
Reading C

Children at arms

John Ryle

In the 1980s the standard image to emerge from the world's disaster zones was a skeletal child with despairing eyes, clutching the hand of an aid worker. Soon this was displaced by another stereotype, a bearded guerrilla fighter brandishing an AK-47, its forward-curving magazine silhouetted above his head. Today these two images have morphed into the figure of the child soldier, a gun-toting sub-teen with wrap-around shades and a threatening demeanour, a child who is clearly not on his way to school.

The kid-with-a-Kalashnikov is already a cliché, and picture editors are now likely to demand more arresting images from the battlefield (a seven year old with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, say, preferably a girl). But the child-at-arms is still the defining image of the troubled lands of the South, of the realm of war and hunger. He or she has come to represent a whole array of things that have gone wrong with the world: the loss of innocence, the destruction of youth, the collapse of order, the continuing spread of war.

Because we sentimentalise children and disprize soldiers, the very term 'child soldier' sets up a disturbing resonance. Formerly we felt sorry and angry about the fate of children in disaster zones. Now we feel sorry and fearful. According to a report from Amnesty International, *In the Firing Line*, there are at least 300,000 under-18s actively engaged in combat, in 36 armed conflicts round the world, a dozen of them in Africa. Such young people are the focus of a campaign by Amnesty and other human rights organizations to outlaw their participation in armed conflict. The proposal is to expand the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to include a new protocol banning military recruitment below the age of eighteen (the current limit is fifteen). This move is opposed by a number of countries, including the United States and Britain, where sixteen year olds are still recruited into the armed forces.

Like others of my generation growing up in England in the 1960s and 1970s I was a child soldier myself, from the age of fourteen to sixteen, a less than willing recruit to a ramshackle organization known as the Combined Cadet Force. We were, in theory, potential conscripts in the event of the reintroduction of national service. I was also a member of Amnesty International. On Thursdays I learned to shoot; on Saturdays I rattled a collection box outside the school chapel. Since then I have worked as an anthropologist and aid worker in various African countries. A day a week playing war games as a schoolboy does not, of course, qualify you to understand what it is like to be a bush fighter, but talking to trigger-happy teenage sentries in Uganda, Somalia, Sudan and elsewhere has made me come to doubt that these *kidogos* – little ones – to use the Swahili term widespread in East and Central Africa, see their situation in the terms that human rights researchers do, any more than I did when I was a military cadet. I doubt that they even accept that they are children. And, in the case of seventeen year olds, I am not sure they are wrong.

Despite the near universal adoption by governments of the existing Child Rights Convention (the United States and Somalia share the distinction of being the only countries in the world that have not ratified it) the definition of childhood is by no means as universal as the Convention implies. At the start of the war in Sudan most of the senior class in the secondary school in the town where I had worked went to the bush to join the Southern rebel army. These sixteen and seventeen year olds were from a pastoralist culture where young men were traditionally expected to be warriors. Their uneducated younger brothers in the village had most likely already been initiated into adulthood, a rite of passage that can occur in Nilotic societies at any age after puberty. Although Southern Sudanese are quite as shocked as we are by ten or eleven year olds in the line of battle (such things have come to pass as the war has become more widespread and brutal), they do not necessarily consider it inappropriate for a sixteen year old to bear arms.

Faced with the horrors of the current wars in Africa and elsewhere it seems churlish to question the Amnesty Campaign. It is certainly imperative to reduce the dreadful abuse of children in conflict, both as victims and as perpetrators. But it is also necessary to consider the wisdom of trying to control these evils by expanding the definition of childhood. Africa is a young continent, demographically speaking. Most of its inhabitants are under eighteen. That is to say, the majority of Africans are children, in terms of the UN convention. But there are many places where a seventeen year old would no longer be considered a child, and might well be expected to take on the role of an adult, quite possibly the head of a household. For many such, as the Amnesty report acknowledges, the choice is likely to be soldiering or starvation. In Africa, when there is no state to protect you, a gun may be the only way to ensure that you and your family have food – and that someone else doesn't take it away from you.

It's a shame – it's more than a shame – but if I were a seventeen year old in Southern Sudan, say, or Somalia today, I would get myself a gun as soon as I could. I'd join a guerrilla force or a militia – whatever it took. And if I were the responsible adult in my family it would be not just my right, but my obligation to acquire the means to defend myself and my weaker relatives. If a foreigner – or anyone else – told me that I was a child, and therefore had to be protected from military service, I would laugh at them as people who understood nothing.

The proposed extension of the UN Convention risks jeopardizing, in the name of children's rights, this right to self-defence, a right which may include bearing arms. Western countries with representative governments have, in many cases, quite properly legislated this right away; but the situation is different where there is no state, where there is no other source of security ...

Youths with guns may well become monsters; they are liable to terrorize, rather than defend, local people. It would be a far better thing if they could learn the arts of peace. But none of this is an argument for forcing seventeen year olds into the Procrustean bed of the Child Rights Convention. Human rights campaigners need more realistic and culturally convergent ways of tackling the problem. Transparency in the arms trade is the first desideratum – and stricter controls on it the second. With respect to rights, the key issue when considering the involvement in

military activity of sixteen year olds and over is not their age; it is whether they are volunteers or not. Many child soldiers are forcibly recruited and this, of course, is a manifest abuse. But it is the fact of conscription that is the issue, not chronological age. Whether the victims are sixteen or eighteen – or twenty-one – is of lesser importance ...

Although there is undoubtedly a case for establishing principles of good practice in military recruitment, principles that well-ordered countries can aspire to, the danger of enacting them into international law, a body of law that is already more honoured in the breach than the observance, is that they will distract from the more fundamental and unambiguous issue of forced recruitment. Forced recruitment is an issue that everyone, combatant and human rights worker, should be able to agree on. The right that must be asserted is the right not to be forced to fight. To do this is enough of a struggle in itself.

Post Script

Letter to the Editors of the New York Review from Martin Macpherson of Amnesty

John Ryle is mistaken when he says Amnesty International is seeking to expand the definition of childhood in its campaign on children in armed conflict. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international human rights treaty ratified by 191 countries (only the US and the collapsed state of Somalia have not ratified), defines childhood in Article 1 as *‘every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier’* and increasingly international law uses the benchmark of eighteen years as the age below which special protection should be afforded.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child in Article 19 enshrines the right of those under eighteen to protection *‘from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse ...’* although Article 38, which deals specifically with children in situations of armed conflict, establishes fifteen, not eighteen, years as the minimum age for recruitment into armed forces of states or parties and participation in hostilities. Many governments, UN agencies, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and non-governmental organizations, such as those supporting the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, which are seeking to raise the age of recruitment into armed forces and participation in hostilities, are simply trying to correct an anomaly in the convention and not redefine childhood.

John Ryle’s review also attempts to justify recruitment of children into armed forces providing recruitment is voluntary. Such a position is simplistic as the distinction between forced and voluntary recruitment is often imprecise and ambiguous. Children may join armed forces for a range of reasons, including family connections, lack of alternative employment opportunities, a parental belief that the child will benefit from a period of military discipline, peer pressure, adventure, a desire for revenge, or ideological beliefs. But regardless of how children are recruited, the treatment of child soldiers is often abusive, and mentally and physically hazardous in itself. Even with regular government armed forces children are often subject to *‘toughening-up regimes’* which may be detrimental to their mental and physical well-being, as well as to

punishments which can lead to death or permanent physical or mental injuries ...

Ryle's argument that any attempt to protect children's rights is to force them into 'the Procrustean bed of the child rights convention' is disturbing. Human rights standards – whether for adults, children, women, refugees, or any other group – are based on the concepts of universality and nondiscrimination. To argue against this demonstrates a fundamental lack of understanding of the role of all human rights standards which seek to provide equal protection for all.

In his review John Ryle gives examples of child soldiers on the continent of Africa to support his argument that the definition of childhood is not universally accepted and argues for more realistic and culturally convergent ways of resolving the child soldier problem. And yet, it was the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1990 which adopted the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which defines a child as 'every human being below the age of 18 years' and prohibits the recruitment of children ...

The involvement of children in armed forces is not inevitable. There is no excuse or acceptable argument for abusing and exploiting children as combatants. The recruitment and participation of children in armed conflicts is a decision made by governments or by leaders of armed opposition groups. It is unforgivable that children and young persons are encouraged to commit barbaric acts as well as being the victims of grave human rights abuses. It is time to exclude children from participating in war, and the optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict which raises to eighteen years the minimum age for participation in hostilities into armed forces is a significant contribution to this goal.

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Source

RYLE, J. (1999) 'Children at arms', New York Review of Books, New York, 46(4), 4 March.