Children and War (final draft)

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Croesus, the Lydian king who appears in Herodotus' *Histories*, remarks that in peace sons bury their fathers but in war fathers bury their sons (Herodotus, 1.87). This maxim captures the inversion of norms that accompanies war, and the essence of transition, destruction, and the reallocation of roles.

Children have always been involved in war. Like adults, they experience wars in many ways: as targets, indirect victims, by-standers, witnesses, and perpetrators of violence. War brings children new vulnerabilities: when they are displaced or forcibly recruited, or through the death of family members or the destruction of physical, economic, or political infrastructure. Depending on their age, gender, cultural background, and personal characteristics, children respond differently to wars, often assuming new identities and functions. Alongside the increased vulnerabilities, war can sometimes offer new opportunities.

A child is defined in international law as being any person under the age of eighteen years. This codification brings with it the assumption of biological, emotional, or psychological immaturity, and can also imply a degree of legal irresponsibility and cognitive irrationality. Notwithstanding this definition, childhood is more comprehensively understood as being socially rather than biologically constructed, and as such the impact of violent experiences depends on a number of factors, including the capacities of the children and the social understanding of childhood and child rearing (Boyden and de Berry, 2004).

The portrayal of children as innocent and essentially passive victims of war has contemporary currency, but has not always been the dominant interpretation. The

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American Civil War was fought largely by young people, and death in battle was seen to ennoble, rather than waste, a short life. In Europe and the United States, a shift has taken place over the last century, from the depiction of child combatants as heroic, to an interpretation that they are victims or demonic. This is linked to the discourse of human rights and humanitarianism that associates the military with criminality or deviance (Rosen, 2005).

Wars disproportionately impact the young, and affect boys and girls differently; the effects are emotional and psychological as well as physical, economic and political. How children survive depends largely on the labor opportunities that are available to them and the kinds of development these lead to.

The World Wars

During the First World War, the official age for recruitment into the armed forces across Europe was eighteen years, but in all countries involved in the conflict, younger children enlisted. In Britain, many children left school at fourteen, and there were an estimated 250,000 under-aged soldiers in the British army. Recruitment into the army brought release from poor living conditions at home, and the promise of an opportunity to see the world; it was also responsible for the deaths of many thousands of young soldiers.

The Second World War again saw a massive mobilization of children in Europe. In Germany, nearly nine million under eighteen joined the Hitler Youth, inspired or coerced by Nazi ideology. At the outbreak of the War, many of these were pressed into active service. Their female counterparts also received new social responsibilities as members of the League of Young Girls, reproducing and nurturing the perceived purity of the German people.

Life for millions of Jewish, Gypsy, or handicapped children in Europe was also transformed by the Second World War, and up to 1.5 million of these children were killed by the Nazis. In occupied territories, Jewish children were at the forefront of the armed resistance, and those who joined partisan groups in the forests of eastern Europe experienced survival rates that were higher than those for children who remained as civilians (Rosen, 2005).

Elsewhere in Europe, the Second World War was a time in which traditional roles could be challenged and many teenagers left school to find employment or join the military. Measures were introduced to protect younger children from war, the most notable of which was mass evacuation: in September 1939, hundreds of thousands of children were taken from British cities to the countryside in an effort to save the lives of a generation of children from the disruption and bombing caused by the War.

Legislation protecting children

At the end of the Second World War, the Geneva Conventions outlined a number of international agreements on the treatment of civilians during conflict which, by implication, included the protection of children. The Additional Protocols of 1977 extended protection to victims of armed conflict, and as such had relevance for child soldiers. Notwithstanding these developments, UNICEF estimates that two million children died in armed conflict in the ten years preceding 1996 (Machal, 1996).

The Rome Statute of 1988 made recruitment of children under fifteen years a war crime, and the following year the Convention on the Rights of the Child defined a child soldier as "any person under the age of eighteen who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or any armed group in any capacity other than purely as family members." In 1999, the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention

on the Worst Forms of Child Labor (Convention #182) called for an end to children's participation in armed conflict, including ending their forced recruitment. The Optional Protocol, which came into force in 2002 and laid the foundations for the International Criminal Court in Sierra Leone, set eighteen as the minimum age for compulsory government recruitment, all recruitment into non-governmental forces and for direct participation in combat.

The use of child soldiers has been denounced repeatedly in UN Security Council resolutions, and there is some evidence that there has been a decline in use of children in governmental forces since 2001 (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2004). In recent years, human rights organizations and aid agencies have promoted child demobilization and reintegration projects in a number of countries including Sierra Leone, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. While legislation and the implementation of demobilization projects indicate some consolidation of an international position, they are not backed by robust political mechanisms for enforcement, and the use of child soldiers continues in many wars.

The ILO estimates there are around 300,000 child soldiers fighting in 36 countries around the world. These children are serving as combatants, spies, camp followers, wives, porters, and minesweepers in regular troops, paramilitary, and opposition forces. In Palestine, children operate as suicide bombers. Children are widely considered to be relatively fearless and obedient and, as such, make good frontline fighters. The availability and portability of light weaponry means that children are easily and cheaply armed, and are able to carry and operate guns, particularly automatic assault rifles, pistols, and hand-held grenade launchers.

Contemporary war in Africa

The majority of contemporary warfare takes place in Africa, and around half the child soldiers in the world are serving in this region. The context for these wars is the post-Cold War dominance of neoliberalism in global politics and the fallout from the AIDS epidemic.

The end of Cold War brought a decline in patronage offered by rich nations to leaders in developing countries. The financial impact of this has been offset by increased commercial opportunities granted by the rise of neoliberalism which enables integration, however uneven, into the world economy through formal and non-formal trading routes. These economic activities are accompanied by decentralized configurations of political power, which are, in turn, reflected by patterns of decentralized violence manifested in intrastate wars with high proportions of civilian casualties.

Alongside these economic and political developments, AIDS has re-shaped demographics over the last two decades. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest regional incidence of AIDS, and particularly high seroprevalence rates are recorded in armed groups which are mobile, use commercial sex workers, and often do not practice safe sex. AIDS decreases life expectancy, placing greater responsibility on younger members of society in all forms of employment. In the light of the decentralized structures, this employment—including work as soldiers—is frequently informal and unprotected, may not afford a subsistence level of return, and regularly involves violence or other forms of abuse.

The influence of neoliberalism, experienced through structural adjustment and unequal labor conditions, and the AIDS epidemic means that many people in sub-Saharan countries contend with dangerous levels of poverty irrespective of the onset of fighting. In Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example,

years of predatory government, repressive international interventions, and impoverishment, placed many millions of children in a precarious situation before the start of the wars.

War exacerbates these conditions of poverty, through the further loss of assets, houses and farmland, or through loss of public entitlements or market opportunities. Children are made homeless through war, can be internally displaced, or become refugees in another country, all of which affect their labor opportunities. The death of parents and the destruction of social structures during war propel children into roles as breadwinners, often providing for other children. Child-headed households face particular obstacles in terms of land rights, access to education and health services, and legal protection.

Displacement either within a country or across borders is also closely associated with the informalization of politics and the economy. In countries at war in sub-Saharan Africa, the state's capacity is reduced and the market is unregulated. This leads to increased violence and coercion in trading arrangements, the most extreme form of which is abduction for recruitment, forced labor, or slavery. War gives cover for these practices, which often target young people: boys are taken into agricultural work or mining; girls are more generally used for domestic chores or for sexual exploitation.

Whilst coercion into armed groups can increase the vulnerability of children, it can, in other circumstances, improve their security, and an ILO study found that two thirds of children fighting in wars in central Africa were volunteers (Dumas and de Cock, 2003). For children born during a war, violent conflict is normal and militarization a familial and social expectation. Faced with violent conditions,

children may use violence to protect themselves or promote their interests (Brett and Specht, 2004).

Being a child implies that one is the child of someone, and when families are torn apart, armed groups can take the place of the biological parents and siblings. The imagery of patriarchy, easily adopted in hierarchical structures, can be interpreted variously by combatants and their commanders, and can play a part in reallocating responsibility for violence (Schafer, 2004). The nature of voluntarism in joining an armed group is debatable, and choices are circumscribed by environmental conditions, but to an important degree many children make an informed decision to fight. In a similar vein, wars often increase children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation, but in other circumstances offer increased opportunity to challenge gender roles, as occurred in the Female Detachment of FRELIMO during the Mozambican war (West, 2004).

Working with violence

The combination of aggressive commercial interests in war, a declining life expectancy, and increased poverty, has aggravated the impact of war on children, particularly in Africa. The conditions of war tend to make economic, political, and social transactions more violent, influencing the forms of commercial exchange and labor that children engage in. This leads to a heightened dependence on non-formal or subsistence work, which may be exploitative, demeaning, or dangerous. Loss of family capital or income can lead children to begging, stealing, prostitution, or violence—as individuals, or as members of gangs or armed groups.

In the process of making choices about their labor and survival, children are agents not only in their own futures, but in the social and political development of their communities. They are included in areas of life that might previously have been

considered the reserve of adults. This means the increased risks that accompany wars surface, not only as vulnerabilities, but also as new ways of finding and attributing meaning to existence and violence, new negotiations of social and political spheres, and ultimately to new realities fashioned by the processes of conflict.

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