves indicated as salient to their decision to volunteer and which are discussed in the remainder of the chapter.

5.3 Background Information on Apartheid

The Union of South Africa was established in 1910 after three centuries of Dutch and British imperialism. It consisted of Cape Colony, Natal, Transvaal and Orange River Colony (see Appendix 4). While the era of imperialism laid the foundations of racial segregation, it was the National Party, swept into power by the white electorate in 1948, that epitomised the idea (Beinart 1994:137). The Afrikaner-dominated National Party conceived of a system ‘apartheid’ and would in the years following their electoral victory refine and unveil the blueprint of this system. In Figure 2, I outline the seven pillars (legislative means

and objectives) that, according to Beinart (1994), constituted the apartheid edifice.

- (1) *Rigid racial classification of the South African population* – Population Registration Act (1950), Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), and Immorality Act (1950);
- (2) *White minority rule* – Coloured Voters Act (1950s), which robbed coloureds of their vote, Suppression of Communism Act (1950), which outlawed any opposition – Communist or not – against the State, and Unlawful Organisations Act (1961), which banned the ANC and PAC;
- (3) *Separate institutions and territories for Africans* – Bantu Authorities Act (1951), which established local and regional government in the African ‘homelands’ and reinstated chiefs, and Bantu Education Act (1953), which placed the education for Africans under the authority of the Native Affairs Department and thereby dismissed the missions and provincial authorities (Beinart 1994:153);
- (4) *Spatial division of urban and rural areas* – Group Areas Act (1950), which allocated specific areas to particular ‘racial groups’ and forcibly removed non-members, and Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act (1951);
- (5) *Control of urban growth by restricting African movement to the urban areas* – Pass Laws, Native (Urban Areas) Amendment Act (1955), which extended urban influx control, and migratory labour system;
- (6) *Segmentation of the labour market* – Reservation of an increasing proportion of jobs for whites and regulated supply of black labour to mines, farms, factories and domestic households (Cohen 1986:8);

(7) *Petty Apartheid (Reservation of buses, beaches, park benches and other facilities for whites only)* – Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953).

Figure 2 (Source: adapted from Beinart 1994 and Cohen 1986)

It was not long before the opposition movement assembled its troops. While the ANC had deep historical roots dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and others were part of a new, impatient generation of political activists in the post-1948 period. They joined the ranks of the ANC and founded the Youth League. The Congress Youth League eventually wrested power from the older Congress leaders and developed a Programme of Action that proclaimed mass protests, strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience as the opposition strategies for the future (Davis 1987:6). The Defiance Campaign, launched in 1952, proved that the ANC had buried the more cautious approach of the previous decades and was growing into a mass movement. However, the organisation soon became the object of an ideological battle:

‘Radically different perceptions of the white race characterised the debate within the post-war ANC between Africanists, who considered anti-apartheid protest a blacks-only affair, and multiracialists, who had faith in achieving change in alliance with philosophically compatible whites.’

(Davis 1987:10)

A split in the ANC was imminent and, in 1959, Robert Sobukwe founded the PAC, whose ideology and impatient activism would appeal particularly to the younger volunteers (Davis 1987:11).

In 1960, the PAC organised the anti-pass campaign, in which supporters would invite group arrest by breaching apartheid laws. On 21 March 1960, the police

opened fire on peaceful protestors at Sharpeville, Langa and Vanderbijlpark, killing seventy-one and wounding another two hundred. Most of them were shot in the back. The government declared a state of emergency and passed the Unlawful Organisations Act, making it illegal to be a member of the ANC or the PAC and effectively pushing these organisations underground. For many political activists, the harsh repression of the South African State had smothered their hope that peaceful protest would carry them to the path of reform. In the ANC it sparked off a fierce debate on the viability of non-violent protest. This debate concluded in 1961 when the ANC created Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) – Zulu for ‘The Spear of the Nation’ – as a military wing, while the Congress would continue to function as a political organisation pursuing its goals within the system.

‘At its inception the High Command [of the MK] decided on selective sabotage as the form armed resistance would take. All efforts were made to avoid the loss of human life. We clearly stated that the aim of the campaign was to bring the government to its senses before it was too late and save the country from going down the path of war which would leave scars very difficult to heal and further polarise South African society.’

(Hani 1990 cited in Williams 2000:17)

The security forces struck back in the Rivonia Raid (1963) having obtained enough intelligence information to arrest the leadership of the ANC and the high command of the MK and imprison them on Robben Island. The PAC and its military wing Poqo⁹³ suffered a similar fate. The apartheid regime had effectively wounded and crippled the opposition movement and it would take almost a decade for it to start walking again.

⁹³ The name Poqo - Xhosa for ‘pure’ or ‘standing alone’ - would later be replaced by the name Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA).

In the late 1960s, a new set of ideas was developed in the South African churches and the educational institutions: Black Consciousness. This new ideology drew upon the heritage of 'Africanism', the US civil rights and the Black Power movement. Steve Biko, the charismatic activist of the Black Consciousness Movement, embodied the positive black self-image that the movement was proclaiming and the battle it waged against the notions of black inferiority that victimised the oppressed in South Africa. In 1977, Steve Biko would die of the torture inflicted upon him in police custody. His gruesome death testified to the lack of professional constraints in the security forces, which characterised this period and would only deteriorate in the years to come (Beinart 1994:247). The high expectations that the BCM raised across South Africa and the frustrations regarding the – peaceful – methods of protest exploded in violence when township school students met with security forces. On 16 June 1976, school students of Soweto marched to protest against the Bantu Education system and the introduction of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in school.⁹⁴ By 1976 the gap between the quality of education for Africans and their educational aspirations widened, as government expenditure plunged, class size multiplied, and institutions lacked resources, equipment and well-trained teachers. Although the Bantu Education system accomplished its goal of increasing the proportion of Africans receiving (primary) education, this had the unintended consequence of expanding the politicised section of the South African population (Seekings 1993:12). When the police clashed with and fired at the students, the protest

⁹⁴ In contrast to the popular belief outside South Africa, the majority of the South Africans who speak Afrikaans are not white but coloured. However, the apartheid regime gave Afrikaans its hated status as 'language of the oppressor' for many coloureds and blacks.

rapidly spread to townships across South Africa. By the end of that year, 575 students had been killed and 2389 wounded (Worden 1995:119). In addition, thousands of students had left the country to join the MK or the APLA to walk the only remaining path that – they believed – would lead to freedom: armed resistance (Williams 2000:21). In the MK, they were known as ‘June 16th Detachment’ and were famous – or infamous – for their impatience and ‘dissatisfaction with anything less than all-out guerrilla warfare’ (Davis 1987:56). The South African child soldiers, who I interviewed in my fieldwork, grew up in the wake of the Soweto Rebellion and entered their teens when the liberation struggle in South Africa started a new phase.

In both 1985 and 1986, the government of South Africa declared a State of Emergency as the ‘townships were burning’. The newly founded United Democratic Front, a federation of more than six hundred organisations that predominantly propagated ANC’s ideology, launched the campaign to make the townships ungovernable and identified the youth as the spear of that campaign. While in the 1970s the school students had protested alone, in the 1980s the ‘ANC had called on the youth to “act as the yeast, to energise and dynamise the people as a whole”’ (Seekings 1993:6). Significant increases in rent, house evictions and demolitions of squatter camps by black councillors amidst a growing economic recession sparked off local grievances and ensured a much broader support within the townships for the anti-apartheid struggle from 1984 onwards (Beinart 1994). Community members boycotted the system conceived by the apartheid government under the 1977 Community Council Act and 1982 Black Local Authorities Act to force the townships to become ‘self-sufficient’, to

reduce the government expenditure even more in these poverty-ridden areas and to 'absorb and defuse discontent' (Seekings 1993). Township residents refused to pay the rent for houses that were small, overcrowded and lacking basic – but long promised – facilities such as water and electricity and resented the recently inaugurated black councillors as puppets of the apartheid government or sell-outs to their own people. In addition, stay-aways from school, work, and shops run by whites, were very successful as they put white businesses in selected towns under pressure (Beinart 1994:231). The state reacted to the riots and protests with overtly political repression, ordered the army to occupy the townships and lent their support to death squads and vigilantes (Gibson et al. 1991). The police were patrolling the schools, where the students had left the classrooms and turned the school grounds into battlefields. Community struggles in general became 'increasingly militarist as large groups of youths began engaging the security forces in running street battles' (Swilling 1988:103). In short, a state of war governed the townships and this in turn secured more 'protected spaces' for MK and APLA guerrilla soldiers to hide and operate inside South Africa. 'Once the townships become internal sanctuaries of resistance, the [African National] Congress plans to use them as training grounds for further anti-apartheid agitation and as launching pads for attacks on white areas' (Davis 1987:78).

Towards the end of the 1980s, the political turmoil, the longevity of the economic downturn, the burden of the international sanctions orchestrated by ANC president Oliver Tambo in London, and the political isolation of South Africa - now that the sun had set upon the era of Thatcher and Reagan - had turned an increasing proportion of South African businessmen and politicians in

favour of reform. In August 1989, F.W. de Klerk took over the presidency of P.W. Botha. In the following year, de Klerk unbanned the ANC and PAC, started to dismantle apartheid legislation and embarked upon a process of negotiations with the ANC and other liberation movements. In February 1990, the charismatic leader of the ANC, Nelson Mandela, was released after twenty-seven years of imprisonment. In 1994, he would win the first general elections in South Africa.

5.4 Education

5.4.1 Education and Educators in the Literature on Children and Armed Conflict

Because of the prominent place that the school took up in children's confrontation with the racist apartheid system, this chapter begins by looking into the role and contribution of educators to children's political and military engagement. In their study of children growing up in war zones, Garbarino et al (1991) present education as promoting children's level of coping with adverse circumstances. They describe how governments in wartime curtail spending in health and education to compensate for the excess expenditure for defence. In addition to the adverse effects this has on the wages and working conditions of teachers, Garbarino et al highlight those situations in which military groups pinpoint teachers in their operations.

Over the course of history, heads of state, ruling parties and revolutionaries have succeeded in inspiring aversion in their ranks towards the intelligentsia. In

northern Uganda, the LRA burnt down two-thirds of the primary schools, murdered seventy teachers and kidnapped two hundred fifty schoolchildren between 1993 and 1997 (Tangelder 1999:93). In Cambodia, Garberino et al (1991:66) listened to testimonies of how the Khmer Rouge portrayed teachers as elements of 'foreign corruption' and, subsequently, ordered their removal from society. In Mozambique, teachers were the subject of numerous attacks by the rebel army RENAMO. The South African apartheid government sponsored this rebel army RENAMO, which aimed to destroy the infrastructure of the first independent government of Mozambique (Garbarino et al. 1991:66).

While the (new) intelligentsia has often been loathed for their social mobility on the basis of acquired, instead of ascribed, characteristics, they have also been constructed as having common cause with the enemy. With regards to the latter point, Garbarino et al (1991:114) report that in addition to the closure of schools, the Israeli government have often suspended all educational activities in Palestinian areas on the pretext that they constituted 'hotbeds of disorder'. The authors continue that this policy reflects the belief of the Israeli government that:

'education is suspect. It is inherently revolutionary. *And*, because Palestinian parents value it as a source of upward mobility, it is a bargaining chip for the Israeli authorities to use as a part of a carrot-and-stick approach to managing the conflict.'

(Garbarino et al. 1991:114, original emphasis)

This shows that teachers can be perceived as a threat to the establishment, because they possess an important instrument of power: the construction and dissemination of knowledge. Particularly in the context of (civil) war, state control over the education system becomes a central element in regulating the

kind of information that reaches the masses. Under apartheid, the South African authorities engaged in activities similar to those of their Israeli counterparts in an attempt to control the range of 'subversive' discourses circulating in the student halls and, ultimately, the political development of the young.

5.4.2 The State of Education under Apartheid

In fact, the apartheid regimes reserved an important role for education in the system of racial segregation and white supremacy. With the issuing of the 1953 Bantu Education Act, the Department of Native Affairs aspired to kill two birds with one stone. Firstly, the Department intended to socialise the black or 'Bantu'⁹⁵ population group of South Africa into their future role of second class-citizens. The ideology that this educational institution and its teaching staff were supposed to convey would restrain black children's aspirations and shape their anticipation of (future) rights, abilities and social identities. Secondly, this policy of providing non-white children with a basic level of education was designed to accommodate the economy's demand for unskilled labour. It goes without saying that this government plan included a drastic cut in expenditure for the education of the non-white children (Beinart 1994:154; Diseko 1991:46). Former child soldier Jake summarises the state of education for black children and youth in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s as follows:

'You know, the education is something of a privilege. In fact, each and everyone who is young needs to have education – there is a need –, but in South Africa if you don't have money you can't get education, you understand? No education. So if you are poor, you get no education. Such was the education in South Africa. Instead, the government of that time was using,

⁹⁵ Those categorised as Bantu by the Department of Native Affairs.

was buying hippos [armoured vehicles], was building more police stations instead of schools and instead of churches. So that was the kind of education that we were getting. For example, you can ... if you are in Standard 6, maybe you are taking seven subjects, but you find out that these subjects have nothing to do with what you are going to do in the future. You see? So it is just frustrating.'

As the supply of governmental subsidies was shut off, the quality of education deteriorated in several ways. Firstly, due to shortages of school buildings and equipment, students were taught in provisional classrooms in churches, homes, under trees or in open air. Jake describes the situation:

'Because what was happening in our school you found out... in the class there are so many students. Maybe there are sixty to eighty students in your class but there is one teacher. But if you go to white school, you find that there are eighteen in the class, understand? So ... at the same time ... you found out there were no schools, there were few schools for the black boys, most of them ... you find them learning under the trees, you understand? No schools were being built. You will find that they were learning in the church. They will cut the church, making rooms with the black plastic ... Then ... you found out that whenever there is a noise in the class, there is no good education that you can get. So at the same time, those who were under the tree, if there is a rain, there is no school. So at the same time at school there is corporal punishment. There was a corporal punishment.'

Secondly, a crisis in the teaching profession ensued as teachers' salaries were reduced to a level 'regarded by most as barely sufficient to cover the minimum cost of living' (Diseko 1991:46). Hence, when the Department of Native Affairs did succeed in educating a larger proportion of the black population, it not only expected teachers to survive on a minimum wage, but also to teach in front of overcrowded classes. Exposed to these kinds of working conditions, it was not long before they left the teaching profession in droves. Figures on the proportion

of secondary and high school African teachers with a university education, reproduced in Diseko (1991:48), reflect this decline, dropping from 36.3 percent in 1961 to 1.39 percent in 1964. It reached an all-time low in 1975 of 0.37 percent and only recovered up to 2.42 percent by 1980. Thirdly, this evolution exacerbated the already high pupil/teacher ratio and resulted in the increased use of corporal punishment as a way to control and discipline students. The former child soldiers referred to the latter issue as an indicator of the rising authoritarianism in schools.

5.4.3 The Role of Educators in the Political Socialisation and Activism of Children

In light of the above findings, I investigated the kind of role that South African teachers played in the development of political values and consciousness of the former child soldiers and their involvement in the liberation struggle. Were the teachers in the non-white education systems the feared 'revolutionaries' or 'subversives' of the above discussions? The research subjects' descriptions of their teachers did not fit this profile. The former child soldiers, who attended school in the late 1970s and 1980s, often perceived their teachers as puppets of the apartheid regime. The young students set little store by the teachers' arguments and behaviour, which they viewed as the products of fear of the Department of Native Affairs and the security forces. For example, when asked about his relationship with his teachers, Matthew replied:

'No, I think our teachers were not really, I think our teachers were actually serving the government. In fact, we looked upon them more as enemies than as friends, you see. And we took it that they were part of it, but they always

try to tell us that there are some things, which they know and we do not. You know? We know that they are just cowards, they can't find the fight.'

Some interviewees cast a less negative judgement on their teachers, taking into consideration the difficult circumstances in which teachers worked and had to make a living. Former child soldiers Jake and Lucy gave them the benefit of the doubt as teachers tried to balance the education of their people with the greater goal of liberating them.

'Jake: No, at that time the teachers were aware of this, but there was nothing ... They did not want to lose their work, understand? So but there are some of the teachers who, whenever they were with us, they ask us and tell us everything about the kind of education we are in [whispers to emphasise the secretive nature of these conversations with their teachers], why this kind of education is frustrating ... They just tell you about this ... They gave us the real history, understand? So what I can say, some teachers were and others weren't ... telling us everything and explaining us what went wrong.'

'Lucy: Some of them were quite supportive, but you always ... There were always like – we would call them [laughs] the teachers - those, who just sit there, who would always discourage you from going [joining activities organised by the anti-apartheid movements]. But there were supportive teachers, those who always used to provide sleeping places, places for students and things like that, so we were ... quite a ... close knit group of comrades in the area and so were some teachers at school.'

Diseko's (1991:64) research on student movements of the 1970s confirms my findings. His interviewees testified to the low profile that teachers kept in the politicisation and mobilisation of pupils. Diseko claims that this situation springs from those apartheid policies, which the government prepared in response to the prominent role that African teachers played in the fight against the Bantu

education policy in the 1950s. Teachers were prohibited by law from propagating their political opinions in the classroom.

‘According to this regulation [issued in 1955] teachers could be dismissed or demoted for making public any unfavourable comments on government policy or matters relation to the Bantu Authorities, school boards and committees. This together with the political purges and frequent police raids into schools sanctioned by the Native Affairs Department, heightened the level of insecurity in the profession.’

(Diseko 1991:47)

Verwoerd, the Head of the Department for Native Affairs at the time, silenced the teachers of black children, warning them that: ‘People who believe in equality are not desirable teachers for Natives’ (Verwoerd 1954 cited in Diseko 1991:46).

In sum, these historical events shed light on the role of educators, who taught the former child soldiers, in relation to their students’ political engagement. The fear of police harassment, imprisonment or job dismissal can be imagined to have shaped teachers’ public behaviour and support for the liberation struggle in the 1970s and 1980s. The subsequent perception of teachers as puppets of the apartheid government indirectly reduced the potential power their views and attitudes might have had on their students. This problematic relationship jostled the youth even further away from more conformist views and reactions against the apartheid system. As such, teachers can be said to have played a negative part in the political socialisation of the young generations in the 1970s and 1980s.

5.5 The Family

5.5.1 Parents and the Family in the Literature on Children and Armed Conflict

Next, I examine the role of parents in the political development and activism of their children. Within the framework of classical socialisation and child development theories, an assessment of the role of parents and caregivers in the children's engagement with apartheid is imperative. As illustrated in relation to the OSGSR-CAC's (2000) proposal, researchers studying the impact of armed conflict on children have allocated a salient part to parents and caretakers in children's coping with and protection from the adverse effects of violence (Angel et al. 2001; Gibson 1989; Punamäki 1989).⁹⁶ However, the positive role that the literature on children and armed conflict initially attributed to parents and caretakers regarding children's resilience has gradually been modified as social scientists observed that 'war, by its very nature disturbs and breaks up family life' (Punamäki 1987 cited in Cairns and Dawes 1996:131). Whereas previous studies portrayed children separated from their parents, habitual caretakers or legal guardians in the context of armed conflict and human displacement as particularly – or even most – vulnerable to military recruitment (Brett and McCallin 1996:113; UNHCR 2000c), recent studies are increasingly studying parents' complicity in children's involvement in hazardous activities, such as prostitution and soldiering. Although some authors present this as a neglected

⁹⁶ Chapter Two described the essential role that classical socialisation and child development theories attribute to parents in relation to the normal and healthy physical, cognitive and moral development of the child.

area or explanatory factor in the literature on child soldiers (see for example Brett 2003; Brett and Specht 2004), research studies on children growing up in war zones, such as the one conducted by Cairns (1989) in Northern Ireland and Boyden (1994:264-265) in South East Asia, have already highlighted the conflict between social and individual rights or between the survival of the family or social group and that of the child. 'Family survival strategies in war zones often single out children in particular categories as expendable, whether through abandonment, sale, or militarisation' (Boyden 2000b:7).

Hence, in this section I discuss the values and norms of parents regarding the personal development of their offspring and their attitudes towards children's political or military activism. In line with the new sociological paradigm for the study of childhood, I hereby pay attention to the dynamical nature of children's socialisation and learning processes by investigating how children perceived the social norms and values that family members conveyed to them and complemented them with other sources. Were children indoctrinated and pushed into political movements by their parents? Was children's engagement in the military struggle against apartheid a joint family decision or strategy? Finally, the finding that they (sometimes) trampled upon the norms and values of their parents or family will require me to assess how children and adolescents were able to assert their agency over the structural and cultural factors that shaped their position in the social environment and, ultimately, affected their power to act.

5.5.2 Parents' Attitudes towards Children's Participation in the Anti-apartheid Struggle

On the basis of my interviews with former child soldiers, it became clear that their parents, at the time, believed education to be one of the few ways to escape the vicious circle of poverty and discrimination. If their children could complete their primary and secondary schooling – an opportunity that many parents of that generation never had – they believed they would live to see their children achieve greater things in life. The accounts of the child soldiers reflect these dreams and hopes of their parents.

‘Raymond: So like me, all the time when I was taking all those decisions [to join the PAC and later the APLA], my ma and father were encouraging me to be, to learn ... one day I can be a doctor and things like that.’

‘Simon: So it was like a shock to me, because where I was coming from – my parents they wanted me to go to school. They were providing me with everything. For what I can say, I am the firstborn of my parents and my father is not from Cape Town; he is Sotho speaking from Lesotho and all those sort of things. I could say, at first they disagreed with what I am doing.’

Interviewer CCR: So you did tell them that you were in the APLA.

Simon: I told them I am doing it for the cause. If you like it or not, I am doing it for the cause.’

While their parents considered education as the ultimate means to progress, the former child soldiers' own experiences of Bantu education led them to challenge this claim. On the basis of these experiences and their interactions with youth organisations (see below), schooling came to symbolise reform within the apartheid system at best and surrender on the terms imposed by the apartheid regime at worst. The former child soldiers did not believe that education would

improve their future prospects, as individuals or as a social group. The former comrades recalled bitter memories of confrontations with their parents who disapproved of their political engagements.

'Jake: Because the last words that I said to my parents, who didn't know by then that I was leaving [for exile], because they couldn't know ... I said to them: "I am just going to Durban to the conference, to COSAS⁹⁷," because they knew that I was sometimes going to the conferences. When I said [this] to my parents, they asked me: "What about school?" I told them: "You are just asking about a few days that I will not be with you. What about those children, those people, those who are not with their mothers, who are away of them, what do you say about them? But you are just crying for a few days." The day – I think it was Tuesday – when I was leaving ... saying that I will be back on Friday. So "you are just crying for few days. But what about those who didn't see their parents, what about the parents who haven't seen their children for years?"

Interviewer: You were referring to the children who went into exile or who disappeared?

Jake: Yes, those who disappeared.'

Although fictional, the following extract from the novel *David's Story* (Wicomb 2000:20), which tells the story of a comrade who fought in the liberation movement of South Africa, resonates well with the experiences of my respondents.

'Perhaps he was called that [coward] by his colleagues at school, where he would not be promoted, would never achieve his father's ambition of having a school principal for son. As for the implications of moral turpitude or cowardice, well that was just plain absurd. He was one of the bravest comrades, whose skill and stamina had soon earned him an honourable position – but that his father would not hear of, would find infuriating. That Oliver Tambo⁹⁸ himself had held his hand in both his own and called him my

⁹⁷ Congress of South African Students (COSAS)

⁹⁸ After the Rivonia Trial, Oliver Tambo became the *de facto* head of the ANC and was posted at the ANC headquarters in London.

son ought to be enough for anyone. Why did he go on caring what his father thought of him?’

The next excerpt of a dispute between David and his father illustrates the extreme disillusion of the parent with his son’s political activism. David’s father laments:

‘No one could have set you a better example, a life of decency and sacrifice so you could have an education. And what are you throwing it away on – politics! Going against the law, getting up to all sorts of terrible things and associating with people who are not our kind. What has been the fruit of my labour but shame?’

(Wicomb 2000:21)

Similarly, Jake told me that:

‘Each and every thing, each and every thing I was doing I was always trying to hide from the family. If I am going to the funeral, if I am going to any kind of activity, I don’t have to inform them because they were so afraid. [He imitates his parents:] “Don’t do this, don’t do that. Go inside the house. Go to school and from school come inside.” If, for example, there was no school [and I wanted to attend a meeting], I must just do something as if I am going to school and then I take my books. Understand? So ... I wasn’t informing them, but one of those days hm, the day hm I was shot, I was shot by the vigilantes at a night vigil of another guy who died. Then, in an actual sense, I was having a blood, because we were carrying the people who were shot. Understand? So hm when they [my parents] saw that, I told them and then I told them that I am coming from such, such and such an event. They said: “No man, you must not do that, otherwise they [the police] are going to take you away to a homeland [to the reserves that the apartheid regime had allocated to the black people of South Africa].” They were saying all those things. Then I said to them: “I can’t go back, I can’t go back. I continue.” So that was happened.’

These extracts show how some parents reacted to their children’s involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle. While some were filled with anger at this discovery

and others wept, they all expressed fear for the safety of their child. They feared the violent hands of the state and security forces, which had little respect for the lives of black and coloured people. Reports and statistical data compiled by organisations, such as the South African Institute of Race Relations, the Detainees' Parents Support Committee, the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights, proved that children – activist or not – constituted direct targets of police intimidation. Cairns (1996:133), for example, reproduces figures for the period of 1984-6, during which 300 children were killed by the police, 1,000 wounded, 11,000 detained without trial, 18,000 arrested on charges related to protest, and 173,000 held in police cells. Nina (2000:163) claims that

'In fact, since Soweto 1976 the state security forces concentrated their energy on repressing children and young people who were seen as one of the main groups responsible for the lack of stability in the country. [...] In fact, the level of brutalisation and repression was so alarming that in the mid-1980s the New York-based committee for Human Rights defined the apartheid state as one conducting acts of "terrorism" and engaged in a real "war against children" '.

The knowledge that children were not entitled to special treatment in police stations, prisons and torture chambers, can be imagined to have kept many a parent awake.

5.5.3 Intergenerational Conflict Exacerbated by Social Conflict

While the former child soldiers hide their political activities from their parents to minimise their worries (Reynolds 1995), they hereby also sheltered themselves from disapproving parents who in their eyes had submitted to the apartheid regime. In addition to tracing the origins of parents' attitudes towards their children's participation in the liberation struggle, this section investigates how

children came to see their parents' opposition to their involvement as a reflection of the parents' submission, passivity or helplessness in the face of apartheid. Hereto, I firstly consider the fate of the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1960s, which had a negative influence on parents' views on political and especially violent opposition to the apartheid regime. Secondly, I outline how apartheid policies struck at the heart of community and family life and as such undermined the authority and control of parents and their caregivers over their children. In sum, this section explains how different aspects of the apartheid system and its resistance worsened the conflict between the generations of the former child soldiers and their parents and partly informed children's involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle.

The origins of parental submission, which Ronnie Kasrils (1998:122), a founding member of the MK, refers to in the following citation, dated back to the 1960s.

'When Soweto pupils organised a mass protest march on 16 June [1976], the police opened fire. Twelve children died. But the show of brutality failed to subdue the anger of a generation that had grown up in a period of parental submission, Sharpeville and the Rivonia set-back.'

The Rivonia raid in 1963 represented a milestone in the government's fight against the opposition. In this raid, the security forces laid their hands on membership lists of both the ANC and the MK and other information of high value to the secret intelligence (Davis 1987:18). With this information and the issuing of the Unlawful Organisation Act in 1961, the apartheid regime banned the ANC and PAC, cleared the path to the arrest and imprisonment of its party members and effectively pushed their struggle underground. As such, it succeeded in virtually beheading the different anti-apartheid organisations. The

literature on the history of the anti-apartheid struggle generally agrees that the 1960s represented years of relative tranquillity in the opposition camps; the liberation movement was licking its wounds. Moreover, the fact that police forces opened fire at a mass protest at Sharpeville, targeting and killing unarmed protesters, simultaneously smothered the hope of many South Africans that non-violent protest and passive resistance would bring the nation to reform. The following extract of the interviews with Simon shows the position of the parent towards his involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle and, more importantly, makes reference to the events of the 1960s, which informed that parental position.

‘As I am saying, my parents were totally against what I was doing ... They said: “You are going to get killed.” They were afraid of the system, they were afraid of standing up for their own rights. And us as youth, they told us: “You kids, you happen to know a lot, but you don’t know nothing. You are young! Where were you by then, by 1960?!” They asked us that question: “Where were you by 1960? But you happen, you seem as if you know better than us [your parents]? Because we were there by then and we are still doing nothing about it. But you, you are a young kid, and you want to tell us that we are going to destroy the system! Do you know these people that you are fighting against?!” Then for me, that was a duty for me, i.e. to convince them and tell them: “If I die while doing this, be proud of me, because I am doing this for your own benefit as well.” “For whose benefit ... blablabla ...” [imitates his mother ... angry, upset, and telling him off]’

On the basis of his analysis of the impact of political violence on children in South Africa, Gibson (1989:664) suggested that

‘there is what might be termed a generational split within families. [...] Many [children] lost confidence in the older generation who they perceived as having been silenced by the massive repression of the sixties.’

As the interviews with the child soldiers indicated that their parents and family members often disagreed privately with the policies and actions of the white minority government and its security forces, the intergenerational dispute largely concentrated on the questions of who and what would bring about change in their immediate and/or larger social environment. For example, Matthew initially portrayed his father as a vocal critic of the apartheid government. However, when asked about the role of his father in his political and military engagement, he qualifies his statement:

‘He continuously reminded us always that h’m you see h’m there is a fight going on and white people are doing this and so on. And he was very much pro the Black Conscious Movement specifically. And I think that basically it influenced me, you know, to finally take the step to move. But I think indirectly my father, even from that time until this day, you know, he is still very much critical. He is actually the same person as he was [before the liberation]. He was, it is, he was almost like a helpless person: he knew what was wrong, he could say what was wrong, but he couldn’t do anything about that. So maybe from that point of view, I thought: “Maybe I can do something”.’

Similarly, Reynolds (1995:210-1) describes how child political activist Nomoya, whom she interviewed, gradually became aware of the powerlessness and submissiveness of her father when confronted with the security forces.

‘Her own and her family’s vulnerability was exposed when the forces of the state entered the family domain. Nomoya’s father conceived of himself as the defender and protector of his family. He stood between them and the outside world. However, some of his children began to join in political protests along with their peers in the uprising of youth against the oppressors who implemented the system of *Apartheid*. In response, the agents of the system reacted, and the children were arrested, beaten, detained and harassed. The agents entered in to the very heart of the family. Nomoya watched as her strong father was belittled in the face of such a powerful outside force. He was humiliated, and had, in Nomoya’s view, “no plan or strategy to

counteract what was happening in the family.” He felt powerless. He was unable to stand on behalf of his children, and his wife was the one who sought for her children when they were missing in the police stations. Nomoya’s father was unable to guide his children by explaining what was happening, by warning them as to what to expect. So the children turned from the family and sought explanations and guidance from others.’

Whereas this excerpt highlights the effects of government violence, the literature comprises numerous studies of how the different pillars of apartheid system conspired to strike at the very heart of family and community life (Chikane 1986; Dawes 1992; Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights 1986; Marks and McKenzie 1995; Swartz 1999). My interviews with former child soldiers in South Africa confirmed the extremely destructive impact that the apartheid system had had on family life in South Africa. While the migratory labour system itself predated the era of apartheid, it resulted in the breaking up of families through ‘influx control’ regulations and the creation of the so-called homelands. The latter represented an important instrument in the National Party’s grand scheme of racial segregation. Soon after this political party swept into power it passed the Bantu Authorities Act, which effectively allocated fourteen percent of the South African territory to seventy percent of the population (Silove 1988:347). On the basis of historical research and invention the apartheid regime reconstructed these regions as the true and original home of the black – then labelled ‘Bantu’ – peoples, the hearth of their culture (Beinart 1994). While some of the African chiefs embraced this governmental initiative for reinstating their traditional function and authority and hereby became allies of the apartheid regime, only a minority of the black masses accepted this idea of homelands (Beinart 1994:153). It forcibly moved them to ‘remote rural areas that

lack the infrastructure to support these “repatriated” persons, many of whom have no genuine ties with the locality’ (Silove 1988: 347). Some entered the labour market as farm workers; others were forced to search for means of survival in the big cities. The policies of ‘influx control’ controlled this migrant labour system from above, ensuring that the economy could draw upon a pool of cheap and unskilled labour while restricting access, or influx, to the urban areas. Having designated the cities as predominantly white areas, migrant labourers could only entry when in possession of the correct documents and passes. Wives and children were not allowed into the urban areas and were arrested and sometimes deported when found breaking pass laws. As the following interview extract demonstrates, this migrant labour system resulted in family situations in which grandparents were put in charge of childcare or in *de facto* single parent-families.

‘Interviewer: Who took care of you before you joined the armed struggle?

Jake: It was my father.

Interviewer: Did he take care of you throughout your childhood?

Jake: The one who took care of me before ... Since I was born, my mother and father were working in Cape Town [, i.e. in the Western Cape province] and then they took us to the Eastern Cape [province] where we were living with my grandmother. We called her “mami”. So we were there ... from ... one year up to ten years. She took me to school and then I came to stay in Cape Town with my father.

Interviewer: Was your father living here because of his work?

Jake: Yes. [...] my mother was working here in Cape Town. But unfortunately, they were having some problems ... which led us, that is one of the reasons that made us to be with my grandmother. They divorced and lived apart.

Interviewer: Did their work allow them to come and see you once in while in the Eastern Cape? How often did you see them?

Jake: Maybe he [father] used to come once a year for one week. He was working in a hotel in Cape Town.’

Silove (1988:347) discusses the threat that racial (re)classification posed to the integrity of the family. As government officials revised criteria for racial classification on an *ad hoc* basis, the machine of racial segregation and discrimination was set in motion and crept into family households overnight. Family members woke up to different lives, either because the Mixed Marriages Act condemned their union, the Group Areas Act assigned them to separate territories or the children were forced to enrol in different schools. The Group Areas Act destroyed social networks, extended families and peer groups, which were crucial in providing support and socialising the young or new members of the community (Silove 1988:347; Swartz 1999:6).

The South African case study illustrates that violent conflicts tear families apart and tax the power of the parents who remain at home. It was events like the one described by Nomoya in the above that nourished children's belief that their parents were incapable, unwilling or afraid to stand up against the oppressor and fight for the values that they held dear, and that eventually tore up families. As children witnessed the humiliation of their parents or caregivers by employers, government officials and policemen and experienced glaring poverty, they started to question their capacity to provide for the family and protect it from the violence that the state subjected their communities to. This in turn cast doubt upon the moral guidance and analytical tools, which parents reached out to their children to make sense of the children's daily experiences and confrontations with the apartheid system. Indeed, according to mainstream sociology and psychology, this process represents a normal phase in the development of the child and a precondition to the creation of the child's own unique identity.

However, the social conflict, through its negative impact on the family structure, exacerbated this (normal) intergenerational conflict. These power struggles often degenerated into situations where parents ceased to be role models. Reynolds (1995) claims that the humiliation of their parents led many children to look for surrogate parents, which they would find in their grandparents, but most importantly in the political organisations.

‘A slogan that was written on a wall in Soweto – “they can kill us but they will no longer humiliate us” – reflects the outrage of youth against what they perceive as excessive compliance with the apartheid system by some of their elders in the past. It has been recognised that the recent uprising in South Africa has been as much a rebellion of black youth against the passivity of some of the older generation, as it has been a revolt against the oppression of the white establishment.’

(Silove 1988:347)

As the following section and the next chapter demonstrate, these would not only provide them with alternative tools to engage with the conflict, but also carve out more powerful identities for children to deal with their social environment.

In spite of the intergenerational rupture that featured in the majority of my interviews with former child soldiers, Lucy described how her mother’s initial disapproval of the political and military activities that she and her brother were engaged in gradually made way for sympathy and support.

‘Lucy: My parents, my mother used to be very very religious, very church-going. And for them at that stage, it was like, you know, you don’t do, you just don’t oppose the system. But they learned also through my brother leaving the country and we... So they learned from us, you know, from our involvement, from the police that used to come in and hassle us, you know, when they went the houses at night. So that gave them more determination also to join up and and be aware of the community around them. That is how

our mother also used to hm get involved like with community groups, like all the women around in the area, like the kids that used to be on the run.’

By claiming that her parents learned from their children, Lucy argued that ongoing communication with her parents, but also a genuine engagement on the part of her mother with the children’s concerns and the solutions they proposed, might have prevented her from choosing a more drastic line of action and protected the family from a more long-lasting rupture.⁹⁹

5.5.4 Grandparents

In line with the study of Straker et al (1992) on young political activists in South Africa, I found that most of the former child soldiers grew up in the care of their grandparents. When grandparents took their grandchildren under their wings, they sometimes became beacons in the lives of these children. In telling the history of their people, in bringing back to life famous battles and their heroes, they shed light on the present, on the waves of violence and repression that flooded the lives of the children, their families and communities (Straker et al. 1992). They helped to untangle the web of poverty and discrimination that children failed to escape. Simon tells how his grandmother gave him and his peers moral and material support in their political engagement. His account reveals that his grandmother’s own experiences of and reflections upon the history of the liberation struggle challenged the beliefs and nuanced the claims of

⁹⁹ Among the former child soldiers I interviewed, Lucy was the only one who had managed to combine her life as a political and later military activist of the ANC with that of a high school student. She worked hard to study for her high school diploma while being involved in underground training and military activities. Even at the time of the interview, she retained close relationships with her family and the military veterans who were in her MK unit.

her grandson. She seemed to guide him through the discourses and statements that were proclaimed by the youth organisations and the self-defence units.

‘Interviewer: How old were you when you started living with your grandparents?’

Simon: Starting from thirteen, the year when I joined.

Interviewer: Ah, the same age [when you joined the APLA].

Simon: Yes, the same age. I would say I was twelve or thirteen.

Because my parents did not approve of what I did, but my grandmother did – she was a member of the PAC. My grandmother would tell me about the activities of the PAC. She was the one who would say to me: “You are talking about this and this events, but were you there? I was there!”

Interviewer: Was she an active member of the PAC? Was she politically active?

Simon: No ... [He searches for the term to describe her involvement with the PAC and complains that he cannot find the appropriate term in English. Finally, he settles for the word:] spiritually. She was spiritually supportive of the movement. At the time she would also provide a place to sleep for those who needed it. A lot of my friends stayed at my home when they needed a hiding place. And she would treat them very well. She would treat them as well as she would treat me. Those who stayed at my grandmother’s home still remember her well and still ask about her. When they are in the area, they will go and visit her. And they say: “Mami, are you still alive? How are you?” ’

5.6 Conclusion

This first chapter on my fieldwork in South Africa underscores the importance of using the new paradigm for the study of childhood in order to gain a better understanding of why children volunteer for military recruitment. I commenced this chapter with a brief history of apartheid in South Africa before bringing the experience of the generations born in the 1970s and 1980s – to which the former child soldiers belong – into focus. I mapped the social context in which the

former child soldiers grew up and, subsequently, studied how children made sense of their day-to-day experiences. I hereby paid special attention to how the apartheid system and its opposition movements affected children's relationships with significant others, such as educators and caretakers.

The literature on children in armed conflict has identified education as a preventative measure in the fight against child soldiering by removing children from the streets and tackling boredom. Moreover, education is seen as positively interacting with children's level of coping, because it can provide children with more complex and analytical perspectives on social problems. However, in order to safeguard the regional interests of South Africa, a significant part of the national budget was consumed by security operations inside and outside the country and the military, logistic and financial support that these required. In addition to these financial concerns and the economic demands for unskilled labour, the issuing of Bantu Education Act of 1953 has to be framed in the grand design of apartheid. Collins (1999:1) subsumes this Act under the social violence of the apartheid system, which 'victimised black children and youth by intentionally limiting their educational abilities, feeding into their limited skills available for potential employment, and thus impinging on their social development'.

Rather than resorting to physical violence, the Bantu Education system endeavoured to shape children's anticipation of rights, social identities and abilities by introducing them to an ideology that naturalised the social positions allocated to different racial groups. The teachers that the former child soldiers

encountered in the 1970s and 1980s were the product of an education system that lacked investment and had come under close surveillance of government forces. Fear of violent harassment and job dismissal shaped teacher's public support for the liberation movement. While teachers presented education as the ultimate means to progress, the former child soldiers' own experiences of Bantu education led them to challenge this claim. They indicated the decisive part that student organisations played in not only highlighting the poor quality of their education system, but also unveiling its oppressive nature. The subsequent perception of teachers as puppets of the apartheid government reduced the potential power their views and attitudes might have had on their students. This problematic relationship with their educators jostled the youth even further away from reformist views and reactions against the apartheid system.

Next, I examined the role of parents and family members in the (political) socialisation of the former child soldiers. In Chapter Two, I referred to the growing recognition that local communities possess different views on the nature of childhood, on the duties and rights of children, on the phases and rituals situated along the path to adulthood, but also respect certain rules of warfare, such as those stipulating who is qualified to participate in armed combat. This chapter sought to address the crucial question of how these norms and values are maintained and transferred in the course of violent conflicts. Chapter Five found that parents held education to be the only source of upward mobility under apartheid. I traced the origins of parents' negative views on political and violent government opposition to the 1960s, where the apartheid government violently repressed peaceful protest and dealt an organisational blow to the anti-apartheid

movements and their military wings. Furthermore, my interviews with former child soldiers in South Africa indicated how the different pillars of the apartheid system conspired to strike at the very heart of family and community life. The migrant labour system, the Bantu homelands and the measures of 'influx control' tore families apart and undermined traditional hierarchies. Children's daily confrontations with poverty, violence and humiliation nourished the belief that their parents were incapable, unwilling or afraid to stand up against the oppressor, protect their family and fight for the values that they held dear. As such, the apartheid regime not only robbed parents of the physical and moral authority to guide their children through the conflict, but also taxed their power in the debate on the role of children and youth in the struggle against apartheid.

However, rather than portraying children's participation in the military wings of the anti-apartheid movements as taking place in a situation of anomie, my interviews with the former child soldiers referred to the relationships with grandparents, community leaders and peers that these children established or strengthened. In the following chapter, I continue my account of how children drew upon these relationships in their search for alternative ways to analyse and respond to their social situation.

Chapter 6: Child Soldiering in South Africa - The Role of Political Leaders and Peer Socialisation

6.1 Introduction

This chapter continues the analysis of the causes and motivations for children's participation in the South African anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s and 1990s that I started in Chapter Five. While Chapter Five centres on the role of the family and educational structures in the political development, activism and militarisation of young people, Chapter Six integrates that of political leaders and peers. The decision to start my investigation with the family and education did not merely derive from traditional socialisation and child development theories, which have defined these as the primary and/or necessary locus for the maturation of the child into a socialised and rational adult, but from the finding that the former child soldiers identified these as informing their decision to join the MK or APLA. It was here that they first observed the tentacles of the apartheid system, experienced the ways in which its policies struck at the heart of families and communities defined as 'coloured' or 'black' and where they began to question this social reality. I described how teachers, parents and grandparents sought to formulate answers to the questions that children put to them and advised them to use their education as a tool of individual and, eventually, collective liberation and social improvement. I outlined how parents' norms and values of political reform and of childrearing had been shaped by the experiences

of their generation of the apartheid system and how their capacity to convey them to the new generation had been increasingly drained by apartheid policies. Similarly, I explained how children assessed the validity of the norms and values conveyed by their caregivers and teachers in relation to their day-to-day experiences and the desirability and feasibility of certain lines of action. That children are capable of processing these events and of forming an idea of local social relations, is supported by Boothby and Humphrey (1988 cited in Goodwin-Gill and Cohn 1994:34):

‘Through their endless series of why questions, children as young as three-year-olds begin to make rudimentary inquiries into social inequities they spot outside the home, and in doing so, can challenge their own parents’ complacent ways. Everyday struggles for food, shelter and other basic necessities can make their need to comprehend – and, at times, to act – even more pressing.’

My analysis not only showed the ways in which the societal conflict changed or damaged particular social relationships between children and adults, but also documented the new relationships that children established and drew upon to devise their response to the social context.

While the final section of Chapter Five referred to the important role that grandparents played in the political development and activism of the former child soldiers I interviewed, this chapter looks at the growing importance of political leaders and of their peers. Whereas the discussion of the impact of the political leaders allows me to comment on the statement that children’s participation in armed conflicts on the African continent constitutes a remnant of African traditional societies, the information I gained on the significance of fellow students, siblings and youth organisations allows me to underscore the

importance of the growing interest in researching peer socialisation. Furthermore, this chapter seeks to make a contribution to the theorisation of political socialisation by describing the locus of contact with socialisation agents, the modes of communicating political messages and their content, the repertoire of means of political reform that the youth organisations explored, the dynamic interaction with the government and its security forces and the militarization of youth activities. I demonstrate how in the context of the relationships with the political leaders and peers children not only shaped their views and actions in relation to the societal conflict, but also redefined what it meant to be a young person or an adult.

6.2 The Role of Political Leaders in Children's Political and Military Activism

6.2.1 'Old Crocks'

In each account of the former child soldiers, I could trace the name of or references to an 'oupa' – Afrikaans for 'grandfather' – who had contributed to and left their mark on the children's political development. These 'oupas' were PAC or ANC members, who often had been imprisoned on Robben Island for their involvement in the resistance movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Although they had to keep a low public profile upon their release from prison or go underground, the former child soldiers would run into them while visiting the home of a friend or a family member. In the following interview excerpt, Simon describes how he would often hang around meetings of the elders, eavesdropping

on their conversations and eventually asking them questions. It seems be that the support and guidance that Simon drew from the bond with his grandmother, who listened and responded to his questions about the apartheid system, gave him the courage to raise those issues with elder members of the PAC.

‘I was eleven years old when I became interested in the liberation movement. Just as we are sitting here today, commander Stephen [APLA commander who is present at the meeting] daughter might be running inside or might be hanging outside the door and, maybe without us knowing, listening to our discussions, to what the adults are saying. I was like that. I heard adults talking about the PAC as being racist, as violent, and more. So I was asking myself: “Why are they calling the PAC racist and violent?” This was at the time when some of our leaders [of the PAC] were set free from Robben Island and I had the chance to meet some of them at my uncle’s house. I was very lucky as the PAC at the time were fifteen under the ground [was forced to operate underground due to the government ban]. And I asked one of the leaders: “Why is the PAC being called racist? Is it a violent organisation?” and other questions. The adults were very surprised about my questions, amazed because I was so young and wondering where I had heard these things.’

The key role that Simon attributed to the ‘old crocks’¹⁰⁰ in his political education and activism, was often repeated by the other former child soldiers. The former child soldiers admired their strength, defiance and endurance – their bravery – in the face of the apartheid regime. Although their meetings with the ‘old veterans’ would initially be haphazard and their influence would go undetected, their encounters would gradually take on a more formalised pattern, in which they seem to have shaped or crystallised the political views of their – newly adopted –

¹⁰⁰ That is how Simon would refer to the political activists and PAC leaders of his grandparents’ generation. Although Simon always spoke with great respect and awe for these persons, he mentioned that they were not particularly happy with their nickname ‘old crocks’.

pupils. As the following interview extract points out, the experience of studying party and other political documents under the supervision of these ‘old veterans’ was a memorable one.

‘Simon: One leader, who I had addressed the questions to, told me that he himself could not answer these questions, because of the dangers it would expose me to. Instead, he gave the Declaration of the PAC for me to study. The documents were very old as they were the person’s originals, which he had received before his imprisonment in Robben Island. The PAC has the principle that one cannot join the liberation movement and fight for freedom if one is not mentally free. To be free you have to study the Declaration of the PAC, to know about the Land. Otherwise you might say things such as “All whites must be killed”, so you have to study the principles of the PAC. I attended underground classes of the PAC, where we studied the four documents of which the Declaration consists. ... So we studied these documents with teachers, with the old leaders present and we could ask them what every paragraph and principle of the Declaration meant.’

This extract provides further insights in the process of children’s political development. The fact that they were given access to party documents and were given the opportunity to study these at home constitutes a first important finding. Secondly, as was the case in youth organisations, this type of self-study was complemented with meetings with other party members and leaders to discuss the political analyses and ideological principles set out in these documents.

‘Lucy: [The ANC organised] short courses over the weekend and like sometimes during holidays. The reading material was with you most of the time. So you had the time to go through it and you had to get yourself ... to get used to it and operate all the material. ... [At home], the material used, you would hide it away.’

In addition to sketching out the dynamic and interactive nature of this learning process, Simon’s account brings to the forefront the claim that political and

military activists had to be mentally free. In what follows, it becomes clear that this was an important aim of the political education classes, whether organised by mainstream political organisations or by student organisations.

‘Jake: But it might take some time, because before ... before you teach somebody about the tactics, about how to use a weapon. You first have to politicise them, because our guns were guided by politics, because we were not terrorists. There is a difference ... Although the Boers [Afrikaners] were calling us terrorists, there is a difference between a terrorist and a freedom fighter. [...] If I tell you that you must go and bomb Kerk X [church X], because I know there are only Boers in this church. But the Boers that are in this church ... not all the Boers are against you, others are on your side. So it is only the terrorists who can do that [who can kill randomly]. So our arms are guided by the politics – so basically we have to be aware of the politics. You must teach that person the politics. So that you cannot hm you cannot produce the bandits, understand?’

While these classes connected with and reflected upon children’s day-to-day experiences, they sought to move beyond the individual or idiosyncratic events. Instead, political ideals or projects were supposed to guide the political and military activities of party members who, due to tight security measures, could not communicate or consult with their party leaders (Davis 1987).

It goes without saying that the party documents that the former child soldiers studied with the political leaders not only contained a vision of how South African society should be (re)organised, but also of how that objective should be attained. The tale of the young and old lion, which Simon describes in the excerpt below, sheds light on how party leaders contributed to the redefinition of children’s role in relation to the anti-apartheid struggle.

‘Yes, they [the old crocks] are the founding members of the thing. But for them their time was over and it was for us to take it on. So they can tell you

[about the organisation, its activities, the history of the struggle, etc.]. I remember one time one guy, as I was saying, he told me the way about the group [PAC], but I was within that group. But the story is still with me even today. He was telling me [imitates the voice of someone who tells a tale, an important tale]: “There is one thing that I cannot teach you that is to ... I can only teach you ...” He says an old lion – he made an example of a lion – an old lion always teaches his young ones how to ambush, but he cannot ambush himself. Himself, he only knows the tactics and the skills of how to do the thing, but he is old now and he cannot do it anymore, any longer. So this is one the things that made me say: “This is my time. Let me proof myself while it is still my time and then I can teach the others after me.” ’

6.2.2 African Traditions Supporting Child Soldiering

The tale of the young and old lion brings me to the theory that conceptualises child soldiering in South Africa in terms of a remnant or adaptation of African traditions. This theory proposes that traditional African cultures included social norms, which were embodied in and enforced by the council of the elderly and prescribed that the young and able-bodied members of the community were to be trained in warfare and sent into battle. Bennett’s (1998b) historical research indicated that in some traditional African societies age sets were transformed into pools for military recruitment. Although Bennett claimed that this military practice faded with the onset of colonialism, my case-study of child soldiering allowed me to investigate whether such practices were resurrected during the anti-apartheid struggle.

For example, Raymond presented a different picture of the older leaders and their contribution to his recruitment in the APLA.

‘It was from 1988. There was another – let’s call him Uncle Jack –, who came here from Robben Island. And there was another Father, who was called

Oupa. That Father was always trying to teach us the thing that is happening [in South Africa], [that] we must do this, this and this. We must do these things, to fight the Apartheid system. So all the time they pressurised us and then they give us the thing to ... and then as from that year 1988 all the time they tell us ... from 1988, 1989. And from 1990 I find the right time to take my decision. I think it is February. Yes, it is in February.'

The account of this child soldier suggests that the leaders of the PAC and APLA sometimes pressurised or aggressively persuaded children to join the resistance movement. This finding raises the question of whether the generation of the grandparents and, in particular, the 'oupas' of the PAC and ANC, blinded these children with promises of heroism and the illusion of power. Did the self-interest of these leaders sometimes take the upper hand in their dealings with young activists?

My case-study of child soldiering in the anti-apartheid struggle gave support to Bennett's claim that ancient African traditions do not account for the extensive use of child soldiers in armed conflicts currently waged on the African continent. However, I did find that South African child soldiers and their mentors sometimes *mobilised* those historical discourses to 'naturalise' – and hence, legitimise – the role that children and 'oupas' adopted in the anti-apartheid struggle. From the position of the 'oupas', the tale of the young and old lion celebrated the achievements of their generation, honoured their wisdom and demanded respect of the younger generation. The desire to strengthen or reinstate the powerful position, which was taken up by the elder members of the community in traditional initiation rites, might have encouraged military commanders and community leaders to abuse this myth and, ultimately, children's eagerness to act.

The children, on the other hand, welcomed the historical account that some traditional African societies assigned young adolescents the role of protectors of society and of warriors. It provided them with a compelling legitimisation of their decision and actions, which their parents and teachers would not, or could not, give. My research with the former child soldiers suggested that most of them were aware of their ambiguous position, of the fact that the roles they had assumed were 'normally' reserved for older members of the society. When asked why military commanders insisted on him continuing his training in exile and not participating in military operations in South Africa, Simon replied:

'It was because of my age. I was so young, you see. They wanted me to go to school, to continue my education. Some said to me: "You are still young, you can become something else [than a soldier]. There are other opportunities for you". But I told them: "Let me die for what I believe rather than not doing anything, than sitting aside. For if I do not go and fight for my ideals I will become a coward".'

The following excerpt illustrates how the former child soldiers contrasted their 'mental fitness' with their biological age.

'Simon: Yeah. There is a *need* for you to fight, that is why you become a guerrilla.

Interviewer: But do you think that young people can understand what it is all about? What are the causes...

Simon: You see a guerrilla for the mere fact, I would tell you, each and every day long who has been in the fight, who has become a guerrilla physically, - I can call anyone - he is clear mentally. They first train you mentally, you must be fit before you can go physically and do the real thing. We make you mature mentally regardless of your age. So the age does not count in that instance, even the sex as well does not count. Because I can say, one of my trainees was a woman and she is still the best.'

By becoming a soldier, children actually imitated or mirrored traditions that offered a more militant and powerful role to its youngsters. The respect and freedom that was granted through the community, was further accompanied by the authority that could be demanded through the barrel of a gun. The power and status that the old veterans bestowed on these young and inquisitive persons opened a door, a way out of the cloak of innocence and victimhood that their parents and the wider community had wrapped around them for protection. These children were no longer considered too young, because their dedication and commitment to the liberation struggle was valued regardless of their age.

6.3 Peer Socialisation

6.3.1 Student and Youth Organisations

The previous chapter described that the oppressed South African population came to perceive education as one of the few remaining paths to a better future. One can even imagine that the government welcomed the oppressed people's faith in education as an antidote to poverty and discrimination as it provided a good means to mute the unhappy masses. However, when the government failed to keep this illusion alive, it played into the hands of the political movements and especially of student movements. Precisely because education was held to be an important weapon in the fight against material and social deprivation, but was neutralised by the apartheid regime in the Bantu Education system for 'black'

pupils and other types of education for the 'coloureds'¹⁰¹, it would soon be pushed to the top of the political agenda of the liberation movements.

'Stripped of all political and economic rights, most blacks came to perceive education as offering one of the most important – perhaps the only – way out of the ever-widening circle of poverty into which most are trapped. Over the years this has not only raised the demand among black people for education but has also elevated educational matters to a central place in black resistance politics.'

(Diseko 1991:53)

It was the students themselves who would bring education to the forefront of the anti-apartheid struggle. Students' organisations stimulated their peers' awareness of the government's intention to mould its black and coloured population into second-class citizens and to feed them eventually to the hungry-for-unskilled-labour economy. Here, child soldier Matthew sheds light on the central part that the Students Representative Council (SRC) played in his political development and activism.

'... but specific things that made me join ... I think indirectly h'm¹⁰² the whole problem of being involved for myself started from basically the choice of selection of subjects and so on. It started there and then it spilled over. Because I think the SRC at that time were also timely in terms of telling us that "the reason why you cannot do what you want to do, because there is h'm a government in power that does not want us to do all these things".'

The interviews with other former soldiers confirmed that the finding that the education system actively discouraged or prevented pupils from taking subjects, such as maths and science, provoked a lot of anger and frustration. Concerned

¹⁰¹ These terms refer to those individuals who were grouped into the racial categories 'Bantu' and 'coloureds' according to criteria set by the apartheid system.

¹⁰² 'h'm' indicates doubt or hesitation.

with the general state of their education and with the level of authoritarianism that teachers and principals exercised in the schools, they resorted to collective organisation and peaceful protest (Diseko 1991).

‘Jake: Yes, I was a member of COSAS¹⁰³ by then. What we were fighting for was a non-racial, one education. So COSAS was then the party that [constituted] the Western Cape Student Congress and with the Student Congress in other areas, in the Eastern Cape and others, we would come together. So this body was going to politicise the students, was going to tell them [the students] that they have to be aware of the politics, we must be aware of what is happening in the country, what happened in our education and how can we change this education to be the People’s Education. You understand? Because we are having one thing: freedom. We are fighting for freedom in this country, we are fighting for freedom in education, freedom in every good thing, you understand? So the students need to be aware of their politics, aware about their history. Understand? They must be .. the white people were telling that they were superior to other races, you understand. So the students had to be aware of all these politics. So, as I was saying, the COSAS was there to concern the students what they can do to get the People’s Education instead of the Bantu Education. So COSAS was politicising us at school, at the same time there were workshops, at the same time there was someone who was going to give us a paper, that is something that tells us about the history of what happened, what happened in our country. Understand? So it was COSAS that inspired us ... in joining the revolutionary army.’

Rather than portraying students’ challenges to school authority and the creation of youth organisations as an extension of the wider resistance movements in the educational sphere, Diseko (1991) attributes a considerable degree of independence to the students and the challenge that their organisations posed to the apartheid regime. The defiance displayed by a large proportion of the

¹⁰³ Congress of South African Students

students is seen to have awakened the interest of the national liberation movements. For example, Nina (2000:159) contends that:

‘The recruitment of children from the school environment was a phenomenon sparked by the Soweto uprising of 1976. This momentum, at least at the national level, created the conditions for the recruitment of child soldiers¹⁰⁴ from the classrooms. The possibility of launching a revolt against apartheid using a sector of the population that was highly disaffected, was an opportunity on which the national liberation forces managed to capitalise.’

Similarly, Beinart (1994:154) establishes a historical link between the significant expansion in secondary and tertiary education and the challenge that the student population gradually posed to the white minority regime. Wolpe (1987 cited in Diseko 1991:45) explains this relationship by conceptualising the school and university setting as ‘a partially protected political space relatively shielded from the repressive state apparatuses’. Wolpe’s perception of the school as a relatively ‘protected place’, its validity already questioned before the Soweto rebellion (see Diseko 1991), no longer captured the experience of pupils and students in the eighties and nineties¹⁰⁵. For once the government realised the destabilising potential of the student population, it organised its forces for a counterattack. In the wake of the Soweto rebellion and in response to the persistently high level of student protests, police and security forces deepened their military thrusts into the townships and patrolled the school grounds in a strategy of containment or banishment. Jake explains that his school

‘was patrolled by the police, because what we have done in our schools and in other schools, the body that was operating in our school was the SRC [Students Representative Council]. The SRC was a body in school that was

¹⁰⁴ In this paper, Nina employs a broader definition of the term ‘child soldier’ than the one commonly used in the international community.

¹⁰⁵ The South African child soldiers, whom I interviewed, were members of that cohort.

called upon whenever a rule was broken, they can go to the principal and say: “This and this and this is needed”. Or each and everything we need, the SRC has to stand for us. But the Boers¹⁰⁶ and the police didn’t want us to have SRC at school. But we *fought* for it, for the SRC. Some of the students *died* for the SRC.

[...] So if you are having a meeting, the police would come around and shoot or beat the students. ... So many people died for the SRC. Even the government encouraged the vigilantes to kill the students. So it was the things that inspired us to join the revolution.’

While the school was far from a ‘protected place’, the educational sphere did represent a societal realm in which children and the youth could explore different political ideologies, participate in youth-led protests and join political student movements. More importantly, the school constituted the locus where the former child soldiers came into contact with the apartheid system and deepened their knowledge of the discriminating and oppressive nature of the society in which they were living. As such, Bantu Education, originally conceived as one of the powerful arms of the apartheid regime, did not provide the space for the young black generation to live in the illusion that, if only they studied hard enough, a brighter future would be awaiting them. It is within this gap or contrast between lived reality and the growing expectations of children that danger lures – or the possibility of political intelligence.

‘Lucy: They [political education] started at a high school level, the SRC at the school, the Student Representative Council, at that time. And from there, we always got programmes on political scenarios in the country, on leaders and then we try to educate the people around those issues. And [with regards to our local] areas [we learned about] what, what is rent boycotts, what is close to us that we *can* change. We read about it through workshops and we gained [knowledge] in that field, and from our schools we went to the area, all the

¹⁰⁶ Literally, the term ‘Boers’ refers to the white farmers in South Africa. In this context, it refers to the (Afrikaner-dominated) National Party and its supporters.

schools of the area. We all came together as the Youth Congress and we all shared our views. And then with the Youth at night, we all came together, also the older ones who had finished school, they all worked together. We had videos at that time, videos that we got and we saw battles from all over the world. And that also gave us more confidence to ... to go into the struggle and politically.'

This extract provides another example of how peer socialisation played an important role in their political development and activism.

As the following interview extract shows, once their blinkers were removed, children often felt that there was no other perspective or angle to look from upon the situation than sheer oppression. They often concluded that political activism was the only way out – or forward.

'Mafole: The time of the military training, I mean the time before that, did you ever discuss any political issues with your friends at school? Did any of your teachers encourage you?

Simon: Oh, I was always problematic. You can go to schools, man, and they will tell you about me. [We all laugh.] They [the teachers] can tell you about me. I can say, from primary level I was problematic because I always asked them: "Why don't you talk this? Why don't you say this? You always give the good side of the story."

Mafole: Sure, with withholding information.

Simon: Yes. "Why don't you tell them ..." I want to tell them [the pupils] that they are the same age as me and why have I known all this and they don't and we still live in the same atmosphere. "Where do you live?" I am living in heaven alone? [Calling out] You see, that was my problem, you see. That is why I could say I was influential to others, because my mind was, I was older than my boots. [Smiles] That is what people say, I don't know in English what is the right name to say.'

6.3.2 State Violence Obstructing Paths to Change

Many children and youth shifted towards the use of more violent means to pursue their political objectives in the context of an educational system that refused to grant channels for grievances and complaints. The school principal often impaired the activities of the SRC, in that s/he ignored recommendations, prohibited actions and suspended its initiators. In some cases, school principals would even collaborate with the police in identifying SRC leaders and members. The subsequent arrests and harassments by the police and the limited results of their peaceful protests and requests for change, further inflamed pupils' grievances. The interviews with the former child soldiers suggested that these experiences stimulated their organisations to explore alternative instruments of change and/or led members to join their military wings. As such, children's and youth's recourse to or engagement in violent action often constituted a rational and meaningful reaction to a social structure that did not allow them to achieve reforms through standard or culturally approved channels. In the following paragraphs, I strengthen the latter argument by highlighting the campaign of intimidation that the apartheid government launched and in which so many children were caught up in.

The South African security forces were responsible for maintaining and restoring law and order and for ensuring that the members of different racial categories took up the social positions and roles laid out for them by the apartheid system. In a state where only a small minority had the right to vote, this task was fulfilled at a high cost. The security forces drew extensively upon the repertoire of repressive methods, granted to them through the state's monopoly on the use of

violence, to neutralise or purge troublemakers. In the TRC, some of these security operations set up to hunt down whoever opposed the regime, were exposed. Families often became the innocent targets of security operations aiming to smoke out the rebels. While these strategies served as punishment for anyone or any community hiding or maintaining government enemies, it also sent out a warning to the whole nation.

Under apartheid, the South African child soldiers experienced numerous night raids, in which they and their sleeping family members were seized from their beds and subsequently questioned, beaten up or arrested. This naked display of disrespect and of arbitrary and unlawful use of violence and intimidation outraged the victims of these raids. As the following extracts suggest, it stimulated and strengthened the children's commitment to the liberation struggle and also brought families and communities together.

'Lucy: H'm especially what also made me h'm also join at that stage ... like you know the police h'm the police visits to our houses. The threat that they used to give, you know, and the way they used to wake you up at night and they used to like shine a torch in your face just to see who you are and question you and things like that. And that made, gave me more of a determination to go in that, you know, and to see what can be done to make a change to our society.

[...]

Like when the cops used to raid our house and then they would have ... there were like lots of vans, they had a lot of access to transport those apartheid cops. And like say they would raid like six houses at once, and when they had left our house, I would phone someone else's house and say "Tell your mother that they are here" and then you would hear in the background "Tell them we are all ready". So we had like a close, you know, net. So we had to get organised in that field to tell people like "they will be here" and things like that. And that helped ... especially the parents who were not very active,

that brought them all closer together, to work as a team, to support the children and things like that.'

Secondly, in addition to the actual attacks of security forces, the constant threat and fear of new or more violent attacks constituted an important element in the apartheid's reign of terror. While the township of Bonteheuwel, in which former child soldier Lucy grew up, was under constant threat of police raids, the media would function as a continuous reminder of the death and destruction occurring in other areas of South Africa.

'Interviewer: And what about your decision to join the armed struggle, did you ever regret your decision? What kept you going?

Lucy: No, I never regretted, but you know there were the bad times, when you lose people. You always ... like we ... the area in which we grew up Bonteheuwel it is always like a very, a very special area for the cops. And lots of students and guys that died that came from that area, especially from our community, that was the hardest hit. So that were h'm ... so ... it made you stronger to what you wanted to achieve. And yeah, yeah that was that the emotions that ... but you would say that the apartheid system took them away. And that cops that used to go to the houses, we would mostly blame them, you know.'

Moreover, the way in which the police indiscriminately arrested persons, raided houses in the middle of the night, treated detainees, beat up, tortured and killed people left the former child soldiers with the feeling that there was no justice in their country. In talking about his aunt who was a political activist and was

detained from 1985 until 1989, Jake illustrates the impact of the Internal Security Act of 1982¹⁰⁷.

‘Yes, in that period there was ... That period, whenever they take you [passionate], there was no that thing [law] of forty-eight hours [of detainment without trial]. They can take you for ... even ... you can just ... the year can pass without going to [court], without judgement. But during that period, what are you doing? They are just interrogating.

Interviewer: So they could detain you without trial for a long period?

Jake: Yes.

[...]

Interviewer: Where were you at the time that she was detained? Were you still in the country?

Jake: I was still inside the country, but I was just a comrade, just an activist.

Interviewer: Did the thing that happened to your aunt influence your decision to join?

Jake: Yes, in some way it did influence me, because h’m I could see that this country, there was no justice in this country. There was no justice. So h’m I foresee the reason for me to be, h’m to be really active, more than before.’

While purporting to enforce and operate within the boundaries of the law, these child soldiers came to perceive the law as only there to protect the ruling class.

‘Jake: The apartheid police, for example, if they were fighting the system, irrespective if you did go [to the protest], if you were participating in that kind of event, if they meet you on the street, they beat you, they kill you, they shoot you. Even those things have been done, understand? For example, you are just, maybe you were just coming from the meeting, when they meet you, they would beat up and then they ask you: “Who is the leader?” Understand? “Who is the leader?” So ... this was the situation. Sometimes the police were killing, would kill, would have done a massacre, for example, and then you were (active?) on that funeral, on the graveyard. They [the police] would come to the graveyard and shoot. They shoot, they shoot at the graveyard.

¹⁰⁷Nina (2000:164) describes that ‘the state enacted the Internal Security Act of 1982, which was inspired by the need to contain and immediately remove from society all the people who were participating in the social mobilisation against the regime. This legislation gave clear power to the state to keep in unlimited detention those activists who were regarded as participating in any of the banned political organisations’.

They kill more people again. Understand? [passionate] And then you start, you start to run and then whenever they meet you, irrespective if you participated or you did not participate, but surely they can beat you up and jail you or kill, shoot you. [silence]'

At a meeting of an advocacy and support group for victims of human rights violations, I was introduced to a young man who at the age of sixteen was wrongly accused and imprisoned for a political murder. He was seeking compensation from the new government for his unlawful imprisonment and the illnesses that flared up in that period. In the interview, he told me how, contrary to his peers, he knew little about – let alone was active in – the liberation movement. It was only due to this experience and his encounters with political activists *in prison* that he became interested in the resistance movements, in their history, famous leaders, ideology and activities. Hence, as a result of the injustice suffered at the hands of the government, he is now a political activist.

The discussion suggests that, in the absence of a justice and governmental system that respected the (basic) human rights of the majority of its subjects – including the right to non-violent protest –, children could not conceive of any change, and eventually any means of change, *within* the system. This indicates that the decision to take up arms constituted a rational and meaningful act within their social context. The interviews with the former child soldiers also unveiled the emotions that coloured their political and military activism, such as Jake's experience of police shooting at a night vigil for a fallen comrade (see last citation). Although these emotions constituted important factors in the process leading up to their decision to join armed opposition groups, the findings drawn

from this case-study challenge the argument that revenge constitutes one of the most important causes for children volunteering for armed combat across the globe (Brett and McCallin 1996). It could be argued that these child soldiers reacted to a sense of powerlessness, which arose from the perceived threat of ‘apartheid cops’ and a justice system that failed to defend the rights and interests of the majority of the South African people. Children experienced this sense of powerlessness not only in the protection of families, but also in their pursuit of freedom, equality and social improvement for their social group. Revenge could then be perceived as a means to take justice in one’s own hands in a country where the idea of justice had been distorted. Consequently, rather than reducing children’s participation in the anti-apartheid struggle to an emotive reaction, the claim that emotions might have triggered their decision to join the military wing of the political organisation they were member of – an act they might have been considering for a long time – seems to have greater validity. Furthermore, these experiences might have given the former child soldiers the strength and determination to persist in activities, which asked continuous sacrifices, but aimed at addressing the very causes of their pain and grievance.

6.3.3 Peer Recruitment

I now shed light on another aspect of the significant role that children played in the political socialisation and activism of their peers, namely their involvement in the military recruitment and training of their peers. With regard to the issue of peer recruitment, I draw upon a particularly enlightening interview with former child soldier Simon, who joined the APLA at the age of twelve. In our third interview, he explained how he mobilised some of his peers to join the armed

struggle. Here, I insert extracts of his description of these recruitment strategies indicating which motives played a party in children joining up.

'Simon: It was easier to convince those youth coming from the rural areas, because they knew about oppression. They had their cows, their sheep, the experience of working on the land and the oppression that they were facing there. In the urban areas, here in Cape Town, the people sometimes did not see the oppression. They would go and buy their food in the shops and they did not feel the oppression. Except for those who were coming from the rural areas and those living in the squatter camps - they were easily convinced about the need to fight against the apartheid regime. To those who did not see the oppression, I had to give them examples of the oppression. The most obvious example of the oppressive system was their experience in school. That Bantu Education was not providing them with any skills or the right skills, was not hard to show. It was not hard to convince them about that.'

Depending on the rural or urban origins of the children, Simon used different mobilisation strategies. In the South African countryside, it was not unusual for children to contribute to their parents' work on the fields. As such, children of the rural population were exposed from an early age to the exploitation of black labour by white farm and land owners. They witnessed how their family's cattle and production were taken away to satisfy the unreasonable demands of their boss and experienced the grinding poverty that resulted from it. In addition to this naked form of exploitation, child soldier Raymond describes children's confrontation with the authoritarian position of the land owner and the humiliation that their parents suffered.

'First of all, my dad was working in a farm at that time. My ma was still with us at home – we were not staying in the farm [...] So all the time we were going to school. We are experiencing the suffering, we are not satisfied [with] so many things like food, clothes, school – like uniform. So all those things ... you can ask to your mum. Your mother can tell you your father is working

there. So if there is no money, they can tell you [that] you can go to your father. The permission to do that, to enter the farm, was not like the way now we are using. You must try ...to praise ...the owner of the farm and then enter there and you can talk about things that you want. You see all those things?’

In addition to the white land and farm owners, the chiefs were the main oppressors in the rural areas. The latter would often support the system of the Bantu ‘homelands’, which, although invented by the apartheid regime, had led to the reinstatement of the position and status of chiefs. In the following interview, Chris sheds light on the oppression his community suffered at the hands of the chiefs and describes how, by joining the PAC and the APLA, he managed to readdress some of the injustices done.

‘Chris: The same oppression that was put by the whites here in Cape Town, here in the homelands they were oppressed by the heads of the chiefdom. The chiefs were the ones who oppressed us in the rural areas. The chief wanted Rand [money], wanted sheep, cows. [...] He wanted a blanket made of cheetah or of lion skin. The chief collected the money from the community, from the *poor* community, for example, for his wedding or to get a bride.
[...]

Interviewer: Did you and other young people protest against the actions of the chief?

Chris: Yes, we did. In 1987, we tried to protest against the actions and the ways of the chief, but our parents actually intervened and reported us to the chief. So the chief and his bodyguards came and took us to his royal kraal and he punished us. And we could not go to the police station to complain about what the chief had done to us, because that [the chief] was the law.

Interviewer: Would you say that your experiences of chiefdom in the rural areas influenced your decision to join the PAC and the armed struggle?

Chris: Yes, it did. In fact, in 1989, 1990, [when he had joined the APLA], we [PAC / APLA] challenged all the things that the chiefs did. We brought the chiefs together in a kraal and we told them about the things they had done. Afterwards we returned all the things that the chiefs had taken from their

people, from the poor community. We gave the community back their cows, their sheep. We gave the money that the chiefs had collected back to the people. But we did not get involved in settling any personal matters, such as “you [the chief] have slept with my wife”.’

But why does Simon claim that children growing up in the cities would not always feel or see the oppression? While violence would be increasingly used to ensure that state subjects walked in line and to squash the opposition, the apartheid system originally sought to render its tentacles invisible. The apartheid regime sought to sway its sceptics by, as I showed in the previous chapter, presenting Bantu Education as the perfect opportunity for black children to learn about their so-called Bantu culture, be educated in their own language and prepare for their future role in society. This description served as a fig leaf for a policy that aimed to segregate education and provide the South African economy with a large unskilled labour force.

The following extract illustrates how he convinced his peers – here: living in squatter camps – that political and military activism was the logical or appropriate response to their social context.

‘But for the people who were living in a squatter camp, or in a squatter camp house, when it rains, there is rain coming inside the house and you have to move your bed to the other side. If you showed such things to someone living in the squatter camps and you told them that even a white house [a house owned by white South Africans] does not have such things. “A car goes into a beautiful garage and you and your family are staying in this thing, this is a shack. It is made for pigs and even nowadays pigs are not living in such things. But you and your family are staying in such things. You see. God has not made you to live in such a place, if God exists. This is man-made. This is

what we call it oppression.” People tend to look as if “Yes man but this is true what you are saying”.’

As such, Simon emphasised that the circumstances in which children and their families found themselves were not created by the poverty of the country in raw materials or by natural disasters, but were the product of deliberate policy-making and human interventions. It was not just poverty: it was oppression.

Similarly, he called upon his peers engaging in crime and persuaded them that the only long-lasting solution and effective strategy towards improving the social, economic and political conditions of their people was through political and military action.

‘But if you went to him, you ask him: “You are doing crime, my friend. Why are you doing crime, my friend?” “Because at home there is nothing to eat, because of this and this...” And they tend to mention the lack of basic needs, what they are saying is that there is a lack of basic needs. And they maintain these basic needs by going to crime. “You are going to be arrested at the end of the day and it is only you who is fighting as an individual. It is not politically motivated what you are doing. There is no background for it.” And they turn and look at you “Hey, what are you trying to say? Do you have an option?” It is then when I start to show them that, “if, my friend, you involve yourself with the liberation movement, you have to behave in a certain way. You are a victim of the system. When a policeman comes and shoot you, I cry the most because maybe some day you will be a leader of a guerrilla army. But because you are standing here, people don’t look at you in that way. They look at you as a hooligan or all those sort of things. No one will fight for you, but if you fight for the people, people will hide you, people will always take care of you.” You see? This is another situation, understand?’

Nina (2000:151) concludes that ‘South Africa’s experience [of child soldiering] was one of participation by need, choice and also by what seems to be an

ideological conviction of what was needed to overturn the [apartheid] regime'. Nina hereby establishes a clear link between children's experiences of life under apartheid and their voluntary recruitment in the armed opposition groups.

'That is why I had a bigger influence on the young people. I could easily mobilise them ...

Interviewer: Because they wanted the same thing as you did?

Simon: Yes. I told them about the things that the PAC was involved in. I told them about the things I was doing and said to them that they could do the same. Because you have to convince the young people that they can do the same things as you are doing and you have to show them what you can do. For the principle of the PAC is that you must always be able to demonstrate your capacities.'

In the following section, I describe how both the MK and the APLA recognised the major part that young persons played in the political development and activism of their peers and drew upon this potential in their military training.

6.3.4 Peer Socialisation in the Military Camps

My interviews with the former child soldiers illustrated that, in deciding to join the MK or APLA, they embarked on a long journey of training and military deployment. They evoked the harsh conditions of the military camps in exile, which were often described as lacking basic facilities and sufficient supplies, recalled the physical demands of military tasks, and reminisced about the showers of homesickness that drenched all newcomers. Here, Simon reflects on the first formal training course he took as an APLA recruit and which took place in Zimbabwe.

'I would say to you, it was not easy. I was like being in hell, if one has never been in hell, because it was not easy. It took a person who says: "I know why

I am here”. Because if just say: “My friends are going there and I am also going there,” those are people who, we call today, have deviated and ran away and all those sorts of things, because they could not take the punch. It was like in hell, if you never have been in hell, that was it.’

In addition to vocational training courses, which Davis (1987), on the basis of his visits to ANC and MK camps in exile, described as ensuring the self-sufficient nature of the camps, my interviewees made reference to an extensive list of subjects that they were obliged to take as part of their training, such as topography and first aid. Next to military training, which comprised musketry, conventional warfare, guerrilla tactics and intelligence training, political education constituted the bulk of the child soldiers’ formation¹⁰⁸. Both Matthew and Simon boasted about their knowledge of the grand theories of Marx, Engels, Mao, Lenin and others and described how their classes used to analyse conflicts in other parts of the world. This interest in, and astute knowledge of, foreign politics and international conflicts would also surface in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

During their time in exile, former child soldiers Matthew and Jake were promoted to ‘political commissar’, whose primary task it was to teach political education to the newly arrived.

‘Matthew: But what I am saying there was a continuous training programme in the camp, which I was part of. We had like the beginning of the Rooie [Red] syllabus of political training - and then sometimes like the political commissars also used to give military classes.

¹⁰⁸ Former child soldiers Lucy sketched a similar education model for the South African underground, which organised ‘crash courses’, political workshops and meetings for its new recruits.

[...] I was more interested in ideological issues more than national politics.
And I eventually became an instructor, a political instructor.'

As such, the liberation movements aimed to ensure that their soldiers were 'mentally free' and that their guns were 'guided by politics'.

'Once the recruit accepts, an initiation process begins. The ANC places great emphasis on instructing its members in party history, philosophy and strategy. "We don't want someone who merely knows how to use a gun," asserts NEC¹⁰⁹ member Thabo Mbeki, "we need a political person, who understands what we stand for."'

(Davis 1987:81)

In familiarising themselves with and adhering to the political values of the organisation and the grand project it pursued, Jake claimed that the 'freedom fighters' distinguished themselves from criminals and terrorists, who acted out of self-interest or revenge¹¹⁰. This in turn explains the buffering effect that MK commanders, such as Ronnie Kasrils (1998), attributed to the (young) political commissars in channelling the grievances of new recruits and in dealing with their impatience to engage in military action¹¹¹.

'The opening of a new generation gap was inevitable. [...] "We were tolerant, non-violent, convinced we could reason with whites," explained a top ANC veteran in Tanzania who had escaped South Africa in 1966. "Not the 1976 group. They are very intolerant, completely violent and ready to fight on the spur of the moment".'

(Davis 1987:56)

¹⁰⁹ National Executive Committee (NEC)

¹¹⁰ See interview excerpt on pg. 207.

¹¹¹ In addition, party officials and military heroes, such as Oliver Tambo and Joe Modise for the ANC, would regularly visit the military camps in order to boost the morale of the foot soldiers and contain the impatience of the younger generation to be deployed in military action.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter picks up the thread of Chapter Five, in that it investigates why and how children came to take up arms in the anti-apartheid struggle. I hereby paid special attention to the role that children's relationships with significant others played in their political development, activism and militarization. My analysis of the role of political leaders and peers strengthened and expanded the arguments developed in Chapter Five. Firstly, children's decision to join the military wings of anti-apartheid organisations often constituted a rational and meaningful decision. My study of how these South African children made sense of their social environment under apartheid and devised their actions accordingly, supported the theoretical claim that children have agency. Moreover, my description of the ways in which children sought answers from parents, educators, political leaders, siblings and youth activists, and assessed the validity of their views on the basis of their day-to-day observations and experiences, indicated the interactive and dynamic nature of children's socialisation. I showed how grandparents, political leaders and youth organisations stimulated children's awareness and understanding of the political projects and ideological goals that underpinned the Bantu Education system and other apartheid policies. Throughout these discussions, I made reference to a multitude of methods of political learning, ranging from children's observations and eavesdropping on adult conversations, over the self-study of political manuscripts and party documents, political education classes in the military camps or underground and to their participation in protest activities. This underscored the argument that children have political agency, in the sense that they have the capacity to explore political arguments and ideologies and to act in the pursuit of political objectives.

Children's militarization was often the result of a long process of political development and activism, in which children joined youth organisations and explored a repertoire of non-violent protest means. As their efforts to improve or reform the state of their education were thwarted by the government, they shifted to more radical, violent means of government resistance and change. In conclusion, my case-study of child soldiering in South Africa illustrated de Waal's (2002:18) comments in relation to African youth:

'young people are social and political beings, impatient to express themselves, organise and engage in the social and political affairs of their communities and nations. They often long to escape from their families and are already engaged with extra-familial networks. Given the chance, many join political parties and become among their most active and dedicated members. Some volunteer for armed rebel movements, which in some cases can become a means for personal as well as political emancipation.'

In addition to providing evidence towards children's (political) agency, these two chapters on my fieldwork in South Africa underscored the importance of studying children and adults within a system of relations between generations, which continuously redefines conceptions of childhood and adulthood. In Chapter Two, I discussed de Berry's (2001) case study of child soldiering in Uganda, in which she concluded that local normative systems, and the social relationships that sustain those, seek a new balance in the face of violent conflict. My research on child soldiering in South Africa strengthens her argument that it is this reorganisation of the value system, rather than its absence, that frame children's involvement in armed combat. Why did the children see it as their responsibility to react to the anti-apartheid system? It was the elder members of the community, the grandparents and the community leaders, and the children's

peers who would redefine children's position in society. They would not only provide them with alternative tools to engage with the conflict, but would also carve out more powerful identities for children to pursue personal and collective emancipation. I portrayed the tale of the young and the old lion – the mobilisation of a historical or cultural discourse – as a powerful legitimisation of children's contribution to the liberation of their people. Viewing their parents' generation as hesitant or slow in their opposition vis-à-vis the apartheid system – or passive and subordinate at worst –, they conceived of themselves as the young lions who would bring the whole nation to freedom and prosperity. As Straker et al (1992:19) claims, the youth 'had found a new-found sense of power and a vision for the future.'

I described how, empowered by this vision and by an understanding of how the apartheid system affected South Africans across a range of social backgrounds, one of the former child soldiers I interviewed recruited his peers into political and military organisations. The power of children to teach political ideas to their peers and shape the course of their actions was recognised by those very organisations, in that they, for example, promoted them to 'political commissars'. In sum, my case-study suggests that, in order to make sense of children's voluntary participation in armed combat, researchers and practitioners need to take account of how children themselves contribute to the redefinition of their views and roles in relation to the societal conflict.

‘[...] adolescents’ strengths and potential as constructive contributors goes largely unrecognised and unsupported by the international community, while those who seek to harm them, such as by recruiting them into military service or involving them in criminal activities, recognise and utilise their capacities very well.’

(Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2000:1)

6.5 Former Child Soldiers Searching For a Place in Post-Apartheid South Africa

By now, the reader might be wondering about what happened to the former child soldiers in the aftermath of the apartheid regime. The remainder of this chapter indicates how the experiences and acts of former child soldiers during the military struggle against apartheid affected their lives in post-1994 South Africa. These findings show that the former child soldiers, while playing a crucial role in overthrowing the apartheid government, changed their social context in ways they could not have anticipated. This in turn strengthens the claim that human agency is always realised within a social context and, consequently, does not imply successful agency or intentionality.

It was Oliver Tambo who was sent to persuade the military camps of the MK to abandon the armed struggle and, as such, increase the credibility of the political talks that were being held in the early 1990s between the Afrikaner party and the ANC. The former child soldiers stated that they would have preferred a military defeat of the apartheid regime over a political settlement with the Afrikaner party. The disrespectful treatment that the rebel soldiers received upon their arrival in South Africa and in the subsequent demobilisation programmes,

reinforced the belief that the political leaders had sold them out – or, at least, the values and ideas they were fighting for. As such, the feeling of victory that the South African ‘freedom fighters’ experienced did not last long. If the end of the military struggle left a bitter taste in their mouth, the post-apartheid period had more disappointments in store for them.

The aftermath of apartheid was a time in which those who had succeeded in overthrowing the apartheid regime, were brushed aside in the political process and were expected to become ‘masses’ once again while the middle class took over leadership positions. Several studies have highlighted the disillusion experienced by children and youth who were very committed to the struggle but were subsequently excluded from the reconstruction of South African society (Cock 1993; Marks and McKenzie 1995). While political parties and wider society had once frowned upon children’s participation in the political and military struggle against apartheid, the notion of the child or young politician was now perceived as a contradiction in terms or as the ‘unchild’ (Wyness 2001:194). The capacities that anti-apartheid movements had recognised within to the younger generation from the late 1970s onwards in order to describe them as spearheading the revolution (Seekings 1993), were now being replaced – whether in the name of respect for cultural traditions or of children’s international rights – by notions of the child and youth that portrayed them as vulnerable, victimised by the apartheid system and in dire need of protection and education.

‘Adults no longer treat the former child fighters as heroes, preferring to pathologise them as traumatised victims, assuming that their future

contribution to the societies they helped to establish will be negative. Children may be permitted to make history, but they are excluded from making policy.’ (Ennew 2000a:47)

As Ennew (2000b:17) writes, the conception of children as civilians, whether as constituents or protagonists in the polity, only becomes meaningful within a redistribution of power between generations. This comprises ‘a frontal questioning of power based on the condition of adult’ (Cussianovich 1995 cited in Ennew 2000b:17) – a task that the newly sworn in political and military leaders in South Africa, as in so many post-conflict societies before, were not ready to take on.

In addition to falling short of child soldiers’ dreams of political involvement in the reconstruction of post-apartheid South Africa or of heroism, the ANC, which constituted the leading party in the newly elected government, broke many of the promises it had made to its political and military activists. When asked if the ANC or MK ever offered him a salary, family assistance or other things when they recruited him, former child soldier Jake replied:

‘No. [...] before we came home [return from exile to South Africa], the leadership used to come to us and visit us, as I said to you. What they do, because at the time when we left the country [South Africa], the time that we joined the revolution, we didn’t ... we didn’t get any pay for that. So we volunteered ourselves for this. So these people, then they come to us so many times and they tell us: “When you come home, we know that your friends are now already got education, all those things. Your friends have got houses, cars, but *you are not*, you are not going to ... - what is it [asks me] – you are not going to blame yourself about that. ... You are going to have your own houses. We are going to give you some money, and then you are going to choose either to go to school or go to work, understand? Because the work for you will be there, the money for you to go to school will be there.” These are our hopes, you understand?’

While they had joined the anti-apartheid movements to fight for the freedom of their people and for a democratic, equal and just society, it is not far-flung to assume that the child soldiers imagined they would benefit from this future society. They expected to reap the fruit of the sacrifices they had made and the suffering they had endured in the camps and on the battlefields. The above interview extract describes how opposition leaders promised their recruits the 'fast track' to success, to a good position in society.

But their hopes were terribly disappointed. Without 'proper' education and work experience, the prospect of unemployment and poverty soon made itself felt. In post-1994 South Africa, the unemployment rate amongst young people soared high – and the former child soldiers were no exception to these trends. Coolen (2001:17, translation by author) states that 'almost six million people between the age of 15 and 34 do not take part in the economy, not even as a small scale enterpriser in the informal sector.' The former child combatants claimed that the primary obstacle to finding a job was the lack of 'certificates', namely the official recognition for the educational and vocational skills obtained in the resistance movements (see section 6.3.4). In the post-apartheid society the (political) education, vocational and communication skills of the children – or young adults – vanished into thin air. Without certificates, their experience and the knowledge acquired in the underground years were reduced to political indoctrination. Their military skills seemed to be the only ones recognised as apt for career-development and, consequently, the few job offers that the former child comrades received were as security guards or as foot soldiers in the newly formed national army. But the dreams that they cherished before their military

involvement, and which they thought could only ever be realised if the society in which they lived radically changed, had remained intact. My interviewees expressed their wish to pursue those dreams without employing their military skills – read: without falling into the clutches of military or criminal organisations. The frustration of their unsuccessful search for a job, of the bureaucracy that slowed down or obstructed their claim for financial compensation, of the growing disappointment of their parents who saw their children return empty-handed, of the disrespect – or even fear – that the surrounding community displayed in their behaviour towards former comrades, and much more, gave the interviews a dark feel. The poem by Jake, which I inserted in Appendix 3, reflects the dire situation that these former combatants faced in post-apartheid South Africa.

In light of the harsh conditions in which they lived and the criminal activities that some of them engaged in, post-hoc descriptions of the former child soldiers as unsocialised, corrupted or evil beings emerged. This social stigma stuck to them like the blood of their enemies that coloured their dreams. It made them drift further away from the society for which they laid the foundations.

‘Six years of democracy has delivered little to the hundreds of thousands young people who were so important to the anti-apartheid struggle. They are called the “lost generation”. They themselves say that they were born “at the wrong time on the wrong place”. They feel deserted by the government. [...] A lot of young people feel betrayed, as their concerns seem to have disappeared from the national agenda. [...] The youth is like a rag, first used to clean up the filth from the floor, afterwards deemed dirty and thrown away, the bitter commentary goes.’

(Coolen 2001:11, translation by author)

The former South African child soldiers, whom I interviewed, did not lose their hope in the new government. Although they sometimes expressed extreme disappointment and voiced their anger about those who recruited and commanded them, but now pretended not to know them, they still seemed to believe in the potential of this government to pursue the ideals they fought for. But they wanted to participate in the realisation of this dream. They wanted to be part of the train that leads to progress and true liberation.

‘Simon: I want to deliver what I can to the people, because I am seeing ... Like anyone having dreams, I am seeing myself as successful maybe in the business sector or maybe having a business of my own. Only, that is only possible if I have got, if I can acquire the skills that I need. If I have got no skills, nothing can happen for me. That is why there is the need for us, first, to get, to acquire the skills that are needed and then we can say: “Why are you [the government] not doing anything about us?” Then we can start complaining a lot after that. [Laughs] Because we are already complaining now. And the other thing that I wanted to say, the conditions that we are living in. If you are not in the army, that is the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), or you are not absorbed by the reintegration process, then there is nothing for us. I am one of the people who was not integrated and I have gained nothing. Like from a family perspective, they say: “You have been there and there and what are they doing for you? Nothing. The government is doing nothing for you.” Other people are being forced by their families to go and join the army [...] We didn’t join the guerrilla armies because we were hungry or wanted money. We felt the pain, but there is a fight for us. So I am one of the people who says, “I will never join that SANDF, because that SANDF does not represent my need, does not represent what I was fighting for.” So there is no need for me to go and join SANDF. I want to go back to school and empower myself. What I fought, it is over. So there is no need for me to go, I didn’t have a plan of seeing myself as a soldier. I didn’t plan that. That happened because of the situation. [...] So we are feeling that we are being left in the same situation. They are moving with the train, leaving us apart and leaving us outside. And that is also going to create a problem for them who are moving, because we are going to say:

“Guys, you don’t look at us as one of your comrades. You forgot so early. You are in the great train as they call it. Yeah.” Then the people who are outside, we have to wait – “When are you throwing bridges out of the train?” In fact, it hurts ... ’

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I argued that the image of the child soldier who is forced or coerced into military combat still dominates research and policy-making on the issue. The moral cloak that envelops the issue of child soldiers often nips in the bud attempts to discuss the diversity and complexity of the situations in which children become participants in warfare. It also obscures empirical studies that show a significant proportion of child soldiers joining armed groups or forces voluntarily. Reduced to the structural factors that determine children's lives and to the limited cognitive skills that children have mastered, the debate on the nature of voluntary child soldiering is conventionally construed as irrelevant to the broader plight of child soldiers.

In this thesis, I have not only provided yet another case of voluntary child soldiering, but also strengthened the call for a more in-depth understanding of children's reasons for becoming soldiers. I have hereby shown how the debate on the causes and processes leading up to children's military recruitment can be enhanced by incorporating the voices of (the former) child soldiers themselves. My research has strengthened the hypothesis that children's decision to voluntarily participate in armed combat emerges out of their location in a particular social context. Furthermore, I have argued that child soldiering often

constitutes a reasonable response to the children's social environment. This has led me to the conclusion that altering the social context of (potential) child soldiers and, subsequently, presenting them with alternative choices contains the key to the successful prevention and demobilisation of child soldiers.

7.2 Pre-Sociological Models of Childhood Shaping

Research and Humanitarian Aid in Relation to Child

Soldiering

Researchers and practitioners often face difficulties in persuading others to recognise the extent and significance of child volunteering. In order to explain these constraints, I conducted an investigation into the drives of the global movement against the use and recruitment of children in armed conflict in Chapter Two. In the face of the increasing use of children in armed combat and the inadequacy of international humanitarian law to deal with this humanitarian ordeal, a coalition of NGOs launched a global campaign against the use and recruitment of children in military conflict.

These human rights activities identified quantitative research methods as a pivotal element in their strategy to raise global awareness and put child soldiering on the political agenda of the international community. In dire need of hard evidence to 'name and shame' governments and armed opposition groups that draft under-eighteens in their ranks, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (2001) identified the monitoring, documenting and reporting of

children's recruitment and use in hostilities as a research priority. This led to almost a decade of research into child soldiering that was dominated by quantitative surveys. Chapter Three described how this quantitative data on child soldiers not only served the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in its diplomatic endeavours to pressurise governments, but also lent numerical support to the call for drafting an Optional Protocol to the CRC. In addition to constructing child soldiering as a social problem and – later – as a violation of international law, these quantitative studies have to be acclaimed for putting child soldiering on the conceptual map of social scientists. They upgraded general knowledge on the topic by generating statistical data on relative and absolute numbers of child soldiers in different conflict zones and on the social distribution of the phenomenon.

But if child soldiering represents a time-honoured custom, why has it only recently captured the attention of the international community? Firstly, in Chapter Two I gave credit to the instrumental role that the media and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers have played in raising global awareness about the plight of child soldiers. Secondly, although humanitarian advocates generally acknowledge that the military deployment of children is as old as war itself, they have highlighted recent shifts in children's involvement in hostilities. While the evolution from international to internal warfare has multiplied the number of child soldiers, the advances in modern technology, which resulted in the proliferation of small arms, have radically affected the role of children in armed conflicts. Their promotion from assistants to combatants, the ways in which children are trained – cruel initiation rites – and prepared for armed combat –

drugs, alcohol and amulets – have triggered concern from the international community.

However, these arguments leave the impression that the definition of child fighters as a social problem constitutes a logical or natural response to an ‘objective reality’, which was waiting to be exposed and addressed by the international community. Instead, in Chapter Two I argued that, in addition to the factors described in the above, dominant western conceptions of childhood and children have profoundly shaped contemporary perceptions, analyses of and reactions to children’s participation in political violence. To develop this argument, I drew upon the new sociology of childhood, and its emphasis on the social construction of childhood (James and Prout 1997:ix). This new sub-discipline of sociology, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, argues that the concept of ‘children’ as signifying a different social group and that of ‘childhood’ as referring to a specific and delineated period of life have only recently emerged. Therefore, in addition to the rising global awareness of the phenomenon of child soldiering, the differentiation of children from other social categories, such as adults and the elderly, accounts for the birth of the term ‘*child soldiers*’. This new term builds upon the assumption that the recruitment strategies, training schemes, military duties, experiences and post-war consequences for child soldiers significantly differ from those of their adult counterparts.

Does this imply that the category of ‘children’ can explain why under-eighteens partake in armed combat? Can this social category account for children’s

behaviour in the post-conflict society? In Chapter Two, I showed that particular conceptualisations of childhood, which arose over the course of history and can still be traced in the contemporary mosaic of childhood conceptions, answer these questions affirmatively. The thread of these so-called ‘presociological’ models (James et al. 1998) is that the child is positioned outside the social context. This means that the child’s perceptions and reactions regarding the social environment are in essence determined by characteristics and processes *inherent to the child*. I subsequently traced the origins of certain ‘presociological’ models of childhood and illustrated how the characteristics, which the ‘innocent child’, the ‘evil child’ and the ‘naturally developing child’ ascribe to the social category of ‘children’, continue to inform popular accounts of child soldiers. Children are seen as extremely vulnerable to the recruitment campaigns of military organisations, because, for example, children’s innocence and ignorance prevent them from uncovering the ‘evil intentions’ of the military commanders, or because children’s limited capacity for formal logic or abstract thinking inhibits them from imagining alternative means to survive, or because children’s sense of adventure and love for fantasy blind them from the dangers that soldiering involves. These biological and psychosocial features, which vary with the theory that the researcher uses to describe social reality, explain why it is hard to conceive of children volunteering for armed combat – other than as a masked form of forced or coercive recruitment. Furthermore, the idea of the universal child has supported the decision to subsume the huge diversity of children’s participation in armed combat under a single category: ‘child soldiering’. In sum, these presociological models of childhood have not only

constructed child soldiering as a social problem, but also as a global social phenomenon.¹¹²

7.3 Conceptions of Childhood and Child Soldiering

Informing the UNHCR's Approach to Child

Soldiering

Chapter Four took up the thread of Chapter Two, in that it presented a case-study of how contemporary conceptions of childhood and children have not only triggered a heightened interest in the issue of child soldiers, but have also informed its definition as a social problem. Chapter Four began by explaining why the use or recruitment of children in hostilities is a matter of concern to UNHCR. Given that UNICEF has assumed the main responsibility for UN policy-making and programming in relation to child soldiers, UNICEF might appear a more straightforward setting for a study of the theoretical framework in which international policies are developed. However, in light of the observations that IGOs and NGOs on the ground generally alert UNICEF of child recruitment and that UNHCR is often one of the first humanitarian organisations to arrive on the scene of military upheaval and mass movement, Chapter Four presented UNHCR as another interesting case-study. I described how the shift from external to internal warfare has brought about mixed refugee populations, comprising both civilians and soldiers. As a result, UNHCR personnel have been

¹¹² Therefore, the issue of child volunteering often constitutes a thorn in the eye of human rights advocates. It not only raises tricky questions about the responsibility for child soldiers' actions, but also threatens to challenge the homogeneous picture that campaigners hold up to gain sympathy and support of the international community.

increasingly confronted with the presence of armed elements in camps who seek temporary refuge, food and new recruits. Considering that UNHCR has mandatory obligations to protect and find durable solutions for refugees, it has aroused expectations of UNHCR's involvement in the global struggle against child soldiering. Chapter Four went on to show that a significant proportion of the target group UNHCR serves – refugee children – has been defined in the literature as at risk for child recruitment. Within this framework, the UNHCR has adopted the monitoring, documenting and reporting of under-age recruitment as one of its five key priorities in relation to refugee children.

In Chapter Three, I explained why I chose to undertake qualitative research to explore the extent to which UNHCR's policies and activities reflected the latest developments in the literature on child soldiering. A three-month internship at the headquarters of UNHCR in Geneva allowed me to employ not only the method of interviewing, but also of participant observation. My position at UNHCR headquarters facilitated the organisation of formal and informal interviews with staff members who had worked or observed the use and recruitment of children in hostilities. Furthermore, my assignments at EPAU and the Children's Unit gave me access to internal documents on the topic, which allowed me to complement and corroborate my research findings.

In Chapter Four, I showed that UNHCR, as many other humanitarian organisations, has been markedly influenced by the child rights movement and, of particular relevance to this thesis, by the international campaigns launched by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and the Machel report. The latter

not only triggered an exponential increase in UNHCR documents and guidelines on the topic, but also had a profound impact on the conceptualisations of the child and child development that affect UNHCR's perceptions, analyses and reactions to children's participation in armed combat. I found that the psychosocial and physical effects of indirect or direct forms of combat are at the centre of UNHCR's understanding of the phenomenon of child soldiering and, as I outlined in Chapter Two, are driven by a concern for the biological and cognitive immaturity of children. Children's relative immaturity and their correlated dependence on adults are also invoked when accounting for children's vulnerability to military recruitment and particularly when downplaying the voluntary nature of children's participation.

By failing to integrate children's agency and the social construction of childhood, this dominant conceptualisation of 'child soldiering' obscures the huge differences that exist between child soldiers in terms of their personal and social characteristics, their motivations and the huge diversity of the contexts in which they become involved. Furthermore, the views of beneficiaries are not only important in identifying the groups of children at risk, but also in devising valid alternatives to soldiering. In spite of this growing recognition, a recent evaluation project of UNHCR's work in relation to refugee children found that 'the link between opportunities for children and adolescents and their vulnerability to recruitment were often not found reflected in programming' (Valid International 2002:20).

UNHCR's approach towards the prevention and rehabilitation of child recruits, such as family tracing and reunion, is still largely based on a conceptualisation of the child as needing stable, emotional relationships with parents or family members who shield them from violence and cultures of violence and of the child as requiring structured activities and play areas for a normal and healthy development. Similarly, the great emphasis that UNHCR and other members of the Coalition place on international humanitarian law as the primary means to prevent the use and recruitment of under-eighteens in armed combat is in line with the above line of argumentation. For if children's biological and intellectual immaturity renders the threat of soldiering to their physical, psychological and moral development independent of the social context and of the type of recruitment and if it renders the voluntary recruitment of children unlikely, then the most appropriate response to child soldiering is to sensitise governmental forces or armed opposition forces about the rights and protection needs of children and to hold them accountable for any violations.

7.4 Towards an Understanding of Voluntary Child

Soldiering

7.4.1 Integrating the New Paradigm for the Study of Childhood

However, the growing evidence of children voluntarily joining armed forces or groups and the heated debate it sparked off concerning the definition of 'volunteering' gradually created space for the emergence of an alternative approach to the phenomenon of child soldiering. Influenced by, and often

working within, the theoretical framework of the sociology of childhood, researchers started asking questions, such as: What factors and experiences informed children's decision to join military groups? And how do these vary across time and space? In Chapter Three, I maintained that these questions exposed the constraints that the sole use of quantitative methods had so far imposed on the breadth and depth of research projects. Whereas quantitative studies had successfully drawn attention to the scale of this social problem, research on child soldiers had now reached the point where it needed to study and theoretically integrate the range of contexts in which children get involved in armed combat and the plethora of children's experiences before, during and after the conflict.

This strengthens the claim of the new childhood studies that childhood and child development are neither natural nor universal, but are instead strongly embedded in social context. Rather than assuming that biological and psychological forces exclusively determine the lives of children across the globe, social scientists are encouraged to examine the cultural, social, political and economic factors that are responsible for the diversity in childhoods across time and space. Qualitative methodology has increasingly been considered as appropriate when studying social diversity and rapid social change, characteristics of the phenomenon of child soldiering that are increasingly being acknowledged.

Moreover, the new sociology of childhood claims that a research interest in the structural and cultural conditions that affect and differentiate childhoods needs to be accompanied with one for children's own experiences, interpretations and

actions in relation to the social world. While it is important to locate the meanings of children's behaviour within their immediate social context, this new sub-discipline of sociology warns about treating children as passive subjects of social structures and processes. Its proponents thus take issue with classical socialisation theories, which portray children as mere sponges of the norms and values transmitted by the (primary) socialisation agents. Instead,

‘If we want to explain *why* many adolescents are in the vanguard of linguistic change [or within current context: of political activism], and why some are not, we need to introduce a strong notion of social agency – an acknowledgement that people have some degree of choice over what they do’.
(Sealey and Carter 2001:5)

The claim that children are social actors who make sense of the social world in interaction with others and who pursue the views and decisions they develop on the basis of these interpretations, constitutes the second key principle of the new paradigm for the study of childhood.

In this way, the new sociology of childhood takes further the symbolic interactionists' and ethnomethodologists' claim that children are capable of bestowing their social environment with meaning. It argues that children not only have the capacity to make sense of experiences in interaction with others, but also that the resulting meanings and symbols might significantly differ from those of adults – or those that adults believe are held by children. Children are declared to have a 'sociological standpoint', in that children's viewpoints on social reality represent significant, or even core, empirical material that, in addition to the perspectives of significant others, such as parents, teachers, employers, can greatly enrich our understanding of social processes and facts.

This theoretical argument, and the hypothesis that a situation of armed conflict sometimes sows or stirs up discord between parents and children, underscored the importance of setting up research studies, which aim to explore the meanings that children themselves attribute to their involvement in armed combat and their own experiences. Chapter Three put forward the theses that children need to be treated as research subjects and that qualitative research methods constitute important instruments to gather data on the meanings that child soldiers attribute to their context and on the motivations for their actions. Consequently, I decided to opt for a predominantly qualitative approach in my case-study of child soldiering in South Africa.

In order to gather information on former child soldiers' reasons for joining the military struggle against apartheid, I drew upon the research methods of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. While in-depth analysis and the organisational demands of interviews and focus groups partly explained the small size of my research sample, the latter was further constrained by the time limitations of my fieldwork in Cape Town and the difficulties that I experienced in identifying potential research subjects. Working within these research restrictions, I opted for the method of theoretical sampling, in which research participants are selected on the basis of their relevance to the research topic. Although I could not generalise the distribution of characteristics of my twelve research participants to the general population of (former) child soldiers in South Africa, the method of theoretical sampling did allow me to develop and refine theoretical arguments on the basis of my research findings. The latter required me to corroborate my research findings with second-hand sources.

In Chapter Three, I discussed some of these practical and ethical challenges that affected the feasibility, validity and representativeness of my research findings and interpretations. The process of identifying and negotiating access to former child soldiers constituted the most challenging part of the fieldwork in South Africa. Issues of personal safety further affected my freedom in contacting and organising the actual interviews and focus groups. The subsequent settings of the interviews impacted upon the process of gathering data. The first interviews coincided with a regular meeting of the military veterans associations, were set in a community centre and created an atmosphere of support and collective solidarity. The second and third round of interviews sought to increase the personal character of the discourse. My experience with former South African child soldiers confirmed the argument of other practitioners and researchers that a position of political neutrality is not only untenable in a highly politicised context, but might also be considered unacceptable or unethical by the research participants and their gatekeepers. This in turn highlighted the delicate balance between showing one's sympathies to the research participants and engendering false hopes or promising help that cannot be realised.

Finally, in Chapter Three I explained why the plan to conduct a second case study of child soldiering in Palestine was abandoned. Not only did this imply that my theoretical argument could only draw upon one case study of child soldiering, but also that the validity of my research findings became subject to the reliability of adult recollections of childhood events. In Chapter Three, I discussed the potential impact of memory distortions on my research. I

subsequently described how I sought to anticipate these by interview techniques and the corroboration of my findings with information of secondary resources.

7.4.2 Motivations for Children's Military Participation in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle

In order to develop an understanding of why South African child soldiers joined the armed wings of the ANC and PAC, I examined child soldiers' *subjective* appraisal of their social environment. Chapter Five commenced with a brief history of apartheid and its opposition movements. The events of the 1970s and 1980s constituted the core of this historical overview, because this was the period in which the former child soldiers of my research sample grew up and came to take part in the anti-apartheid struggle. Next, I focussed on the structural and cultural facts that the research participants themselves identified in the interviews as colouring their childhood and as salient to their decision to volunteer. Firstly, I described the instrumental role that education played in the system of racial segregation and white supremacy. With the issuing of the 1953 Bantu Education Act, the apartheid government's plan to provide black and coloured children with a basic level of education took definite shape. While the primary objective of this education system was to meet the wishes of the economic enterprises for more unskilled labour, it also allowed the government to keep public expenditure for these groups of the South African population to an absolute minimum. A key to the successful implementation of this policy was to socialise black and coloured

children¹¹³ into their future role as second class-citizens. The ideology that the curriculum and the teaching personnel conveyed were supposed to restrain the aspirations of black and coloured children and shape their anticipation of (future) rights, abilities and social identities.

But how did these children make sense of their situation? In treating children as social agents, my analysis of child soldiering in South Africa verified that the social structure into which children are born, is 'always conditioning rather than determining, and each individual has some degree of choice about how to respond to the contexts in which she finds herself' (Sealey and Carter 2001:9). While parents and teachers of the child soldiers made a concerted effort to present education as the only road out of poverty, the lived reality of the school children shattered that illusion. In an education system, which was characterised by a poor infrastructure, a high pupil/teacher ration, and a narrow school curriculum, many children came to realise that hard study and perseverance would not lead them to a good career or their people to a brighter future. The school not only constituted the locus where the former child soldiers came into contact with the apartheid system, but also with its opposition movements. In particular, I found that students' organisations played a key role in the children's political development and activism and hereby lent strength to the argument that peer socialisation needs to be taken into account when explaining child soldiering (Boyden 2003). These youth-led organisations not only deepened the knowledge of their peers regarding the discriminating and oppressive nature of

¹¹³ Although the Bantu Education Act regulated the education of 'Bantu' or black population groups, subsequent policies by the apartheid government would also drastically reduce the quality of the education of coloured children.

the apartheid system, but also helped them to devise alternative tools to analyse and react to their societal context. Concerned with the low quality of their education, with the level of authoritarianism that teachers and principals exercised in the schools, and with the absence of channels for their grievances and complaints, students increasingly resorted to collective organisation and peaceful protest. Rather than portraying students' challenges to school authority and the creation of youth organisations as an extension of the wider resistance movements in the educational sphere, several studies attribute a considerable degree of independence to the students and the challenge that their organisations posed to the apartheid regime (see for example Diseko 1991).

How did school principals and teachers react to the creation of youth organisations, such as the SRC, and their subsequent challenges to school authority? The teachers that crossed the former child soldiers' path were the product of an education system that lacked investment and had come under the watchful eye of government forces. Whereas African teachers of the 1950s had been vocal critics of the Bantu Education system, subsequent government policies and actions had successfully muted this opposition group by the 1970s and 1980s. Fear of violent harassment and unemployment diminished teachers' (public) support for the liberation movement. Children's perception of teachers as puppets of the apartheid government reduced the potential power their political views and attitudes towards the anti-apartheid struggle might have had on their students. Rather than presenting children with more complex and analytical perspectives on the social conflict, the problem-ridden relationship

with their educators jostled the youth even further away from reformist views and reactions against the apartheid system.

Moreover, the feeling of frustration in relation to a racist education system that constrained their development joined up with despair when children's efforts to improve or reform the state of their education were thwarted by the government. The school principal often undercut the initiatives of the SRC by refusing to act on recommendations, banning activities and suspending their instigators. In some cases, school principals would even provide the security forces with names of SRC leaders and members. The subsequent arrests and harassments by the police and the poor results of their peaceful protests, further inflamed pupils' grievances. In general, the way in which the police indiscriminately and unlawfully arrested persons, raided houses in the middle of the night, treated detainees, beat up, tortured and killed people outraged the former child soldiers and their communities. The constant threat and fear of new or more violent attacks constituted a crucial element in the apartheid's reign of terror. In the absence of a justice and governmental system that respected the basic human rights of the majority of its subjects – including the right to non-violent protest –, children could not conceive of any change, and eventually any means of change, *within* the system.

In sum, my research of child soldiering in the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s and 1990s lent weight to my argument that children's decision to take up arms often constitutes a rational and meaningful act within their social context. Although emotions affected children's decision to join armed opposition groups,

the findings drawn from my case-study challenge the argument that revenge constitutes one of the most important causes for children volunteering for armed combat across the globe (Brett and McCallin 1996). It could be argued that these child soldiers reacted to a sense of powerlessness, which they experienced not only in the protection of families, but also in their pursuit of freedom, equality and social improvement for their social group. Revenge could then be perceived as a means to take justice in one's own hands in a country where the idea of justice had been distorted. The former child soldiers believed that violence constituted a legitimate strategy to secure rights and improve the lives of their social group when other, peaceful means of change had been exhausted. Consequently, rather than reducing children's participation in the anti-apartheid struggle to an emotive reaction, the claim that emotions might have triggered their decision to join the military wing of the political organisation they were member of – an act they might have been considering for a long time – seems to have greater validity. Furthermore, these experiences might have given the former child soldiers the strength and determination to persist in activities, which asked continuous sacrifices, but aimed at addressing the very causes of their pain and grievance.

7.4.3 Introducing the Concept of 'Generational Order'

My case-study of child soldiering in South Africa confirmed that the new paradigm for the study of childhood allows for a more analytical understanding of children's views and behaviour. But the proponents of this paradigm went beyond this claim. They argued that this innovative approach constituted the basis for a new sub-discipline of sociology, because children are worthy of study

in their own right. That childhood possesses a specific problematic not only derives from children's capacity for independent thought, but also from the view that children inhabit a different institutional context, which cannot be reduced to the 'family' or the 'school' (Prout 2002:70). In order to establish the conceptual autonomy of childhood, the new childhood studies have primarily focused on the individual experiences, views and reactions of the child in relation to the social world.

However, this research drive has recently sparked off criticisms, because it threatens to reduce children's agency to the level of individual actors. The limited attention and theoretical space for collective agency runs the risk of obscuring an important part of the dynamic interplay between structure, culture and agency. As I explained in Chapter Two, this comment has been formulated as part of a larger critique of the new sociology of childhood: its tendency to categorical thinking. In spite of the fact that this new sociological school has carried out extensive research on how political, economic, social and cultural facts have produced a diversity of childhoods across time and place, more recent studies of childhood have merely acknowledged the socially constructed nature of childhood and treated the resulting institutional context of childhood as a given fact, as an independent variable. The problem with adopting the institutional context of childhood as a starting point is that its inhabitants become *de facto* members of a social category. Treating this social category as an independent variable, researchers have become susceptible to the very criticism it originally directed towards those 'pre-sociological' models of childhood: circular

reasoning, in which children behave in a particular way because they are children.

The benefits of engaging in relational thinking, in which relationships rather than categories make up units of analysis, are high in the research area of children and armed conflict. Firstly, the stability and persistence of structured social relations have to be questioned in the context of war and social upheaval. Secondly, my case study of child soldiering in South Africa has reinforced the need for a theoretical approach that gives due recognition to the dynamic interplay between structure, culture and – a strong sense of social – agency. A more traditional focus on parents and educators as the ‘primary socialisation agents’ might have resulted in the conception of child soldiering as occurring in a situation of anomie or as the product of inadequate socialisation. My fieldwork, however, has drawn attention to the complex system of relationships between generations in which children – and adults – live. While the societal conflict soured relationships between parents, educators and children, new relationships emerged and old ones were renewed between children and the generation of their grandparents and with community leaders. Furthermore, I referred to the instrumental role of peer groups – as creators of meaning and agents of social change – in reproducing and altering the social structure. Consequently, in addition to children’s individual ability to make sense of their conflict-ridden world, former child soldiers took part in the creation, modification and alteration of the social world they lived in, of social relationships and of the social norms and positions that shape their own and others’ lives – including the dominant conceptualisations of childhood and adulthood.

As such, rather than – or in addition to – focussing on ‘the institutional context of childhood’, some proponents of the new childhood studies have proposed to treat childhood as a relational concept (Prout 2002:70). They have suggested the concept of ‘generational order’, which, according to Alanen (2001:20) ‘refers to a complex set of social processes through which people become (are constructed as) “children” while other people become (are constructed as) “adults”’. Therefore, my case-study comprised an investigation into the impact of the societal conflict on the social relationships, which reproduce and modify social norms about childhood, childrearing practices and adult responsibilities. Although mainstream sociology and psychology portray generational conflict as a normal phase in the development of the child and a precondition to the creation of the child’s own unique identity, my case-study showed how the societal conflict exacerbated this (normal) intergenerational conflict. In particular, the interviews with former child soldiers demonstrated how the different pillars of the apartheid system struck at the very heart of family and community life. The migrant labour system, the Bantu homelands and the measures of ‘influx control’ broke up families and undermined traditional hierarchies. Furthermore, children’s daily confrontations with poverty, violence and humiliation nourished the belief that their parents were incapable, unwilling or afraid to stand up against the oppressor, protect their family and fight for the values that they believed in. My description of how children assessed the validity of the norms and values conveyed by their caregivers and teachers in relation to their day-to-day experiences and the desirability and feasibility of certain lines of action, exemplified the dynamic and interactive nature of (political) socialisation.

Viewing their parents' generation as hesitant or slow in their opposition to the apartheid system – or passive and subordinate at worst, the former child soldiers came to redefine their own role in the anti-apartheid struggle.

Chapter Six described how community and political leaders not only provided children with alternative tools to engage with the conflict, but also carved out more powerful identities for children to pursue personal and collective emancipation. By mobilising historical narratives or traditions of ancient African societies that offered a more militant and powerful role to its youngsters, these elder members of the community provided a compelling legitimisation of children's contribution to the liberation of their people. As such, the tale of the young and the old lion strengthened children's belief that the time had come for their generation to stand up and take action. Moreover, Chapter Six outlined how children would recruit their peers for political and military activities and hereby used a range of political, economic and social motivations.

In Chapter Six, I hereby documented a multitude of methods of political learning, ranging from children's observations and eavesdropping on adult conversations, over the self-study of political manuscripts and party documents, political education classes in the military camps or underground and to their participation in protest activities. This underscored the argument that children have political agency, in the sense that they have the capacity to explore political arguments and ideologies and to act in the pursuit of political objectives. Both the MK and the APLA recognised the major part that young persons played in the political development and activism of their peers and would act upon this potential in

their military training and deployment. Some of the former child soldiers I spoke to had been promoted to 'political commissars', whose primary task it was to teach political education to the newly arrived. This constituted another example of how young people played a crucial part in redefining the views and roles of their peers in relation to the conflict. Peer socialisation and recruitment into political and military activities demonstrated that children are able to approach their social environment and relationships as resources for coping with their situation are capable of conceiving of and actively defending political and social projects. As such, my fieldwork in South Africa showed that these former child soldiers not only participated in political and societal change, but also changed what it meant to be 'young' under apartheid.

7.5 Policy Implications

I ended Chapter Six with some reflections on the current post-conflict situation of the former child soldiers. I hereby described how some of their experiences during the military struggle against apartheid affected their lives in post-1994 South Africa. That discussion showed that the former child soldiers, while playing a crucial role in overthrowing the apartheid government, also changed their social context in ways they had not anticipated. My conversations with the former child soldiers strengthen the call of humanitarian activists to make demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for child soldiers a standard element of all peace agreements (Verhey 2001). Furthermore, my research findings emphasise that the age limit of these special education and vocational training programmes needs to be stretched to include those former

child soldiers who now have reached adulthood, but often fall through the social security net.

More importantly, both demobilisation and prevention policies could be enhanced by integrating a more analytical understanding of children's reasons for joining armed groups or forces. While the interests and rights of children who are forcibly or coercively recruited for hostilities might be served and protected by international treaties, such as the ILO Convention No.182 and the Optional Protocol, the problem of voluntary child soldiering requires the international community to go beyond advocacy campaigns. One cannot ignore the role that the arms industry and the interests of the military commanders play in the increased recruitment and use of under-eighteens in hostilities. However, having argued that children's decision to become a soldier sometimes constitutes a reasonable response to their social context, my thesis argues for more humanitarian interventions that seek to alter children's social context and the constrained choices that they make within those. The suggestion that prevention of children's participation in armed combat necessitates changes in political, cultural, social and economic structures and processes (Peters 2000), echoes the views of many researchers on child labour. In relation to child labour in South Africa, for example, Levine (1999:152) writes: 'Youth activists [in the 1980s] did not expect that eliminating child labour would eliminate apartheid, nor do any working children I have met expect that eliminating child labour will eliminate poverty'. Furthermore, Levine's statement reinforces the importance of consulting and taking account of the views and initiatives of children in DRR and prevention programmes, of seeing and treating them as social agents.

McKenzie's (2002) evaluation of Operation Lifeline Sudan¹¹⁴ illustrates my conclusion that the long-term success of DRR programmes depend on the extent to which these reflect an awareness of and address the underlying causes of child volunteering. Operation Lifeline Sudan successfully demobilised a large number of child soldiers, in that it moved the warring parties to releasing their under-age recruits. Furthermore, UNICEF sent these former child soldiers to school, set up programmes to reintegrate them into their communities and, as such, sought to avoid the institutionalisation and stigmatisation that these children tend to suffer from. However, in spite of these short-term achievements, the situation that these ex-child combatants found at home had often remained the same as when they had left it. Their families still faced a bleak future.

On the basis of his responsibilities and experiences as a UNICEF Senior Programme Officer, McKenzie expressed concern about what would happen if UNICEF and other humanitarian organisations ceased their demobilisation programmes or retreated altogether. What would prevent these former child soldiers from picking up their guns and returning to the battlefields to improve their situation? The international pressure on the warring parties to refrain from child recruitment, to respect the Optional Protocol to the CRC or face the consequences of violations against international humanitarian law? In line with the findings of this thesis, McKenzie argued that this could only constitute a part of the solution and needed to be accompanied by a programme targeting the core

¹¹⁴ Operation Lifeline Sudan was launched in 1989. It is a consortium of UNICEF, World Food Programme and thirty-five NGOs. For a recent report on its activities, consult: <http://www.unicef.org/emerg/Country/Sudan/020529S.pdf>

causes of children's participation in the armed conflict: their position and experiences in relation to the social conflict.

Therefore, I encourage researchers and practitioners to confront or persevere in the difficult task of balancing the moral question of can under-eighteens be recruited and used in armed conflict with the pressing question of if children do express a desire to engage with the conflict that colours and constrains their life, how can this desire be channelled into valid alternative or non-violent strategies.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire for Semi-Structured Interviews on UNHCR's Approach to Under-age Recruitment

Introduction: a) Presentation of my research

b) Ask for description of position and work of interviewee

- 1) Why is under-age recruitment an issue of concern to UNHCR?
- 2) What is UNHCR's role in relation to child soldiers? Which objectives has UNHCR set itself vis-à-vis the phenomenon of child soldiering? E.g. prevention of under-age recruitment, demobilisation or re-integration of child soldiers.
- 3) What activities have been planned to attain these objectives?
- 4) To what extent have UNHCR's policies on child soldiers been implemented? To what extent have the above mentioned activities been undertaken?

Organisation of programme and activities

- 5) Please describe how the project is organised / how the project, in general or in your particular branch office, is implemented.
 - Strategies?
 - Which are the tasks and responsibilities of the protection officer?
 - To what extent and how are other UNHCR staff involved?
 - Strong and weaker points of the organisational structure with regards to these activities? E.g. no reporting on, no budgeting for activities with child soldiers.
 - Human / financial resources?

Assessment of UNHCR's activities in relation to child soldiers

- 6) Definition of the target group: who constitute the beneficiaries?
- 7) Which methods are used to identify this group?
- 8) What kinds of data are collected on this target group and their conditions? Have these data been compiled in a report or file?
- 9) Which activities does UNHCR's staff take (subsequently)?

- 10) How effective are these activities in achieving the objectives? Criteria: The Resource Pack on Child Soldiers, which is part of the Action for the Rights of Children project – a training and capacity building project for general staff -, proclaims that *“Understanding why and how children and adolescents are recruited, enables steps to be taken which make such involvement less likely.”* Therefore, certain understandings or theories of children’s involvement in armed conflict should be shaping or informing UNHCR’s role and activities in relation to child soldiers.
- 11) Which understandings or theories have dominated or primarily shaped their policies and activities?
- 12) To what extent have local communities been consulted in gaining a better understanding of child soldiering? Hence, to what extent do local discourses of childhood, child development and child participation influence, or are reflected in, UNHCR’s activities?
- 13) To what extent have local communities been involved in devising strategies to prevent under-age recruitment?
- 14) To what extent are children (at risk or who have been demobilised) consulted in 11 and 12?
- 15) To what extent can one discern a difference in perceptions of under-age recruitment between HQs and field offices?
- 16) How does the instability of the state / country impact on the effectiveness of the measures or the appropriateness of UNHCR’s objectives in relation to child soldiers? To what extent are objectives and approaches flexible?
- 17) Political issues.

Appendix 2: Questionnaire for Semi-Structured Interviews on the Causes and Motivations for Child Soldiering in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle

Topic 1: Background of the participant

Guidelines (in *Terms of Reference of ILO Voices of Young Soldiers Project*): age, gender, region of origin, religion, ethnic group, level of education, demobilised or not, physical condition, profession of his/her parents, name of armed force or group they belonged to.

- What is your name, age and where were you born?
- Are you married or living together with your partner?
- Do you have any children?
- What are you doing now?
- Do you practice any religion? What is your religion?
- What kind of occupation do/did your father and mother have?
- Do you have any brothers or sisters? (What are they doing now?)
- What armed group did you belong to?

Topic 2: What were you doing before the war/ before joining the war?

Guidelines: school, housing, friends, ideals, ideas on the future, poverty, violence, etc.

- Did you go to school before joining the armed struggle? Level of education
- How old were you when you first started school?
- How many years did you go to school? Which Grades did you obtain?
- Did your brothers and sisters go to school (as well)?
- How did you pay your school fees?
- Did your peers / friends go to school as well?
- How would you describe the quality of the education you received? Bantu education & (resulting) poor quality of education
- What was the language of tuition at your school?

- How many pupils/students were there in your class?
- How would you describe your teacher(s)?
- Did you have a good relationship with your teacher(s)?
- Were the security forces (SADF – South African Defence Force – and/or SAP – South African Police) at any time present on or around the school grounds? How did you feel about that?
- How old were you when you stopped going to school? Why / How did you make this decision?
- Did any of your friends stop going to school? And why did they decide to halt their schooling?

- Where did your father and/or mother work at the time? Group Areas Act, migrant labour system, and influx control of urban areas
- How often did you see your father and/or mother?
- Who took care of you before joining the war? Continuity and relationship with caregiver
- Did she/he take care of you throughout your childhood?
- How did you feel about this person?
- Did you have any children before joining the armed struggle? If yes, where did they live and who took care of them most of the time?
- How did you feel about your family?
- Was there any use of violence in your family? When and why did they use violence? How did you feel about that? High levels of domestic violence and corporal punishment

- Were most of your family members employed at the time? High unemployment rate
- Were there any difficulties for members of your community in finding jobs? If yes, why was that?
- Did you look for a job before you joined the armed struggle? What was it like for you to look and apply for jobs at the time?

- How would you describe the home you lived in? Housing/Living conditions, forced resettlement, evictions, destruction of shacks
- How much did your family have to pay for it?
- How many lived with you in that house/room/...?
- Did you live in that place throughout your childhood?
- Did the other members of your community live in similar types of housing? What was the state of the housing in your community?
- Were there any attempts to improve the housing situation in the community?

- How did you feel about the local councillors? Did you feel they represented the views and problems of the community? Or was there any resentment towards or clashes between the councillors and the community? Black Authorities Act, introduction of community councils that were expected to be self-sufficient
- What did you do when you were not at school? Youth organisations
- Were there any youth facilities in your community?
- Did you join any youth organisations?
- If yes, why did you join it?
- Could you give describe this organisation? (E.g. start, goals, activities, structure of organisation, and its evolution)
- What was it like for you to be part of that organisation?
- How would you describe the leaders of the organisation?
- In what kind of activities did you participate? Are there any activities / moments that stand out, that made a deep impression on you?
- When you were young what did you want to become?
- And how did you picture your future?

Topic 3: What happened to you when the war started?

Guidelines: Exposure to violence, displacement, loss of friends-family, more poor or richer due to war, feelings!

- So when the ANC and PAC declared to shift from non-violent to violent means in the struggle against Apartheid, do you remember that? When did you first hear about it? How did you feel about it?
- How did this change / evolution in the struggle affect your life? (Both policy of ANC and PAC as the reaction of the South African state towards it)
- Could you describe one/some of the first experiences you had with the civil war?
- How did you feel about these events / this change?
- Did you join any groups or associations in your community?
- Could you describe the first time that you heard about the possibility to join the armed struggle?
- When and where was it?
- Who told you and what did they tell you?

- If you were in a group, how did the group react?
- How did you feel about it? What did you think?
- Did the idea of joining appeal to you at the time? Why (not)?
- What stories were told in your community, among friends or family about the MK/APLA?

Topic 4: Why and how did you join?

Guidelines: Did your friends join, etc.

- Could you describe the first time that you started to consider the idea of joining the armed group?
- Why did you want to join?
- Where there any things, issues, thoughts that made you hesitate, made you concerned or scared?
- Did you discuss it with anyone?
- How did they react?
- How much time passed between the first time you thought about it and the moment when you actually joined?
- What were the main reasons for your decision to join? Why did you (finally) decide to join the armed group?

- How old were you when you joined the armed group?
- Did you inform anyone about your decision?
- Where and how did you join the armed group?
- Did any of your friends join at the same time?
- Did your peers/friends join for similar reasons?
- What was it like for you on that journey the armed group / the day before?
- What were your first experiences when you arrived? Could you describe some the thoughts and feelings that you had at the time?

Topic 5: What was it like to be part of the armed group/army?

Guidelines: What did you get, money, clothes, status, drugs, etc.? Did you have fun?

- How would you describe your life in the armed group?
- What rank/position/status did you obtain/reach in the military group?

- What did you learn in the army? What type of training (e.g. military and political) training did you receive? Training and political education
- What kind of documents did you study?
- Did you listen to the radio in the camp?
- Who was responsible for the training (background, experiences in the armed group, age)?
- Could you describe a typical day at the training camp?
- How long did the period of training last?
- Were you eager to finish your training and go into battle? How did you feel when the period of training had come to end and they told you that you were ready for combat/ that you were a soldier?

- How would you describe the camp?
- What types of services were available to the soldiers?
- What kind of punishment was given to those soldiers who did not respect the regulations / military code and/or disobeyed orders?
- Did you expect to be paid by the armed group for your services before joining?
- Did the armed group pay you for your services (salary or in natura)? Did you receive any cloths, money, food, school/education fees from the group?
- Were you happy / satisfied with what the group provided you with *at the time*?
- Were the other soldiers in the camp satisfied?
- Did the armed group give your family any kind of help?

- How would you describe the group / military unit that you were placed in / part of?
- What were your responsibilities in the armed group?
- Would you be willing to describe some of the (military) activities you engaged in while being in the armed group?
- What was it like for you to fight?
- How did you prepare for battle? What did you do / think of?
- Did you smoke or drink anything?
- Did you get wounded at any time?
- What helped you the most in moments of hardship/ during difficult times?

- How many years did you stay with this armed group?
- What was it like for you to / Did you like being a part of this armed group?
- What was it like for you to be a soldier? Did you like your life as a soldier?
- How did you feel about your decision to join the armed struggle? Did this feeling evolve/change over time?
- Did you ever regret your decision? If yes, why and what kept you going?
- Did you stimulate or discourage any of your friends to join? What did you tell them?
- Did you train any new recruits?

Topic 6: How do you see your future?

Guidelines: This question should close the interview and bring the participant back to the future.

- Have you been demobilised or reintegrated into the SANDF (South African National Defence Force)?
- How do you feel about that?
- How do you see your future?

Appendix 3: Poem by former child soldier Jake

Don't Forget

People forget not about our heroes (ex-exiles). They left their friends, parents, sisters and brothers and joined the liberation movements. They love life but they wanted to liberate us in this country, but today they are forgotten.

When they came back, we didn't give them a warm welcome. They sacrificed their education, love and good life. Others integrated in the SANDF and others not. But all those who integrated left the force in large numbers (e.g. 20%).

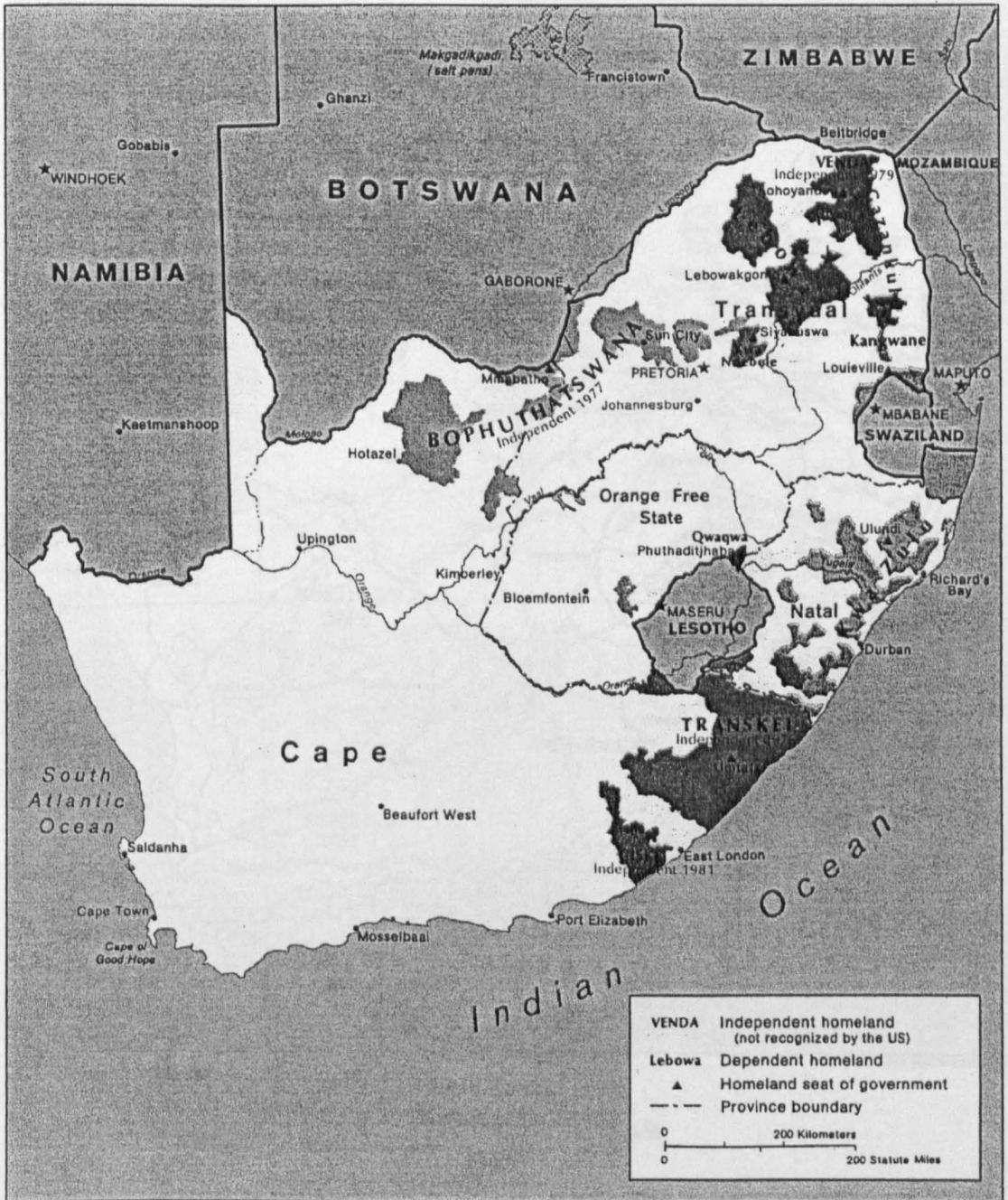
Now they are all roaming around doing nothing because of the scarcity of jobs. They are homeless, jobless, and without money. Others end up doing crime. These people are our people. They get nothing from their liberation movements.

Why does the government ignore the trained people like this? In other countries the exiles were given money, houses, jobs and education. We must help because they are our brothers and sisters. We must do anything we can to assist them. Let's not forget our history.

Jake

Appendix 4: Maps of South Africa

South Africa: Black Homelands



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Source: www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/africa/south_african_homelands.gif

