

David M. Rosen

Child Soldiers: Tropes of Innocence and Terror

The story of child soldiers in the Western imagination is a story of symbolic reversals. Where the image of the child soldier once denoted public virtue and the nobility of sacrifice, it now stands for virtually everything that is wrong with war. Children were frequently present in the military through much of the 19th century (Aries 1962, p. 193). But by the middle of the 19th century, most Western nations had begun to reduce or eliminate the presence of children in their armed forces. The change was slow and erratic, however, so that even during World War I the heroic and patriotic child soldier, typically a boy sailor or soldier, remained a central image in the ideology of war and conflict (Conley 2009). The representational disjuncture between past and present is razor-sharp. In contemporary perspectives child soldiers exist as the most transgressive form of fighter: children who have been transformed into combatants in violation of the essential characteristics of childhood: innocence, vulnerability and dependency. The central interpretative (and moral) challenge presented by child soldiers in the modern world is the management and reconciliation of the putative claims of childhood innocence with the empirical record of war. In the former, children are assumed to be in need of care and nurturance. In the latter, children not only kill others in combat but also aggressively participate – sometimes gleefully and wholeheartedly – in horrifying atrocities and crimes of war.

Much of modern warfare, especially in those regions of the world where child soldiers are widely recruited, has involved the widespread use of terror. Following Walzer (2001), I understand acts of terror as involving the planned and programmed murder of innocent people. Such persons are killed not because they are involved in combat or other military activities or even because they are the police or other persons who carry out oppressive acts. Rather they are killed precisely because they are innocent bystanders who share some collective identity targeted by agents of terror. There is little doubt that historically nearly all wars have involved acts of terror. But the use of terror as a deliberate military strategy and a strategic and tactical weapon of choice is widespread among the

many rebel and insurgents groups that also rely upon the recruitment of child soldiers. While not all child soldiers participate in acts of terror there is little doubt that many do. Bridging the conceptual and emotional gap between the highly idealized child of contemporary Western imagination and the reality of children's behaviour on the battlefield, both as ordinary combatants and as agents of terror, has required the steady interjection of a variety of explanatory tropes whose interrelated logics attempt to explain away the contradictions between the ideal and the real.

The modern image of the child soldier is partly influenced by broad social and cultural shifts in the relative power of the family and the state over the lives of children. In the 18th century, children were understood as functioning within the institution of the family or the state, and little attention was paid to their concerns as individuals. Both legally and morally, family authority over children was extremely powerful and was understood as central to the proper moral and social organization of society. In Protestant and Puritan thinking, the authority of the family over its members was all-encompassing. The English Protestant clergyman William Gouge, in his widely followed 1622 treatise on the family titled *Of Domesticall Duties*, wrote that the family was 'a school wherein the first principles and grounds of government and subjection are learned' (Gouge 2006 [1622], p. 11). Likewise, for New England Puritans the family was a 'little commonwealth' in which power and authority were largely wielded by the family patriarch (Demos 1999). Indeed in England and colonial America the family remained, at least in the eyes of the law, a powerful self-governing institution, a microcosm of government, where disobedience by children (and women) was regarded as a form of treason (Coontz 1992, p. 10; Stone 1977, pp. 653-54).

Although the legal and moral principle of the subordination of children was crystal clear, in actual practice there was a great deal of diversity in the organization of family life and the practical agency and autonomy of children. Moreover, although children were under the authority or control of adults, this was not intimately coupled with the idea of child protection, so that the boundaries between childhood and adulthood often seem blurred. The result was that legally subordinate children had a great deal of *de facto* autonomy. Few, if any, 18th or early 19th century children could be regarded as possessing the kind of psychological autonomy prized in modern life, but their range of independent action was quite large, probably far greater than that of contemporary children.

By the beginning of the 19th Century new ideas, indeed a new modern mythology about childhood, was taking root. This involved a widely shared and deeply held conviction that the family was a sacred unit, and that children, purer and more innocent than adults, were to be treated as treasured objects who deserved exceptional care (Dolgin 1997, p. 1114). As this perspective gained acceptance in many areas of social life, courts, legislators and society as a whole became more concerned and involved with the interests of children and began to articulate their own ideas about children's interests and needs. Absolute family legal authority over children slowly eroded and came to be perceived strongest only when family authority was consistent with the larger society's notions of what

was in the best interests of the child. These changes often merely substituted the authority of the state for the authority of the family. Indeed, the very concept of 'the best interest of the child' presumes that children do not have fundamental liberty rights to choose for themselves how to conduct their lives (Archard 2010).

In Britain, North America and other places in the West, the cultural and social distinctions between childhood and adulthood hardened, and childhood gradually came to be regarded as a separate and distinct stage of life characterized by innocence, vulnerability and the need for protection. Great deference was paid by adults and adult institutions to the psychological autonomy of the child. But while family authority *per se* waned, the practical autonomy of the child also lessened considerably. Childhood autonomy may have been celebrated both philosophically and conceptually, but the psychologically autonomous child was placed within a gilded cage. Of course, none of this happened overnight. Real changes took place more rapidly among the middle class than among the working class and poor. But these new sensibilities spread quickly into law, especially family law, which in both North America and Britain was increasingly fashioned around middle class sensibilities. In particular, courts and other legal institutions increasingly articulated and enforced a 'progressive' view of the moral order which included the idea that the family was the foundation stone of society and that a key role of law and government was to strengthen and enhance family relationships (Friedman 1993; 2005). As both law and society converged around the idea of childhood innocence, and the presumptive embeddedness of childhood in family life strengthened, connections between childhood and the military weakened. As children increasingly came to be seen as innocent, vulnerable, and in need of protection, military service and childhood came to be seen as fundamentally incompatible.

Icons of the Past: The Boy Soldier in 18th and 19th Century Discourse

One of the best examples of iconic boy soldiers was Andrew Jackson, the Seventh President of the United States. When Jackson ran for president in 1824, his campaign was bolstered by the first published campaign biography in the young history of the United States. This book, John Eaton's *The Life of Andrew Jackson*, caught the attention of the nation. At its heart was the story of young Jackson, a thirteen-year-old boy soldier in the army of American Revolution (Lepore 2008). Born in South Carolina, Jackson was thirteen years of age when the war for American independence raged across the American South. Jackson's older brother Hugh had already died during a battle near Charleston. The American Revolution was as much a civil war as it was a war of national independence from England. The war was not simply one of contending armies but was fought among a local population with fiercely divided factions and loyalties. Thus, like many modern conflicts, the war was also an internal domestic conflict, which set neighbour against neighbour, brother against brother, and father against son (Parton 1860, pp. 70-75).

The violence of the revolution was accompanied by an emerging rhetoric of atrocity and revenge that defined the way in which the two sides – Patriots (Rebels) and Tories (Loyalists) – viewed one another. Although it is sometimes difficult to sort out myth from reality, personal revenge was a powerful motive for the rebels (Rubin 2010). Jackson and his brothers were determined to avenge the dead and the wounded. The main objective of both parties was to kill the fighting men, and thereby avenge the slaying of partisans (Parton 1860, pp. 70-75). ‘Men hunted each other,’ said Amos Kendall, ‘like beasts of prey’ (1843, p. 44). Along with many others, and without enlisting in any organized corps, Jackson and his brother formed small parties that went out on single enterprises of retaliation, using their own horses and weapons. In this murderous cauldron the laws and customs of war were routinely disregarded. There were few distinctions between soldiers and civilians, and even where different groups wore distinguishing signs or badges, they often used each other’s badges as a mode of disguise. Later in life, Jackson spoke about the madness of war during that time, particularly citing the case of one Patriot who, having found a friend murdered and mutilated, devoted himself to killing Tories. According to Jackson, he lay in wait for them and had killed twenty by war’s end (Parton 1860, pp. 75-76).

The emblematic story in Eaton’s book focuses on the time that Jackson and his brother Robert joined a cavalry unit, which was routed by a group of armed Loyalists. Jackson and his brother fled and tried to hide in a nearby house, but were soon discovered and captured. Not long after his capture, the officer in charge ordered Jackson to clean his boots. Jackson refused, demanding to be treated as a prisoner of war. As Jackson’s biographer described the scene,

The officer glared at him like a wild beast, and aimed a desperate blow at the boy’s head with his sword. Andrew broke the force of the blow with his hand, and thus received two wounds –one deep gash on his head and another on his hand, the marks of which he carried to his grave (Parton 1860, p. 89).

The officer also ordered Robert Jackson to clean his boots, and when Robert also refused he struck and badly wounded him.

This episode was a prelude to a family tragedy. Jackson’s father had died before the war. His older brother had already died in the war. Jackson and his brother Robert were nearly starved to death as prisoners of war and Robert ultimately died of the wounds inflicted by the officer. Jackson’s mother also died, from a fever she caught while bringing food and medicine to Patriot prisoners in the British prison ships in Charleston harbour. Thus by age fifteen, his brothers and parents were all dead and Jackson was an orphan of war (Parton 1860, p. 94). But Jackson also emerged a hero. He was nationally known as ‘The Brave Boy of the Waxhaws,’ the region of the Carolinas where he grew up. By the time of his election as President he was lauded as a hero of two wars, most notably, as the triumphant general who led American forces to victory in New Orleans in the War of 1812. But Jackson the boy soldier was also deeply embedded in the American imagination: the young patriot, the child who had been told by his mother

that the 'first duty' of her children was 'to expend their lives [...] in defending and supporting the natural rights of man' (Meachem 2009, p. 11).

Jackson was not an anomaly. Legendary child soldiers appeared throughout popular culture in the 19th Century. In art, the image of the child under arms was prominent in Eugene Delacroix's 19th Century painting *Liberty Leading the People*, which depicts a scene at the barricades during the July Revolution of 1830. At the centre of the painting is 'Liberty' in the form of a woman leading the charge over the barricades while clasping the flag of the French revolution in one hand and a musket in the other. To Liberty's immediate left is an equally powerful portrait of a child, a young boy brandishing a musket in each hand. The child under arms was often thought to serve symbolically as a personification of class struggle. Armed children represented the lofty goals of popular insurrection which drew people from all walks of life into the battle against monarchy and entrenched privilege (Yvorel 2002).

The classic representation of the child at war in 19th Century literature is the character of the street urchin Gavroche in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. A key moment in Hugo's novel, written some thirty-two years after the events, is the Paris student uprising of June of 1832, where many students died in a short but violent anti-monarchist revolt. As with Delacroix, the main action is on the barricades and focuses on a child, the orphan boy Gavroche, a street urchin who joins with the student rebels, pistol in hand. During the battle he crosses over the barricades into the line of fire in order to gather unspent cartridges from among the dead. He is killed while singing.

In Hugo's novel, Gavroche's heroic actions are marvels. Margaret Mead once opined that adults viewed children as 'pygmies among giants' (Mead, Wolfenstein 1955, p. 7). But Hugo turns Mead's vision on its head, describing the diminutive Gavroche as a giant concealed in a pygmy body and comparing him to Antaeus, the great mythical Libyan giant defeated by Hercules. As Hugo put it,

The rebels watched with breathless anxiety. The barricade trembled, and he sang. He was neither child nor man but puckish sprite, a dwarf, it seemed, invulnerable in battle. The bullets pursued him but he was more agile than they. The urchin played his game of hide and seek with death, and [...] tweaked its nose (Hugo 1976 [1862], p. 1028).

Gavroche does not survive, but when he is finally brought down by a bullet, Hugo tells us that 'his gallant soul had fled' (1976 [1862], p. 1028). For Hugo and for others, the child fighter very much represented 'the people' in their struggle for democracy; in this sense, the child served as a collective representation of all that was good, striking to break out of an encrusted social order.

Hugo's story of the death of Gavroche must be placed in the context of his understanding of the violence of war. *Les Misérables* combines both narrative and social commentary and is marked by Hugo's observations on revolution, which he understood as inevitably flowing from the conditions of inequality in society. Hugo carefully distinguished his judgments about the morality of collective violence from the particular make-up of the participants. The latter he recog-

nized could be a rather motley stew of combatants. Hugo was well aware that violence could also take a negative turn, but citing Lafayette, Hugo argued that true insurrection, as a form of expression of collective and universal sovereignty guided by truth, was a sacred duty (1976 [1862], p. 887).

For Hugo, Gavroche's participation in the insurrection is part of the rights and duties of all citizens – men, women, and children – to resist oppression. Given the oppressive nature of childhood for children of his class background, Gavroche's interests are best served by participating in insurrection. In no sense could it be said of Gavroche that war 'robbed him of his childhood,' to use a modern humanitarian cliché. If anything, it was peace that had robbed Gavroche of his childhood. Insurrection, in contrast, was the harbinger of a new moral order designed to eliminate the immorality of the social order that framed the ordinary life of a street child in 19th century Paris. Hugo does not imagine that children would be barred from joining in class struggle.

The American Civil War was also filled with celebrated child martyrs and heroes. These include Luther Ladd, age 17 years, reputed to be the first Union soldier killed in the Civil War, Clarence Mackenzie, age 12 years, who died at Annapolis, and Joseph Darrow, age 15 years, who died of wounds suffered at the Battle of Bull Run. All had enormous public funerals and were proclaimed to have gallantly given their lives in the cause of abolition and freedom. Both during and after the Civil War, literature for young boys extolled both the dangers and excitement of war. Oliver Optic's 1864 novel, *The Soldier Boy; or, Tom Somers in the Army*, turned war into an adventure for boys. In Optic's novel, Tom's grandfather tells him that he, too, was only sixteen when he fought in the war of 1812, spurring sixteen-year-old Tom to enlist. Harry Castlemon's Civil War novel, *Frank on a Gun Boat* (2006 [1892]), celebrated the dangerous but lofty adventure of war. Like much of 19th century literature for boys, these war novels tied the proper development of boys to the encountering and overcoming of important trials and tribulations.

But there were also clear dissenting opinions during the period that Hugo and others were extolling the virtues of boy soldiers. Many writers recognized and abhorred the dramatic and horrifying displays of violence and terror in wartime. For example, in his memoirs Viscount de Chateaubriand, describes terrible scenes of murder and mayhem during the French Revolution that hardly support Hugo's view of the morality of revolutionary violence. Indeed Chateaubriand described crowds of people bearing severed heads on spikes:

A troop of ragamuffins appeared at one end of the street. [...] As they came nearer, we made out two dishevelled and disfigured heads [...] each at the end of a pike. [...] The murderers stopped in front of me and stretched their pikes up towards me, singing, dancing and jumping up in order to bring the pale effigies closer to my face. One eye in one of these heads had started out of its socket and was hanging down on the dead man's face; the pike was projecting through the open mouth, the teeth of which were biting on the iron (Baldick 1961, p. 105).

Similarly Chateaubriand's memoirs of the July Revolution of 1830, the same one that figures so prominently in Delacroix's painting, are unequivocal in their near-racialised disparagement of children and his horror at how they threw themselves into the bloody work of war.

The children, bold because they were unaware of danger, played a melancholy role during the Three Days: sheltering behind their youth, they fired at point-blank range on the officers who would have considered themselves dishonourable in firing back. Modern weapons place death at the disposal of the weakest of hands. Ugly and sickly monkeys, libertines before possessing the power to be so, cruel and perverse, those little heroes of the Three Days gave themselves over to assassination with all the abandon of innocence. Let us beware, through imprudent praise, of generating the emulation of evil. The children of Sparta went out hunting Helots (Chateaubriand, p. 1326).

Chateaubriand was a foe of revolutionary violence. He casts the violence that Hugo celebrated as being deeply immoral by referring to the children of Sparta, thereby linking it to an alleged yearly ritual in Sparta, in which young warriors – perhaps as a rite of passage – were given free rein and legal immunity to slaughter defenceless agricultural serfs in what may have been a form of guerilla warfare (Ross 2011). But Chateaubriand was in the clear minority. His scorn for children under arms did not prevail in either French or Western thought, in which the democratic gains brought about through revolution trumped virtually all other considerations. Thus, despite the cruel bloodletting of the past and the prominent role played by young people in revolutionary violence, revolutionary activity was understood as meaningful and positive. Chateaubriand's critique of the revolutionary violence of children contains some elements of the links between innocence and terror that dominate the modern view of child soldiers, but there is an important difference. His interpretation of childhood violence appears similar to the kind of child violence described in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*, whereby innocent children become violent because of the absence of the constraints of 'civilized' society. For both Chateaubriand and Golding, childhood innocence easily segues into terror. Their views of childhood embody a more general view of human nature in which violence, even among children, lurks under every semblance of civility. In modern humanitarian discourse, by contrast, children are essentially innocent and their conversion to violence always implies the culpability of adults. It is adult abuse and terror that subvert the innocence of the child and transform the child into an agent of terror.

There is however, at least one domain in which the image of the heroic child soldier has actually continued to thrive. This is in Western fantasy literature such as the *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Game* series where it remains safely removed from contemporary events (Rosen, Rosen 2012). In both instances teenage warriors play a key role. In *Harry Potter* it is the children of Dumbledore's Army who fight against, sometimes to the death, Voldemort and his army of Death Eaters who seek to take over the magical world. The *Hunger Games* series is a dystopian trilogy about a fantasy world in which ruling adults have institutionalized the

systemic murder of children by other children at gladiator-type games organized by the state. The plot focuses on sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen who defies gender stereotypes and emerges as an intelligent, moral, skilful warrior who is both self-reliant and nurturing. Katniss forges an alliance with a teenage boy, Peeta Mellark, and they emerge as symbols of resistance to the authoritarian rule of the state. As the story progresses, Katniss develops not only as a symbol of resistance, but as a participant in an armed rebel movement that brings about the violent overthrow of the state and its leaders. The *New York Times* hailed Katniss Everdeen as one of the most radical female characters to appear in American movies. She is a female warrior, who fights for herself, her family, and her community (Scott, Dargis 2012).

Both the *Harry Potter* books and the *Hunger Games* trilogy have become international phenomena, as literature and in film. *Harry Potter* is the bestselling book series in history, with more than four hundred and fifty million books in print. Over thirty-six million copies of the *Hunger Games* trilogy are currently in print. Both series illustrate the dramatic return of the child hero in wartime, although the realism of earlier child hero novels is deflected to some degree by the fantasy settings. Indeed, given the general public concern about child soldiers, fantasy may be the only setting in which the appearance of heroic child warriors is culturally acceptable. Collins has made it clear, however, that she does not want the fantasy settings of the *Hunger Games* to derail her message by opening the door to an allegorical interpretation of her work. Rejecting the suggestion that the entirety of the *Hunger Games* can be interpreted as an allegory of the struggles of adolescence, she has insisted that the *Hunger Games* is, first and foremost, about war (Dominus 2011).

The Modern Iconography of Child Soldiers

Perhaps the most iconic modern account of child soldiering has been provided by Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier in Sierra Leone whose autobiography, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Child Soldier*, was a best-selling book in the United States in 2007 and distributed nationally through the Starbucks Coffee chain. Beah was born on November 23, 1980 in a fishing village in Bonthe District in Southern Sierra Leone. Beah's memoir of his recruitment and service as a child soldier sold over 700,000 copies and the book was read across America on many college campuses.

According to his memoir, in 1993 Beah's village was attacked by rebel soldiers of the Revolutionary United Front, a force known for its murderous cruelty in the treatment of the civilian population, including frequent amputations of civilians' hands and arms. The moment his village was attacked was the beginning of Beah's odyssey of flight, recruitment and rehabilitation, punctuated by a series of horrible events that shape the narrative of his life.

After the attack on the village, Beah and some companions flee, but soon realize that they will not be able to feed themselves without money, so they sneak back into the village to retrieve funds. After they escape again from the village,

they wander through the countryside, now a burnt landscape of terror, looking for a zone of safety and hoping to perhaps reconnect with Beah's parents. The boys are briefly captured by rebels, witness the torture and mock execution of an old man by rebel fighters and are forcibly recruited into the rebels' ranks. Beah learns that those not selected for recruitment will be marched to a river and shot, but the whole episode is interrupted by gunfire and he again flees. He wanders through a countryside of burned villages piled high with dead and mutilated bodies and full of fearful and hostile survivors who sometimes threaten and rob him. He sees rebel soldiers who have just burned down villages, carrying the severed head of one of their victims.

Finally, after a long journey, Beah is captured by Sierra Leone government soldiers and believes he has found safety, but instead is forcibly recruited as a child soldier. The war into which Beah has been recruited is a brutal civil war, and the gratuitous violence is apparent on both sides of the conflict. Though the RUF was marked by its extreme brutality toward civilians, the Sierra Leone Army was also a predatory force and was ruthless in the way it treated enemy combatants. The army killed virtually all enemy soldiers, and gave no quarter to those who had been wounded or were captured. As Beah's commanding officer, the 'Lieutenant,' explained, all rebels must be killed, for, he says, 'We are not like the rebels, those riffraffs who kill people for no reason. We kill them for the good and betterment of the country' (Beah 2007, p. 123). Beah is given an AK-47 assault rifle, trained to use the bayonet, and told that he must kill all rebels and leave none alive. He is introduced to the use of drugs including marijuana, brown-brown (a mixture of cocaine and gunpowder), and white capsules (probably amphetamines) and attacks a village where he shoots and kills 'everything that moves' and watches as swamp crabs feast on the eyes of the dead (2007, p. 119). But this is only the beginning of Beah's journey into violence and horrific war crimes. His troops raid both enemy camps and civilian villages to capture recruits. They force other civilians to carry loot. He and his fellow SLA soldiers immediately kill all the wounded, and round up prisoners for hideous and gruesome executions. In one instance, Beah wins a killing exhibition and contest which involves slitting the throats of captured rebels to see who dies first. In another, prisoners are forced to dig their own graves and Beah joins in tying them up, bayoneting them in the legs and burying the screaming captives alive as he and his companions laugh and joke.

The violence of Beah's life as a soldier carries over into his demobilization experience. The Sierra Leone Army agrees to comply with UN demands, and suddenly and without explanation Beah is rapidly demobilized as a child soldier and is turned over to UNICEF. Although he should have surrendered his weapons, he hides a hand grenade and a knife in his clothing. Later, in a camp for former child soldiers, he and his SLA comrades enter into a pitched battle with former child soldiers of the RUF, and six child soldiers are killed before order is restored. As Beah makes plain in his memoirs, he wholeheartedly participated in these and many other atrocities. To Beah's credit, he casts a gimlet eye on the parade of humanitarian and human rights workers who keep telling him that no matter

what he did it was 'not his fault.' He is quite aware of the war crimes he has wilfully committed and of his personal culpability for murder.

But Beah was also quite lucky. He is charming and charismatic, and people like him. He gained the personal attention of Esther, a nurse at a mini-hospital associated with the UNICEF rehabilitation centre, who continued to emphasize that nothing he did was his fault. Beah states that, 'even though I had heard that phrase from every staff member – and frankly I had always hated it – I began that day to believe it' (2007, p. 164). From then on there was a rapid change in the course of Beah's life. Visitors from UNICEF, the European Commission came to the centre, and in a talent show for the visiting dignitaries Beah gave a reading from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and performed a short hip-hop play about the redemption of a child soldier that he had written with Esther's encouragement (2007, p. 169). Soon afterward, he was selected as a spokesman for the centre and began talking to gatherings in Freetown about how to end child soldiering and rehabilitate former child soldiers. Not long after that, he was interviewed and selected by the UN to go to New York to participate in the First International Children's Parliament and to speak before the UN Economic and Social Council. He returned to Sierra Leone and then ultimately fled the country. While in New York, he met Laura Simms, who eventually became his adopted mother when he made his way back to the United States in 1998.

After coming to the United States, Beah completed high school at the United Nations International School and went on the Oberlin College, where he wrote the original drafts of his memoirs and graduated in 2004. He has become a major internationally known spokesman and advocate for the plight of child soldiers and children in conflict zones. He was appointed UNICEF's first advocate on children affected by war. He serves on Human Rights Watch's Children's Rights Division Advisory Committee. He has testified before the US Congress and regularly speaks on college campuses across the United States and in many other key policy venues, such as the Aspen Institute, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the United States Marine Corps' Warfighting Laboratory. He has also founded the Ishmael Beah Foundation, which provides direct assistance to war-affected children in Sierra Leone to help them further their education and reintegrate them into Sierra Leone society.

In this age of fact-checking, Beah's memoirs have been subject to intense scrutiny. The Sydney Australia newspaper *The Australian* raised a number of questions about the accuracy of his story and whether or not some of the events portrayed happened at all (Sherman 2008). UNICEF, for example, could not verify the deadly incident in its camp that resulted in the death of six teenagers that is described in Beah's memoirs. Likewise, *The Australian* could not find anyone who remembered this incident or who filed a report about it. Nevertheless, UNICEF maintained that 'Long Way Gone' is 'a credible account of the tragedy of recruitment of children into armed groups, told by one who undoubtedly experienced this abuse firsthand' (Clancy 2008). Nonetheless, the negative reporting on the book has done some damage. Chris Blattman, who has carried out extensive research on child soldiers in Uganda, doubts the accuracy of Beah's book. He states, 'We

are told what we want and expect to hear when we ask for desperate and tragic tales. The truth is of secondary importance' (Blattman 2008). Neil Boothbay, who has had extensive experience with child soldiers, has also cast some doubt on the veracity of the book. Boothbay's criticism stems from the fact that Beah's account includes almost every possible trauma that could ever occur to a child soldier, and suggests that it would be unlikely for all of these to have happened to a single person. Like Blattman, he suggests that Beah was egged on by UNICEF, psychologists, and journalists to produce a sensationalist account of trauma and rehabilitation. Despite this, both Beah and his publisher have insisted on the truthfulness or at least the 'truthiness' of the accounts (Rayman 2008). Nowadays Beah maintains an ironic distance from attempts to portray him as traumatized. He recently regaled an audience of appreciative anthropologists with tales about how his glassy-eyed teenage boredom during endless meetings with NGO officials was invariably described by these officials as the effect of 'trauma' (Beah 2011). Despite all these difficulties, like Andrew Jackson, Beah has emerged from war as a star. But instead of serving as a symbol of militant patriotism, his recruitment and use as a child soldier serves as a symbolic proxy of the horrors of war. Equally importantly, his story embodies the mandatory modern tropes of terror and innocence that accompany the tales of today's child soldiers.

Child Soldiers in Popular Culture

Much of the contemporary popular fictional literature on child soldiering, frequently written as dystopian parables, serves to echo and exaggerate Beah's view. In Chris Abani's novella *Song for Night* (2007), twelve-year-old My Luck is recruited into a mine defusion unit. After the training, the trainers cut My Luck's vocal chords and those of all the other boys being trained as sappers, to render them voiceless, so that if a mine blows up they will not scare the others with their death screams. There is no evidence that any such practice ever existed.

Another of these dystopian tales, *Beasts of No Nation* (Iweala 2005), which is crafted as a comic book nightmare allegory, tells of the forced recruitment of Agu, a child soldier. It follows Agu through his initiation into the most brutal forms of violence, including his participation in the gruesome murders of both captured soldiers and civilians, which are portrayed in graphic detail, his drug infused killing frenzies, and his routine rape and sodomization by the commander of his unit. The book is set in a kind of dream time, although in this instance the dream is a nightmare. From the very beginning it makes use of the conventions of comic books. In this instance, the Commandant is the nefarious nameless leader of the nameless force that murders Agu's father and kidnaps him from his village. The Commandant has all the attributes of a comic supervillain. Like the Joker in the Batman comics, he has no ideology. He is not interested in power, money, or land. He kills for the sake of killing, as well as for his own lust and amusement. Like other super-villains, he has his servile minions such as Luftenant and Rambo, as well as his army of soldiers who laugh when he laughs and seek to imitate his every walk and gesture. All this is dramatically ef-

fective, but it also has the effect of stripping the story of any social and cultural context. The story unfolds both nowhere and everywhere. There is no history and no meaning to anything that is going on. Strongly paralleling the humanitarian understanding of war, the novel portrays brutalized and manipulated child soldiers who simply kill people for nothing, for no reason at all.

Although child soldiers exist in nations around the world, the vast majority of fiction and cinematography focuses on Africa. Prime examples are films such as *Blood Diamond* (Zwick 2006) and *Johnny Mad Dog* (Sauvaire 2008). *Blood Diamond* was set in Sierra Leone but it almost makes no difference where the story is set: African contexts are fungible. The film *Johnny Mad Dog* is based on the original novel by Emmanuel Dongala. Although no specific country is named in the novel, the setting is apparently Congolese. In contrast, the film is set in Liberia. In some instances, stories about child soldiers that did not originally take place in Africa are intentionally Africanized for dramatic effect. This is the case with the recent award-winning film *War Witch* (Nguyen 2012) set in a nameless African country. Here again a rebel attack on a defenceless village takes place for no comprehensible reason and the rebels commit senseless war crimes. The main character in the story is Komona, who is first forced to kill her parents and then abducted into the rebel army as a child soldier, becoming the virtual property of the rebel leader, Great Tiger. Komona is believed to have the magical power to foresee coming attacks by the enemy, and she is designated a 'war witch' for the Great Tiger. But the film was inspired by events said to have actually taken place not in Africa but in Burma. The Canadian film director Kim Nguyen relocated and filmed *War Witch* in the Democratic Republic of the Congo but set it in an unnamed but familiarly generic African country.

Placing the action of novels and films outside of any temporal, historical or societal context gives the horror they describe an elusive transcendence. The action, which stands outside of history, stands for 'Every War' or at least every African war and in this respect, at least, there is little difference between these novels' understanding of Africa and that found in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad took Africans out of history and context and suspended them between the human and the animal. In his influential critique of Conrad, Chinua Achebe decried Conrad's stripping Africans of their humanity and his description of Africa as a 'metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity' (Achebe 2001). Conrad also had a larger purpose – to offer a critique of colonialism – yet 'You cannot diminish a people's humanity and defend them at one and the same time' (Phillips 2003). As in *Heart of Darkness*, the parade of abused and violent children in much of the popular cinema and literature clearly has a larger purpose. It meshes easily with central themes of humanitarian efforts to 'protect' children under arms. But it strips children of their humanity and agency in order to immunize them from their culpability in murder.

Much of the iconography of child soldiers is an iconography of extremes and moral panics (Denov 2010; Schissel 1997). Nevertheless, there are both personal accounts and novels that tell far more complicated tales. Emmanuel Jal's memoir *War Child: A Child Soldier's Story* relates how he and his family fled from the ram-

pages of Arab soldiers in the Sudan, many of whom seem similar to the murderous racist Sudanese militias of Darfur that Woli Soyinka likened to an African version of the Ku Klux Klan (Soyinka 2012, p. 87). Jal finds himself taken into the Sudan People's Liberation Army. There he had many harsh and often times brutal and shocking experiences during his recruitment, training, and deployment. There is little doubt that members of the SPLA also committed war crimes, but it is also clear that Jal's commanders in the SPLA were not gratuitous abusers and murderers of civilians or of their own troops. In fact, Jal himself witnessed the execution of fellow soldiers for the rape of women (Jal 2009, pp. 183-184). But he is also very troubled by the fact that in an attack on Juba, now the capital and largest city of the Republic of South Sudan, he mercilessly killed soldiers who were trying to surrender and whom he knew he should have taken prisoner (2009, pp. 157-159). But these facts are hardly unique to warfare or child soldiers. The killing of surrendering soldiers in the heat of battle has not been uncommon even in the well-disciplined armies of the West (Keegan 1976, pp. 46-54). And as Jal himself makes clear, he never killed anyone in cold blood (2009, p. 255). Despite his youth and the fears, passions and terrors of war, Jal's experiences as a child soldier are much more akin to those of an ordinary soldier, whether child or adult.

Like Jal's memoir, there are also examples in popular culture which provide a more nuanced view of child soldiers. Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy* (2007) depicts the fourteen-year-old Nigerian child soldier Ali Banana as he is fighting the Japanese with Orde Wingate's British army in Burma. It is a picaresque novel filled with terror and with humour, and Banana ends up having to kill his mortally wounded comrade to save him from torture and mutilation by the Japanese. It is both a coming-of-age story and a tale of the madness of war but falls within virtually none of the tropes of terror, exploitation, abuse and criminality that characterize the leading novels about child soldiers. Likewise Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1994), an early novel written in the wake of the war in Biafra that is lyrical, funny and terrifying and clearly written before the set piece tropes of the child soldier novel coalesced. Finally the tone of some francophone novels such as Amadou Kourouma's *Allah is not Obligated* (2007) have also retained this picaresque quality. There is clearly a North-South dimension to much of the understanding of child soldiers (Macmillan, 2009). Catarina Martins (2011) argues that a clear shift of tone is more likely where African writers and filmmakers control the narrative. These stories often place war and the children who fight them in historical context and contain elements of children's responsibility, voice, agency, tragedy, adventure and a strong diversity of life stories (Martins 2011, pp. 440-43). But some African writers are also able to voice some of the unforgiving anger toward children who wantonly kill in ways that leave little room for Western notions of innocence. In Sierra Leone writer, Aminatta Forna's novel *The Memory of Love*, Kai, a physician, attempts to pick up the body of a rebel commander killed by desperate and oppressed Freetown residents at the close of a brutal occupation:

[She] was a young girl, lying upon the road, angled in death. Fourteen, sixteen at most. Someone had tried to remove her clothing. She lay in the street in a scarlet bra and

panties, doubtless at one time looted from an upmarket boutique. The people who lived there refused Kai and his team leave to touch the body. She'd been the commanding officer in charge of the attack. They would deny her the dignity of burial. The teenage commander, in stolen, silken underwear (Forna 2010, p. 367).

But these views have done little to disrupt or modify the popular narrative of the child soldier, the most recent episode of which has been the film *KONY 2012*, the very slick viral video 'wanted poster' produced by the organization Invisible Children (Russell 2012). The film targets Joseph Kony, Commander-in-Chief of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an insurgent group that has been fighting the government of Uganda and the Ugandan army for more than 25 years. The Kony-led insurgency coincided with the coming to power of Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, who has been President of Uganda since 1986. In 2005 the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for Kony, charging that he had personally issued orders to target and kill civilian populations, including those living in internally displaced persons camps in northern Uganda. Kony has been charged with numerous war crimes and crimes against humanity, including murder, rape, sexual enslavement, intentional attacks against civilian populations, and most notoriously, the forced enlistment into the LRA of children under the age of fifteen.

The Kony video had more than 93 million views on YouTube and appears to have catalyzed the African Union into launching a new regional military operation against Kony using 5000 troops drawn from four African countries: the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Uganda. Even prior to the release of the video, US President Barak Obama had ordered a small force of about 100 special operations troops in support of the search for Kony's rag-tag but lethal band of rebels, now estimated to number between 200 and 400 people.

There is little doubt that Kony is a war criminal, and that he should be captured and tried for his alleged crimes. Nonetheless, the film clearly exaggerates Kony's significance today. (He has not even been in Uganda for seven years). There has been a lot of criticism of this film. The filmmakers appear self-absorbed, over-estimating their own importance. Moreover they know little about Uganda and the film's analysis lacks complexity and nuance; it is ethnocentric and patronizing. One of the biggest problems with *KONY 2012* is that it turns the whole issue of child soldiers into a discussion about criminals, when it should be a discussion about politics and social change. It feeds into the general belief that the recruitment of child soldiers is a uniquely modern form of deviance, the result of a few 'bad apples' abusing, exploiting, and terrorizing children and stampeding them into murder.

But these criticisms of the *KONY2012* video are equally applicable to many of the screeds about child soldiers put out by a host of venerated humanitarian and human rights organizations, where nuance and complexity are rarely the order of the day. The UNICEF report 'Adult Wars, Child Soldiers' metaphorically links the problem of child soldiers to the worst forms of child sexual abuse, such as sex trafficking or child pornography. It offers a model of criminality in which

unscrupulous adults exploit immature, innocent and impressionable children (UNICEF 2002). Child soldiers are frequently described as 'used,' 'manipulated' or 'cheap and disposable' (Youth Advocate Program International 2004). The last-mentioned term likens them to cheap modern goods and products – disposable cameras, razors, plastic cups, wristbands – that are easily consumed and discarded. The term 'disposable' is also frequently used to describe 'human goods' such as labour migrants, child miners, and modern criminal forms of slave labour.

In tandem with this is the stress upon the forced recruitment and abusive exploitation of children who are used as child soldiers. The compulsory recruitment of child soldiers is frequently described as being linked to specific acts of terror and horror, such as forcing new recruits to kill family, friends or co-villagers in macabre ritual acts designed to ensure the permanent alienation and separation of the child soldier from family, home, and community life. In addition, once they are recruited into armed forces, child soldiers are said to suffer from the worst forms of child abuse, including forced labour, sexual slavery, the forced use of drugs and outright murder. The result, it is sometime argued, is the creation of whole generations of psychologically scarred children who contribute to long-term social instability (Kaplan 1994).

At times, child soldiers have been described as 'harvested' by various armed factions, a kind of post-apocalyptic metaphor that represents them as expendable feed or fodder. Children are frequently described as 'cannon fodder.' Historically, of course, critics of war have often used the term 'cannon fodder' to describe raw untrained recruits, both young and old, who were deemed expendable and cynically thrown into the face of enemy fire with little regard for the loss of life. But contemporary critics of the recruitment of child soldiers have adopted this term as especially applicable to all children who are recruited into armed conflict, deeming them 'the cannon fodder of choice' (Masland 2002). Parents are sometime accused of being immoral accomplices in their children's recruitment. When a child soldier, from a group of soldiers who said they were aged between fifteen and seventeen and who had volunteered for the Mai-Mai Patriotic Resistance in the Congo, told that he was encouraged by his parents to fight. Joseph N. Giza, of the Congolese NGO Heal Africa, said this was not unusual. 'Can you imagine?' he said, 'sending your children to a war you are busy running away from? The children were used as cannon fodder' (Faul 2009). Child soldiers, even those who have been demobilized are said to be so traumatized that they constitute 'time bombs' or 'ticking time bombs' that need to be defused (Plan International USA 2008).

Child soldiers are routinely said to be 'programmed' in both advocacy literature and media accounts, in reference to their being trained to function like robots or being inducted into a cult. They are described as being 'programmed to kill,' 'programmed to lie about their age,' 'programmed to feel little revulsion for their actions and to think of war and only war' (Honwana 1998. p. 21). They are said to be 'programmed to develop a mindset that resists any acknowledgment of injury and sickness, be it physical or psychological.' Filmmaker Shar-

meen Obaid Chinoy described Taliban child soldiers as looking like ‘they’re in a trance; they rock back and forth; it’s as if they’re reciting things that they have been programmed to recite’ (Lakhani 2010). The idea of the child soldier as programmed has become so engrained in public consciousness that the Australian ethicist Robert Sparrow likens child soldiers to actual ‘autonomous robots’ which he foresees as the weapons systems of the future – the next generation of smart weapons (Sparrow 2007).

It is almost a cliché to say that war is terrible. The chaos of war can upend and destroy the young and the old, the innocent and the guilty. As it does for adults, war poses significant and often lethal risks for children who serve as combatants, as well as for children who serve in support roles. Like adults, children can emerge from war physically injured or maimed, or psychologically traumatized; in addition, the fact of living in a warzone and directly experiencing war can result in severely limited life prospects. Beyond the fact of being involved in combat, some contemporary conflicts have additionally involved brutal exploitation of children by various armed groups that have used them as suicide terrorists, sex slaves, or forced labourers. On the darker side, children have also, often gleefully, committed terrible war crimes.

Ethnographers of war zones have had considerable success in documenting the highly complicated role of children under arms (e.g. Coulter 2008; Denov 2012; Honwana 2006; Hoffman 2012; Jourdan 2011; Rosen 2005, 2012; Utas 2005; Vigh 2006). But the general understanding of the role of children in warfare has been seriously distorted by legal, humanitarian, and popular notions that insist that the issue be primarily framed as a matter of childhood innocence distorted and subverted by adult culpability. Even legal scholars who show keen awareness of these complications are often unable to abandon the model (e.g. Drumble 2012). Such an approach will occasionally yield convictions in international tribunals and for the worst abusers of children such convictions are appropriate and just. But there is probably not a single ethnographer of war zones who would agree that issue of child soldiers can be reduced to adults abusing and terrifying innocent children into committing violent acts. Childhood innocence and adult culpability are the Janus-faced tropes of the child soldier problem. Given the horrible realities of war, as we increasingly mythologize the innocence of child combatants, we are forced to more emphatically mythologize the blameworthiness of adults. As we come to see children as more innocent, we must, if we are to explain the horrors of war, consider adults to be more guilty.

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