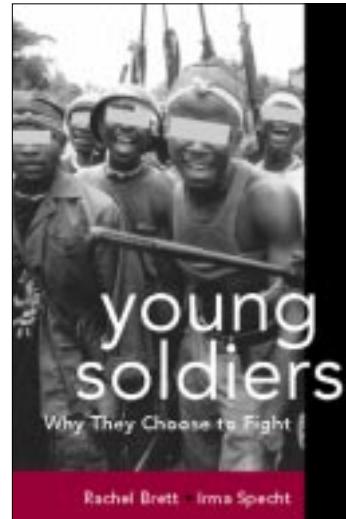


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Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight

by
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Introduction

What people believe as a motive for their conduct is at least as important as the actual sequence of events.

▪ Stephen Ellis, *The Masks of Anarchy*

Children are among the fighters in most of today's armed conflicts. International attention has been given predominantly to those who have been abducted or physically forced to join, particularly those in the lower age ranges. This is not the whole story. Thousands more join armed forces or armed groups apparently through choice. A recent study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that "volunteers" accounted for two-thirds of child soldiers interviewed in four Central African countries.¹ Under-18s are routinely recruited into national armies and armed groups in many countries throughout the world.

The aim of this book is to give a better insight into the realities of these young "volunteers." Through in-depth interviews with young soldiers and ex-soldiers from around the world who classify themselves as having volunteered for armed service, we consider the situation from their perspective. Listening to what they say may help in understanding what drives or leads them to join up.

There are a number of assumptions challenged through the experiences of these young people, one of the most fundamental of which is the voluntary nature of the decision to join up. Equally controversial is the questioning of the assumption that the situation of Western young soldiers differs in all respects from non-Western, and that the experience of those joining the regular army is necessarily dissimilar from that of young people joining armed groups. It is hoped that giving these young people the chance to speak out and bringing their diverse voices

together will invite a more honest look at the common reasons for young people joining armed forces or groups, and will take the understanding of these issues a step further. This in turn will give greater insight into the difficulties in demobilizing and reintegrating ex-soldiers, and the particularities of girl soldiers in this context, and thus assist local, national, regional, and international actors to respond better to them.

The 53 boys and girls interviewed for this research project had all been involved with armed forces or armed groups before they reached the age of 18 years. They were part of national armies, paramilitaries, rebel groups, or other armed groups. In order to ensure that differing circumstances and cultures were taken into account, a variety of situations were selected. At the same time, the nature of the research project required that the young people be accessible for interviews in circumstances that would not put them at additional risk—which is also why the names used for all the interviewees are fictitious—and where suitably qualified “local” interviewers were available. (Appendix 1 gives a full explanation of the research project and the methodology used.) It is in the nature of qualitative research that both the number of situations covered and the size of the sample in each are small; all conclusions are, therefore, tentative. For this research, young people were interviewed from 10 situations: Afghanistan (refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran), Colombia, the Republic of Congo (referred to here as Congo-Brazzaville, and formerly known as Middle Congo), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, formerly known as Zaire), Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and two separate situations in the United Kingdom: young people associated with paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland² and young members of the British armed forces.³

The authors pass no judgment on the merits of the decision to join made by the young people, the reasons given, nor, indeed, on the factual accuracy of the accounts; nor do they take any political position on the conflicts themselves (a short description of each of which can be found in Appendix 2). Our purpose is to understand how things look from the perspective of the young soldiers themselves. The particular choice of these very different sociocultural and economic national contexts reflects the global nature of the problem, but this diversity may also throw into relief the similarities that exist between the voices of these young soldiers.

Because the subjects of the study were adolescents, they are not referred to here as “children” although under international law all persons under the age of 18 years are so classified. The focus on adolescents must

be stressed. This age group accounts for the vast majority of the world's "child soldiers," yet was identified by Graça Machel in the *UN Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*⁴ as being the most neglected age group.⁵ Adolescents are in transition from childhood to adulthood. There are certain things that impinge more directly on them than on adults, such as education or the lack of it. There are other things to which this age group is more prone than are younger children, such as the forced sexual experiences of adolescent girls. Adolescence is a time of vulnerability with the uncertainties and turbulence of physical, mental and emotional development. It is also a time of opportunities with greater freedom, developing understanding of one's own identity and place in the community and society, and a new capacity to make choices and to take on responsibilities. The stage of puberty, during which many of these young people joined, is characterized by feelings of opposition and resistance to authority and power structures in the family, at school, and at state level. In addition, it is a time when injustice and its unacceptability are strongly felt. The reasons why young people join armed forces and armed groups reflect all these aspects of their specific stage of life.

Much of the explanation of why young people are drawn into armed conflict can be found in shared features of their environment, and parallels can be traced across the differences between countries, cultures, and types of conflict. Previous research on child soldiers has identified a number of key factors for child participation as well as which categories of children are most at risk.⁶ In particular, those who become child soldiers have been found to be overwhelmingly from the poor and disadvantaged sectors of society, from the conflict zones themselves, and from those with disrupted or nonexistent families. The present study confirms these earlier findings, but goes further in analyzing and interpreting *why* this is the case and the complexity of how these and other factors relate to and interact with each other in real life. Such an approach from the "inside" rather than the "outside" has rarely been featured in the literature until now.

What the present research identifies is that there are not only various factors that lead to involvement—always, of course, in combination—but also that these factors operate at different levels. Asked what leads to child participation in conflicts in Africa, those working in the field usually reply, "poverty."⁷ It is indeed true that most child soldiers come from impoverished circumstances, and not only in Africa. However, many poor children do not become child soldiers. Thus it is clear that although poverty may create a general vulnerability to military recruitment, it cannot be the only factor.

Such general environmental factors set the context without which involvement is highly unlikely to happen. There is a second level of factors, however, relating to the individual's personal history, which predisposes certain young people to join the army or the conflict, while others who share the same general environment do not. Indeed the precise combination of factors that lead in each individual case to this decision is unique. Even then it is not decisive. In each individual story there is a third level: there is a trigger for the specific decision to join up. What is it that tips the balance from thinking about it to taking the decision and acting on it? Some young people think about joining for years before actually doing so. Obviously many who do not join also think about the possibility, but the particular combination of factors does not occur, or there are countervailing ones. By contrast, some have not considered it at all until their world disintegrates and they see no other option. Many of the same factors that set the scene or are part of the more specific situation of the young person are often the ones that crystallize into a particular moment of decision.

Across these three different levels, the same types or categories of reason can be seen to apply in different ways and to different degrees. These can be divided into the broad areas of war, poverty, education and employment, family and friends, politics and ideology, specific features of adolescence, and culture and tradition. This is demonstrated and explored through the testimonies of the young people themselves in the first three chapters of the book.⁸

The linkages between the three levels of environmental factors are explored in Chapter 4. However, as this book is based on and primarily concerned with in-depth interviews with young soldiers and ex-soldiers, it does not pretend to take account of every theory or possible factor for their involvement. There are almost certainly additional features that do not emerge here. It is nonetheless important to recognize that some of the conventional wisdom related to this subject may represent adult perceptions from the outside rather than the reality experienced by the young people themselves.

In the course of this research, some interesting differences emerged between the reasons for joining given by girls and those given by boys. A preliminary attempt is made in Chapter 5 to identify and comment on these, while recognizing that the exceptionally small size of the sample requires that any conclusions be treated with extreme caution.

Although all these young people defined themselves as having volunteered rather than being forced to join, the analysis of the factors that led to their involvement nevertheless raises questions about the effective

degree of free choice in many cases. Specific attention to this aspect is given in Chapter 6, within the context of the international debate on the subject.

Even from the limited statistical information available,⁹ it is clear that the majority of those recruited under the age of 18 remain involved in the military or armed conflict well into adulthood, although some do extricate themselves and others are captured. For those being demobilized and reintegrated while still young, it is wrong to assume that this necessarily takes place following the end of the conflict. In many situations such programs operate against a backdrop of unstable circumstances or even continuing conflict. (Armies do not normally demobilize their soldiers during the conflict; this is a feature peculiar to the issue of *child* soldiers, arising from local, national, regional, and international pressure.) Particularly in such situations, when the young people were not abducted or physically forced to join in the first place, the demobilization and reintegration are unlikely to be successful or sustained unless the reasons why they became involved are addressed. Even if they temporarily return to civilian life, they are likely to be drawn back into the conflict.

It is essential, therefore, to understand the reasons that they themselves identify for joining armed forces or armed groups, whether by individual choice or as the result of other factors. In turn, understanding why they joined indicates what needs to be done if others are not to follow in their footsteps. As some of these young soldiers themselves recognize, joining not only has the immediate consequences of their participation in the conflict, but also forecloses other future possibilities even when (or if) the conflict ends. Chapter 7 addresses this directly by bringing together conclusions and recommendations for policymakers and workers in the field.

This book is a tribute to the young people who shared their stories and reflections. Their strength of character, courage, commitment, and tenacity deserve recognition. It is also a memorial for their friends and the many others who did not live to tell their stories.

**VIGNETTE: ALI, NOW 20, IS FROM AFGHANISTAN
BUT LIVING IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN¹⁰**

When I was about 7 or 8 years old and I was in class 7 and I was living in a Mojahedin war zone, I was a good schoolboy and my literacy was so good. When I was going to school I simultaneously worked in a medical clinic belonging to Médecins sans Frontières [MSF]. Our school time was 8 to 12 in the morning, and in the afternoon we were free, so I went to the medical clinic of the French doctors. There I began to learn first aid such as injection, dressing of a wound, and so on, and I became a first aid helper with the Mojahedin; I always worked to support the Mojahedin. That time I did support and worked as medical helper behind the strongholds. I gradually learned some advanced medical skills. When I was 12 and 13, I attended in surgical operation room and I did work as a surgical assistant. When my knowledge developed and after a few months MSF held some medical courses to teach medicine helping, surgery, and general medicine, and I took part. So now I am familiar with many medical and surgical skills. For instance, I know orthopedics and I can bone-set whenever needed.

When I was 10 years old a war began between Esmail Khan, the commander and governor of Herat, and the state forces, meaning Dr. Najibollah's cabinet. Because our area had a strategically very crucial position, Dr. Najibollah's forces surrounded the area for about 10 months and 7 days. We were fighting all the time, and 560 people of the Mojahedin and about 1,700 of the state forces were killed and injured.

I was among Esmail Khan's forces. I became familiar with different war weapons and guns such as the Kalashnikov. After 5 or 6 months' fighting, I had to return to the hospital. I was just a 10-year-old boy but the only one who was familiar with medicine in the area. When the area became a war zone for some reason, all doctors and nurses left the place. When the French medical group left Afghanistan, I ran the clinic, because there was no doctor and nurse, there was no one to help the injured soldiers.

Later, when we were fighting the Taliban, sometimes our forces captured an injured enemy soldier. I treated the injured soldier of the Taliban group in the same way that I treated our own soldiers. I didn't discriminate between him and our soldiers. He appreciated me. Later, when the Taliban was in power, I was captured and imprisoned by the Taliban again. When I was in prison, that injured Taliban

soldier who I treated saw me by accident. He was a commander and released me.

Because my average of exams was very high I was allowed to attend the university entrance examination in Afghanistan. And I did. I successfully passed the exam and was accepted to study medicine. I studied some medical courses, but due to having a very bad war experience I no longer like medicine. I saw too many injured people and I don't like to deal with patients and wounded people. I haven't got a diploma. I was injured several times as well. Now I have difficulties with my eyes. I suffer from cataracts and pearl-white. Before attending in the war I was hale and hearty. Because I dealt with injured soldiers, now I have some blood diseases as well. I have hepatitis and my blood is polluted with hepatitis.

Notes

1. According to ILO research, two-thirds of child soldiers interviewed in Burundi, Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Rwanda said that they took the initiative of enrolling themselves "voluntarily" (Dumas and de Cock 2003, p. viii).

2. Regrettably, despite the best efforts of the research team concerned, it did not prove possible to obtain interviews with those young people associated with Republican paramilitary groups, because of the sensitive situation in relation to the cease-fire.

3. The latter was included because of the large numbers of 16- and 17-year-old volunteers recruited each year: 7,676 in 1999 (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001). Until 1 September 2002, under-18s were routinely deployed into combat. Permission was given to interview some of their "satisfied soldiers": those who have volunteered to spend a year working in recruitment centers.

4. Machel 1996.

5. This judgment was reiterated by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2000, p. 1: "Adolescents are in desperate need of increased attention by the international community."

6. See, in particular, Brett and McCallin 1998 and Machel 2001.

7. See, for example, McConnan and Uppard 2001, p. xx: "Poverty is a major factor in the recruitment of children."


8. Some of the transcripts are reproduced in translation or in the words of the interpreter; others reproduce the English of the interviewee (with some editing for literacy and readability). See the section on linguistic differences in Annex I for a discussion of this issue.

9. Brett and McCallin 1998; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2001 and 2002.

10. For general background information, see the Afghanistan conflict profile in Appendix 2.

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