More than Soldiers: Child Soldiers During the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars

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Abstract

Child soldiers have existed for all of recorded history, but recent years have seen a dramatic increase in their numbers. Much scholarly analysis has gone into explaining why children might choose to become child soldiers, but scholars are less certain about the reasons that armed groups might want such recruits. Using the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars as a case study, this article aims to rebut superficial explanations for the popularity of child soldiers, and offer a new theory for how and why armed groups use children. Rather than seeing children as merely substitutes for adult soldiers, much evidence suggests that armed groups see children as a unique and specialized asset. Armed groups' willingness to use child soldiers, despite their numerous drawbacks, points to the changing goals and nature of war in postcolonial Africa.

Introduction

Child soldiers occupy a unique space in the imagination of western audiences. The image of a ten-year-old boy clutching an AK-47 is a staple of television or magazine coverage of conflicts in Africa or the Middle East. Yet behind that simplistic image lies a strange and counterintuitive phenomenon that academics and journalists struggle to understand.

Children have been involved in warfare for as long as human history, but most evidence shows that the global use of child soldiers began to increase rapidly around

the start of the 1990s.[1] Although reliable data is almost impossible to find, the global consensus is that at least 300,000 child soldiers currently serve, mostly in armed rebel groups in Africa and the Middle East.[2] Over the last thirty years, child recruitment numbers have steadily increased, as well as the proportion of child soldiers in organizations that recruit children.[3] The average age of recruits has also decreased, down to an estimated average of just twelve years old.[4]

Before delving into the issue in more detail, it is important to define the term child soldier. According to most experts, a child soldier is anyone under the age of 18 who serves directly in an armed group or government military. Not all child soldiers serve as combatants. Many work as cooks, porters, or fulfill other non-combat roles. However, this article is largely concerned with combatants, particularly those who are significantly younger than eighteen. That group represents a surprisingly large portion of the child soldier population. In the First Liberian Civil War, for example, an estimated 83 percent of child soldiers served as active combatants and the average age was a mere fourteen years.[5]

Most academic work on child soldiers has understandably focused on legal methods to prevent the use of child soldiers and the rehabilitation of former child soldiers. This article will examine child soldiers from the perspective of the armed forces that recruit and command them. In doing so, I will attempt to offer new insight into why armed groups make the decision to recruit child soldiers, and how armed groups choose to use child soldiers once the children have been recruited. The investigation will focus on the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone as a case study. I will argue that traditional explanations for armed groups' willingness to use child soldiers offer an incomplete picture. Many academics argue that modern technology allows child soldiers to fulfill the role of adults. Much evidence, however, suggests that armed groups in

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[1] "Children as Soldiers," accessed April 19, 2021, https://www.unicef.org/sowc96/2csoldrs.htm.
[2] Scott Gates and Simon Reich, eds., *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, The Security Continuum (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).
[3] Ellen Wulfhorst, "Global Count Finds Cases of Child Soldiers More than Doubling," *Reuters*, February 12, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-children-soldiers-idUSKCN1Q12HQ.
[4] Peter W. Singer, "Young Soldiers Used in Conflicts Around the World," *Brookings* (blog), November 30, 1AD, https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/young-soldiers-used-in-conflicts-around-the-world/.
[5] James B. Pugel, "Disaggregating the Causal Factors Unique to Child Soldiering: The Case of Liberia," in *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, ed. Scott Gates and Simon Reich (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 160–82.

Liberia and Sierra Leone used child soldiers for entirely different military and strategic purposes than adult soldiers. The difference between the use of child soldiers and their adult counterparts is so great that in some cases, it begs the question of whether the term ‘soldier’ is even appropriate for child combatants.

Literature Review

Over the past thirty years, academics and journalists have struggled to understand the motivations behind the use of child soldiers. Theories to explain the child soldier phenomenon come in two types: ‘supply side’ or ‘systemic’ explanations, which seek to explain from the children's perspective why children are such an available resource for armed groups. One of the first and most comprehensive discussions of supply side theory comes from anthropologist William Murphy in 2003. Murphy identified four primary schools of thought explaining why children end up in combat groups. Youth clientelism, Murphy’s preferred explanation, suggests that child soldiers are part of a larger system of surrogate familial relationships, where a child’s biological parents are replaced by other adults who provide children with a familial sense of belonging, in exchange for willing service.[6] Murphy and other supply side theorists also point to factors like high youth populations in Africa as explanations for the child soldier phenomenon.

One major strength of supply-side is that it incorporates pre-war social dynamics into its discussion of child soldiers. Murphy points out that in pre-civil war Liberia, children often left their birth family structures to live in gangs which supported various political factions. Murphy thus manages to examine child soldiers not as an isolated phenomenon but as a product of a gradual social evolution.

However, supply side thinking is not the only way to understand child soldier proliferation. Also important is the so-called ‘demand side’ thinking, which examines child soldiers from the perspective of the armed groups that use them. Demand side thinking aims to understand why armed forces would want to recruit and deploy child soldiers. The demand side of the explanation is arguably more important, since a

[6] William P. Murphy, “Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientalism in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars,” *African Studies Review* 46, no. 2 (2003): 61–87.

substantial number of child soldiers are recruited against their will (roughly 40% in Liberia and Sierra Leone), and even those who do volunteer must be accepted by armed groups.[7] Accordingly, this article will primarily use a demand-side focus, using the perspective of military groups.

Perhaps the most extensive book on the subject of child soldiers is Michael Wessells' *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*. Wessells' book eschews political science and anthropology in favor of a more journalistic style, relying heavily on first-person narratives in order to create a more intimate account of the lives of child soldiers. Through personal accounts, Wessells' book expands upon many of the persistent questions surrounding the phenomenon.

Wessells, however, has an unfortunate tendency to jump from quoting a person in, for example, sub-saharan Africa, to a different quotation from a Burmese individual, all with little effort to differentiate the experiences of child soldiers in different political and cultural contexts. To avoid a similar effect, this article will limit its discussion to Liberia and Sierra Leone. In doing so, it will attempt to focus on a narrow context to draw very specific conclusions about the use of child soldiers in Liberia and Sierra Leone. My conclusions, therefore, will not apply everywhere, but I hope that my frame of analysis will add a useful perspective when discussing the use of child soldiers in other regions.

Primary Sources

One of the greatest obstacles to understanding the world of child soldiers is the lack of comprehensive and reliable primary sources. Because of the international community's strong stance against recruitment of children, armed groups cloak their child recruitment efforts in secrecy. Accordingly, there is very little hard statistical data about child soldiers.

As an alternative to quantitative data, many researchers have turned to qualitative data such as interviews or testimonies. This kind of data, however, is also limited. By their very nature, children involved in warfare are typically unable or unwilling to discuss their experiences. Adults who have been involved in the recruitment and

[7] Pugel, "Disaggregating the Causal Factors Unique to Child Soldiering."

training of child soldiers, on the other hand, are even less likely to openly discuss their experiences, because doing so would render them liable for punishment.

Nevertheless, researchers examining child soldiers during the Liberian Civil Wars have access to a few useful sources. The first of these is the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Established after the second Liberian Civil War, the Liberian TRC aimed to examine the atrocities of the past wars through witness testimony. Many of these witnesses either served as child soldiers or were involved in the recruitment or training of child soldiers.

Another primary source available to researchers is the trial of Charles Taylor. In the late 2000s, a special commission of the International Criminal Court charged Charles Taylor with numerous human rights violations, including the recruitment of child soldiers. Over the course of a years-long trial, the prosecution laid out its case in great detail, mustering a variety of witnesses and documents. Together, these documents provide a useful source of information about the inner workings of rebel groups during the Liberian Civil Wars.

Unfortunately, the trial only discusses abuses committed by Charles Taylor and his associated militias. While Charles Taylor was indisputably the most important figure of the Liberian Civil Wars, he was far from the only leader of armed groups. Every major faction of the Liberian Civil Wars employed child soldiers, so the investigation into Charles Taylor does not necessarily provide a comprehensive account of child soldier use during the conflict.

In summary, the primary source available to researchers provides a lot of information about the treatment of child soldiers, but little about the motivations of those who actually recruited and trained child soldiers. Given the limitations of the primary sources, this article will attempt to combine the various pieces of data into a more comprehensive portrait of child soldiers during the Liberian Civil War.

Why Child Soldiers?

Child soldier literature has a tendency to brush over demand-side explanations for the use of child soldiers, understandably preferring to focus on the perspective of the children themselves. However, demand sides explanations are also crucial, not only

because armed groups must make a conscious choice to use child soldiers, but also because the armed group's perspective is the main factor in determining how child soldiers are used once they have been recruited. Accordingly, this article will aim to interrogate the traditional demand side explanations for the proliferation of child soldiers.

Perhaps the most popular demand side explanation is development in small arms technology. Because weapons such as the AK-47 and M16 are light and easy to use, children can become as effective combatants as adults. As Michael Wessells argues in his well-known book, "Weapons like the AK-47 have... opened the door to pervasive use of child soldiers."[8] However, this argument is incomplete. Children have been capable of using firearms effectively for many decades before child soldiering began to rapidly proliferate. For example, the Lee-Enfield rifle, used as the main combat weapon for the British empire from 1895-1957, weighed as little as 8.73 pounds, while a typical AK-47 weighs 10.5 pounds. Moreover, the bolt-action Lee-Enfield was simple to operate and required no great strength to use, although it did place greater marksmanship demands on the wielder than a fully automatic weapon like an AK-47. The development of light weapons like the Lee-Enfield can certainly explain the first wave of child soldiers, which started in the early 20th century, but they cannot explain the sudden spike in the 1990s.

A better, but still insufficient, explanation for the recent increase lies in light weapon prices and distribution. Since the end of the Cold War, regulations around international sales of arms have grown looser, and the pool of available weapons has increased, particularly in regions like Africa. However, it is possible to overstate the scale of this change. Between 1945 and 1990, for example, manufacturers produced an estimated 45-73 million assault rifles in 54 separate countries, mostly for private licenses.[9]

Defining the viability of child soldiers through the weapons they can wield is also an inherently problematic perspective. For both philosophical and practical reasons,

[8] Michael G. Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 19.
[9] "Arms Availability and the Situation of Civilians in Armed Conflict: A Study Presented by the ICRC," n.d., 31.

soldiers should never be defined by the weapons they wield, because the vast majority of even a soldier's time is spent not actively using weapons, but walking, foraging, carrying supplies, and a thousand other tasks. Many of these tasks require abilities only adulthood can bring. Strength and endurance may not be necessary to shoot a gun, but they are crucial for traveling the many miles toward the enemy while carrying food and ammunition. Similarly, soldiers involved in irregular warfare must often make difficult choices, such as how to treat civilians, and how to respond to unexpected developments. In short, while child soldiers can at times fight as effectively as adults, in a broader strategic situation, they are far less useful than adults.

Scholars point to a few other reasons for the proliferation of child soldiers, such as the inherent obedience and courage of children. These benefits, however, have always existed, and therefore cannot explain the sudden increase in the scale of child soldier use in the 1990s.

The current explanations for the proliferation of child soldiers have not satisfactorily explained the sudden increase of child soldier use from the 1990s to the present day. If the number of military conflicts overall had increased since the 1990s, then it might explain the increased use of child soldiers, but most measures show that violence has remained stable over the past thirty years. Moreover, the proportion of child soldiers, as well as their absolute number, has increased over the past thirty years, which suggests that there are major reasons for the recruitment of child soldiers which observers do not fully understand.

More than Soldiers

Traditionally, scholars have seen child soldiers as essentially substitutes for adult soldiers. That is to say, armed groups use child soldiers for the same basic purposes as adult soldiers.[10] Much of the confusion stems from the term "child soldier" itself, which implies that the main distinction between a "child soldier" and a regular soldier is the age, not the role.

[10] Lasley, Trace, and Clayton L. Thyne. "Developments in the Study of Child Soldiers." *International Studies Review* 13, no. 1 (2011): 155-58.

To view child soldiers as substitutes for adult soldiers, however, is to oversimplify the situation. As established in the previous section, despite modern weaponry, child soldiers are still incapable of waging war in anything like the same capacity as adults.[11]

History shows that child soldiers have only rarely been used in the same manner as adults. Traditionally, child soldiers have fulfilled specialized roles, such as drummer boys, scouts, spies, and porters. The need for these specialized roles had less to do with the fact that children couldn't effectively use weapons, and more to do with the strategic and logistical problems of using children.

Given the historical use of children in warfare, and the limited but still significant changes in military armaments, it would make sense to view present-day child soldiers not as replacements for older soldiers, but as fulfilling a specific, specialized role. Given the changing nature of both technology and irregular warfare itself, the role child soldiers play has changed substantially. However, it still remains largely separate from that of regular soldiers. The exact role will depend greatly on the location and the political situation. Accordingly, this article will not attempt to offer a universal description of the evolving role of child soldiers. Instead, it will focus on the example of Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s.

Liberia and Sierra Leone

Liberia makes an instructive case study for a few reasons. Firstly, through most of its history, Liberia has enjoyed a record of stability unparalleled in the rest of the continent. Europeans never directly colonized Liberia, nor did Liberia experience any significant internal violence until the late 20th century. Once violence did break out, however, child soldiers became indelibly associated with Liberia. An estimated 25% of the combatants in the Liberian Civil Wars were child soldiers, a total of over 20,000 children.[12] In few other countries have child soldiers sprung up on such a large scale.

The First Liberian Civil War began on December 24th, 1989, when a small group of rebels led by former government official Charles Taylor invaded Liberia from the

[11] In an attempt to resolve the problem, some commentators prefer the term "Children Associated with Fighting Forces" (CAFF) when referring to child soldiers. However, given the universal currency of the traditional terminology, this article will continue to use the mainstream term, despite its obvious problems.
[12] "Children as Soldiers."

neighboring Ivory Coast. Their stated objective was to overthrow Liberian president Samuel Doe, who had seized power in a coup ten years before.

One notable feature of the First Liberian Civil War was how quickly child soldiers became a centerpiece of the armies. By August of 1990, Western journalists reported widespread use of child soldiers by Charles Taylor's rebel forces, and by the end of the year, all major factions, including those affiliated with Samuel Doe's government, had begun to employ child soldiers.[13]

Within the first year of the war, armed groups overthrew Samuel Doe, but the war continued as new factions emerged. Soon, the frontlines ceased to move substantially and the war turned into a largely static affair, characterized by truces punctuated by renewed violence. By the time the various factions agreed to a ceasefire in 1997, an estimated 250,000 Liberians had died.

The Liberian Civil War spread into neighboring Sierra Leone, where Charles Taylor supported the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the National Patriotic Liberation Front (NPLF) in their fight against the Sierra Leonean Civil Defense Force (CDF). In Sierra Leone, the war also dragged on indefinitely, with no sign of resolution. The civil war lasted from 1991 to 2002, and involved tens of thousands of child soldiers.

Contemporaries considered the two conflicts to be both connected and highly similar. As the Liberian TRC put it, "what was true for the Sierra Leonean armed groups can be expected to be largely accurate for different Liberian factions as well. In fact, due to the close ties between Charles Taylor and the NPFL and the RUF leadership, the [child soldier] recruitment methods on both sides of the border seemed to have been largely similar."

Child Soldiers and Resource Wars

Traditionally, armed groups have attempted to recruit those individuals who could fight most effectively and enable the groups to achieve their military objectives. That explains why for most of history, child soldiers stayed on the sidelines. Many commentators have argued that children have become effective fighters, and have therefore attracted the interest of armed groups. As discussed previously, however, child soldiers remain

[13] "Child Soldiers," *Edmonton Journal*, August 5th, 1990.

relatively ineffective soldiers in the broad strategic picture, and the few advantages children do have in battle date back to the early 1900s, not the 1980s and 1990s, when child soldier numbers began to climb. What has changed, however, are the types of wars waged and the objectives of armed groups.

The Liberian and Sierra Leonean conflicts of the 1990s were among the first so-called "resource wars," conflicts in which multiple armed groups, none of which can claim much political legitimacy, fight to exploit the natural resource in the countries. According to political scientist Jeremy Weinstein, such groups have no particular reason to treat civilians kindly or to negotiate an end to conflicts, because they benefit financially from maintaining their exploitative practices.

Liberia and Sierra Leone fit that model perfectly. In both countries, fighting devolved almost immediately into a perpetual struggle between rival warlords, who profited handsomely off the region's many diamond mines. Diamonds are among the most popular commodities for resource wars, since they don't require refinement and can be easily smuggled out and sold to black market buyers. A postwar survey of Liberians showed that 63% of Liberians identified 'Greed' as the primary cause of the first Civil War, rather than ideology or ethnic loyalties.[14]

Alimamy Bobson Sesay, Sierra Leonean rebel leader and infamous recruiter of child soldiers, put it thus: "Kono [a region of Sierra Leone] was a diamondiferous area, so by capturing Kono we would be able to get diamonds that we would use to go to Liberia and purchase arms and ammunition which could support us and we would defend Kono thoroughly and therefore we would be a force to reckon with by the international community."[15]

Recruitment of child soldiers was closely tied to the diamond mines in Sierra Leone and Liberia. As William Murphy writes, "[Children] were especially useful for extracting an easily portable resource such as diamonds, since they could be part of a

[14] "Liberia: Root Causes of the Civil War | PeacebuildingData.Org," accessed March 12, 2021, http://www.peacebuildingdata.org/research/liberia/results/civil-war/root-causes-civil-war.
[15] "The Special Court for Sierra Leone, the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone - Taylor Trial Transcripts," April 18-21st, 2008, accessed May 13, 2021, http://www.rscsl.org/Taylor_Transcripts.html.

diamond digging team for a few days, then part of a fighting force during the next few days."[16]

Resource wars are also far more likely to involve the recruitment of child soldiers than other types of conflict, for reasons discussed below. If one accepts that argument, then the sudden uptick in child soldier use during the 80s and 90s begins to make more sense. If the quality and availability of weapons did not significantly change during that period, then the types of conflicts certainly did. Since the end of the Cold War, the world has seen the numbers of civil conflicts and resource wars increase dramatically.

Child Soldier Recruitment and Training

Armed groups in both civil wars acquired child soldiers through a combination of abduction and voluntary recruitment, although the relative frequency of these different methods tended to vary by group.[17] The Liberian TRC concluded: "In the case of Sierra Leone, 88 percent of fighters for the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) insurgency were reported to be abducted, while only two percent of the combatants for the government-friendly CDF reported having been recruited by force."[18]

One way to determine an armed group's motivations for recruiting children is to examine what kind of training child soldiers receive. The most striking feature of child soldier 'training' is that traditional aspects of training, i.e. military drill, weapons training, and similar activities, is barely present. Numerous anecdotal accounts by former child soldiers describe weapons training of only a few days to a few weeks. Moreover, aggregated child soldier data (albeit from Uganda, not Liberia) suggests that armed groups typically wait several months before giving young recruits access to guns. The delay is even more prominent for fighters under the age of ten, who wait, on average, six months before picking up a weapon.[19] Instead, military groups in the Liberian Civil War often resorted to more unconventional training methods. Army camps would often

[16] Murphy, "Military Patrimonialism and Child Soldier Clientelism in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars," 73.
[17] Pugel, "Disaggregating the Causal Factors Unique to Child Soldiering."
[18] "Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, Vol. 3, Title 2," 52, accessed May 13, 2021, http://www.trcofliberia.org/resources/reports/final/volume-three-2_layout-1.pdf.
[19] Bernd Beber and Christopher Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013): 91.

turn into impromptu movie theaters, showing action movies to the young recruits. The Rambo films proved especially popular.[20] In the words of the TRC, "Training was often infrequent, hardly systematic and arbitrary… [it] had more to do with loyalty, obedience, and the likes and dislikes of commanders than with actually instilling universally accepted disciplinary rules in recruits."[21]

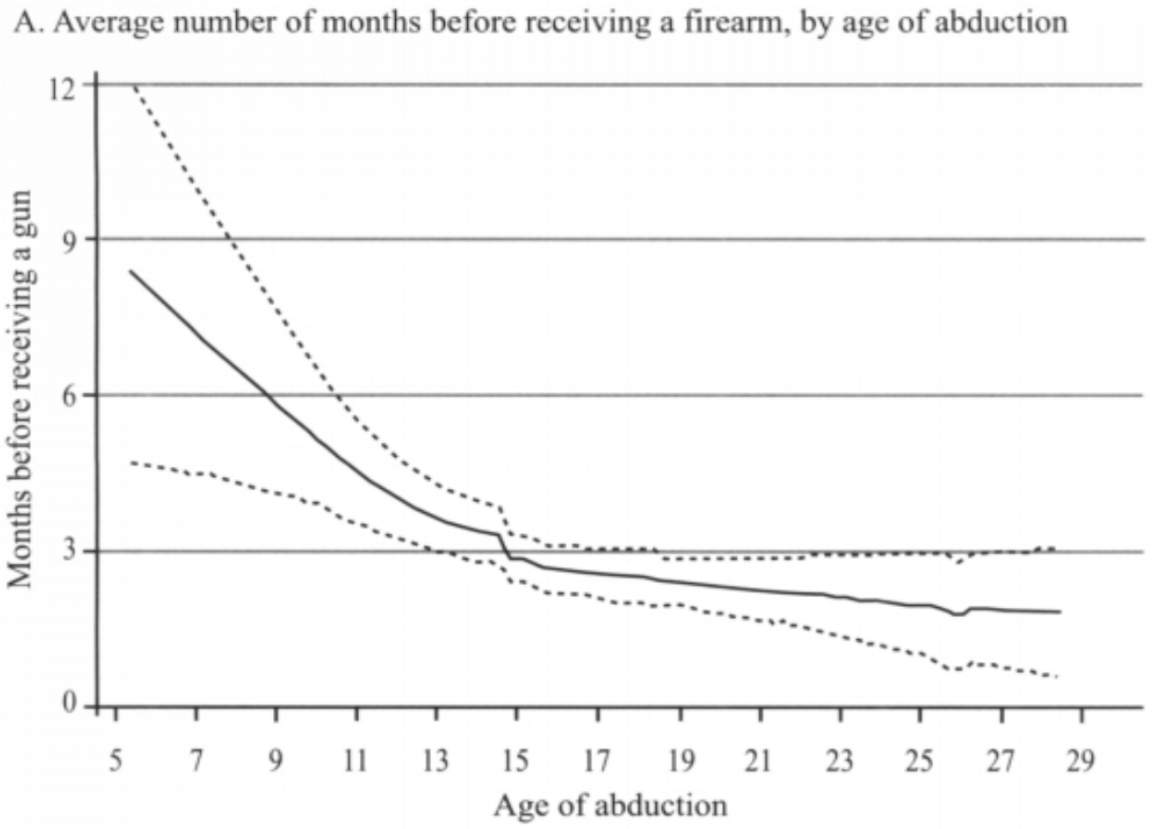

Image from Beber and Blackman, 91.

Rather than teaching the use of weapons, the vast majority of the training Liberian child soldiers received was behavioral. Instructors would teach children to follow the orders of their officers, and help cook food or carry supplies. In most cases this kind of indoctrination was apolitical, focusing on obedience and group loyalty, but in some contexts, child soldiers would receive ideological instruction as well. While this

[20] Michael G. Wessells, *Child Soldiers,* 68.
[21] "Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, Vol. 3, Title 2," 62, accessed May 13, 2021, http://www.trcofliberia.org/resources/reports/final/volume-three-2_layout-1.pdf.

instruction was not as specific or as rigorous as that seen in, for example, many Marxist military organizations, many child soldiers recalled feeling a strong sense of moral righteousness. According to one former child soldier from the RUF, "[The officers] said they wanted to liberate the country from poor education and poverty. I got convinced because I knew these things were lacking."[22]

The ideological education tended to vary depending on the group. According to the TRC, 70 percent of Sierra Leonean Government child soldiers told interviewers they believed in their groups' political goals. On the other hand, only 10 percent of RUF child soldiers expressed political motivations.[23] The lack of political enthusiasm on the part of many child soldiers necessitated the more apolitical instruction discussed above.

Some observers have explained the lack of weapons training as an illustration that armed groups treat child soldiers as expendable cannon fodder.[24] And while that is true to some degree, it also fails to explain why armed groups spend so much time and effort on ensuring the compliance and commitment of child soldiers if they mean to sacrifice the child combatants wantonly. The evidence seems to suggest that child soldiers are not seen by armed group commanders as a cheap resource to be gained and quickly thrown away. Rather, child soldiers are a long-term investment in the longevity of the group.

There is much evidence to suggest that child soldiers can increase the longevity of an armed group. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Liberia interviewed numerous former child soldiers who had in time become officers in their own right, typically commanding newly-recruited children. As a result of that process, armed groups receive lifetime soldiers, who are unlikely to seek out another form of life. Former child soldiers explain how rebel groups like Joseph Kony's LRA, for example, have sustained themselves for generations. Many academics have argued that employing child soldiers tends to lengthen conflicts, but few have suggested that this might be a deliberate tactic on the part of armed organizations.[25]

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[22] Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 68.
[23] "Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, Vol. 3, Title 2," 52.
[24] Ibid., 61.
[25] Roos Haer and Tobias Böhmelt, "Could Rebel Child Soldiers Prolong Civil Wars," *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 3 (2017): 332–59.

The desire for a long war makes perfect sense in the context of resource wars, since resource wars are open-ended conflicts where the military organizations have little incentive for peace. Both the Sierra Leonean and Liberian civil wars dragged on for years with few tangible changes in territorial possession, as all the various parties focused on enriching themselves. The wars only ended when all major armed groups reached a political settlement which guaranteed them power and protection. Unfortunately, a side effect of the anticlimactic ending of resource wars is that armed groups remain powerful enough to begin another civil war whenever they deem it convenient. This is exactly what occurred in Liberia, where a second civil war began a mere two years after the conclusion of the first. Most of the combatants in the Second Liberian Civil War had participated in the first war, particularly former child soldiers, many of whom were by that point adults.

Children in Combat

This article has suggested that armed groups like those in Liberia and Sierra Leone are valued for far more than just their fighting capabilities. However, it is an inescapable fact that many child soldiers do end up in combat. But even in battle, armed groups use children in a manner entirely different from the way they use adult combatants. These tactics once again highlight how child combatants fulfill fundamentally different roles from adult combatants, and those roles filled by children relate inextricably to the resource struggles waged in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

One of the most notorious military tactics involving children is to use drugs to increase the aggression and fearlessness of children. Such behavior is well documented in both Sierra Leone and Liberia. One Sierra Leonean child recalled "Before we fight, the commander cuts us here [pointing to his and others' temples] and packs in brown brown [amphetamines]."[26]

Similarly, a Liberian child recalled, "When you take the tablets you can't sleep, it makes you hot in your body. Anytime you go on the frontline, they give it to you. Just got

[26] Michael G. Wessells, *Child Soldiers,* 76.

to do something to be strong because you don't want the feeling of killing someone. You need the drugs to give you the strength to kill."[27]

What is striking, however, is that there is far less evidence of armed groups requiring adult soldiers to use drugs. The fact that military groups would choose to primarily drug children highlights once again that children are fundamentally different sorts of combatants. As discussed above, children are in many ways inferior combatants to adults. Drugs, moreover, do not improve many aspects of an individual's fighting ability. Drugged individuals are less likely to respond to situations logically, follow orders, or remain organized. These downsides all help explain why most adult combatants did not receive combat drugs.

However, child combatants have a few advantages which drugs further enhance. The greatest of these is psychological. Many soldiers will hesitate to kill children, and find the experience of fighting children profoundly unnerving. The effect is doubtless multiplied when children are drugged. The effect is similar for civilians. Many civilians of the Liberian Civil War recount feeling a special fear of child soldiers, because of "that crazy look" and the greater likelihood of atrocities.[28]

In most military campaigns, atrocities and psychological warfare of the sort child soldiers are capable of would not be useful. Most armed movements require the support of the population to survive, and atrocities have a tendency to draw the ire of the international community. Some academics have argued that some armed groups refrain from using child soldiers for fear of losing international legitimacy.[29] In resource wars, however, armed groups require little civilian support, or the acknowledgement of foreign governments. Atrocities have some advantages too; they create more fractured families and unemployed youth, which in turn leads to more recruits, especially child recruits. Since longevity is an aim in itself during resource wars, child soldiers can be appealingly self-perpetuating. It is unsurprising, then, that in Sierra Leone and Liberia, armed groups committed uncountable atrocities. As the verdict for the Charles Taylor trial concluded: "Throughout the indictment period, the operational strategy of the RUF and

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Trace Lasley and Clayton Thyne, "Secession, Legitimacy and the Use of Child Soldiers," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 32, no. 3 (2015): 289–308.

AFRC was characterized by a campaign of crimes against the Sierra Leonean civilian population, including murders, rapes, sexual slavery, looting, abductions, forced labour, conscription of child soldiers, amputations, and other forms of physical violence and acts of terror."[30]

The use of child soldiers for terror operations at times stretches the traditional definition of soldier, more reminiscent of an executioner than a combatant. In Sierra Leone, the tendency to use children for terror reached perhaps its most concentrated form.

Small Boy Units

During the Sierra Leone Civil War, rebel groups like the RUF and NPFL organized over 10,000 child soldiers into what became known as the Small Boy Unit (SBU), composed exclusively of boys of around fourteen or younger, often much younger. The SBU reveals how the RUF and NPFL treated child soldiers as specialized forces, rather than as a replacement for normal soldiers. The armed groups trained SBU children separately from adults, and taught them different skills.[31] Perhaps the most striking (and certainly the most documented) use of the SBU was to commit atrocities against civilians.

Alex Tamba Teh, a Sierra Leonese Pastor at the time of the civil war, gave the Charles Taylor commission perhaps its most detailed account of a typical SBU operation.[32] RUF-aligned rebels attacked Tamba Teh's town in 1998, taking Tamba Teh and about a hundred other captives to RUF headquarters. Only once the prisoners arrived at camp did Tamba Teh encounter SBU children. He recalled "they were small boys below the ages of 16, 15, right down. They were small, small boys and those were the ones I saw them called SBUs… They were in civilian clothing. That was what I saw them wearing. Some had guns. Some could not even lift their guns up except that they drag the guns on the ground. Some were having cutlasses, machetes."

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[30] "The Special Court for Sierra Leone, the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone - Taylor Trial Transcripts," April 26, 2012, accessed May 13, 2021, http://www.rscsl.org/Taylor_Transcripts.html.
[31] "Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, Vol. 3, Title 2," 62, accessed May 13, 2021, http://www.trcofliberia.org/resources/reports/final/volume-three-2_layout-1.pdf.
[32] "The Special Court for Sierra Leone, the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone - Taylor Trial Transcripts," January 8th, 2008, accessed May 13, 2021, http://www.rscsl.org/Taylor_Transcripts.html.

Alex Tamba Teh witnessed the SBU brutally murder the other captives, even chopping off many of the captives' hands and limbs before the executions. In the end, RUF officers decided to spare Tamba Teh from the same fate because of his status as a Pastor. Before being released, Alex Tamba Teh stayed with the rebels for a brief period of time, and witnessed the SBU burn down a village:

> "Captain Banya ordered the SBUs to go and light candles [the SBU term for burning houses]. I used to see some of the boys who would take batch sponges, some would take dry grasses and will take kerosene, I never knew where they got it from, they would wrap those things together, they tied it up with a rope on a stick. They will scratch a lit match and put it on the things that are tied together and then when there was fire on it they will go and put it on the ceiling of the buildings and when there was a lit fire on the houses, that particular house, they will go to another house and put it there again."[33]

Alex Tamba Teh's story is representative of the way the RUF used the SBU. In witness testimony from the Charles Taylor trial, numerous individuals described SBUs chopping off civilians' body parts and destroying villages. The majority of accounts involving SBUs involve such activities.

It seems likely then that rebel groups saw such atrocities as useful training for child soldiers, since they would have created deep trauma, and psychologically committed the children to the rebel group. However, employing the SBU for atrocities was not just for the benefit of indoctrinating the children. Similarly with the use of children in combat, it seems that rebel leaders calculated that atrocities committed by children were still more terrifying than those committed by adults. Alex Tamba Teh's narrative featured a semi-ritualized form of murder, and it is difficult to discount the possibility that his survival and release had just as much to do with the desire for a witness as with Tamba Teh's status as a pastor.

The Sierra Leonean commander Alimamy Bobson Sesay, an associate of Charles Taylor, provided some useful insight into the use of child soldiers during his testimony against Charles Taylor. Sesay is one of the very few individuals to have

[33] Ibid.

personally led and trained child soldiers and also testified at length about his experience.[34] Sesay confirmed that the RUF used SBU children deliberately as a specialized weapon of terror, saying, “wherever we targeted civilians we would use the SBUs to amputate people, to amputate their arms.” Later, he went on to add, “In some areas where we captured some civilians whom I and the others would capture we would make sure that the SBUs - we would command the SBUs saying, ‘Amputate these ones arms. Let him or her go to Freetown and tell them that we are ready for them.’ So it was a kind of giving out a message to the other civilians that they should fear us and they should tell ECOMOG about us.”[35]

Sesay made another revealing comment about the training of child soldiers, saying that “For some of the children, the SBUs, most of the commanders just gave them machetes because we didn't have sufficient arms so they issued out machetes to them.”[36] The fact that there were not enough guns to equip SBUs with combat weapons once again highlights how, even in modern warfare, a child soldier’s effectiveness does not come from the weapon he or she wields.

Often, foreign journalists and academics describe atrocities committed by child soldiers as a side effect of employing soldiers without adult inhibitions. The evidence, however, seems to suggest that rebel leaders deliberately put child soldiers in the position to commit atrocities, because civilians feared children (particularly drug-crazed children) far more than adults.

This specialized role for child soldier once again reveals the limitations of the term ‘child soldier.’ In defending the term, anthropologist Alcinda Honwana points out that “the soldier in these contexts... refers to the type of fighter that often fills the ranks of guerrilla and rebel groups, inadequately trained and outfitted, often operating under the influence of drugs. Such soldiers harass, loot, and kill defenseless civilians indiscriminately.”[37] Honwana’s expanded definition of soldier helps recontexualize the term, but it does not take into account the fact that in some cases, armed groups

[34] “The Special Court for Sierra Leone, the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone - Taylor Trial Transcripts,” April 18-21st, 2008, accessed May 13, 2021, http://www.rscsl.org/Taylor_Transcripts.html.
[35] ECOMOG, The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group, was a coalition peacekeeping force which intervened in the later years of the Sierra Leonean Civil War.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Alcinda Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (2011), 68.

specifically assigned the specialized groups of children the role of carrying out these atrocities in a way distinct from their adult counterparts.

Many other witnesses reported the SBU filling highly visible roles, especially ones that involved little actual combat. These roles included manning checkpoints and guard gates, as well as serving as bodyguards to rebel officers.[38] This is not to say that the SBU never saw combat – testimonies often report incidences of SBU fighting – but the overall impression is that fighting was not the sole or perhaps even the primary function of the SBU.

Small Girl Units

This article would be remiss to ignore the oft-neglected topic of female child soldiers. Girls have not escaped the global rise in child soldier numbers. In Liberia, around a quarter of child soldiers were women.[39] In Sierra Leone, the RUF complemented its SBU by also creating a Small Girls Unit (SGU). The sources, however, pay far less attention to the SGU than the SBU, making it difficult to determine the scale or the role of the unit.

The most obvious characteristics of SGU was widespread sexual abuse of the young girls in the unit. Numerous RUF witnesses describe RUF officers raping SGU girls indiscriminately. Alimamy Bobson Sesay even goes so far as to imply that SBU boys and SGU girls were paired up, both in training and in sexual relationships.[40]

However, SGUs did not exist only for reasons of sexual exploitation. Armed groups in Sierra Leone committed rape on a broad scale, but unlike most victims, SGU girls were also armed. Plenty of sources describe SGUs playing an active role in fighting, or acting as bodyguards to RUF commanders. Accounts describing the training of child soldiers mention the SBUs and SGUs in the same breath, suggesting that the

[38] "The Special Court for Sierra Leone, the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone - Taylor Trial Transcripts," September 6th 2010, accessed May 13, 2021, http://www.rscsl.org/Taylor_Transcripts.html.
[39] "Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, Vol. 3, Title 2," 54, accessed May 13, 2021, http://www.trcofliberia.org/resources/reports/final/volume-three-2_layout-1.pdf.
[40] "The Special Court for Sierra Leone, the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone - Taylor Trial Transcripts," April 18-21st, 2008, accessed May 13, 2021, http://www.rscsl.org/Taylor_Transcripts.html.

two received similar weapons training and indoctrination. Interestingly, there is little suggestion of armed groups using SGUs to commit atrocities in the same way as SBUs.

Given the lack of information about SGUs, it is difficult to say whether they fit into a specialized role like the SBUs. The dual role of sexual exploitation and military activity could hint towards a special role, but evidence is unclear as to whether the SGU differed substantially from, for example, the many adult women whom the RUF recruited. Nevertheless, the small pieces of evidence provided by testimony hint at a unique, disturbing, and perplexing position occupied by the SGU. Researchers have much to learn about these half-forgotten fighters.

Conclusion

After examining the way armed groups used child soldiers during the Liberian and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars, a few major points deserve emphasis. Firstly, armed groups did not usually see child soldiers as substitutes for adult soldiers. Rather, child soldiers fulfilled unique roles at which children are uniquely suited. These roles included extending the longevity of armed groups and inflicting terror upon both civilians and enemy soldiers. Historically, static longevity and terror have rarely been major goals of armed groups, but in resource wars in postcolonial Africa, longevity and terror are two of the main methods by which armed groups achieve their goals.

This theory has the advantage of fitting neatly into the historical role children play in warfare. For much of history, young children have been closely involved in warfare, but nearly always as more specialized adjuncts to adult soldiers. If such a pattern persisted for thousands of years, it seems premature to suggest that new technology could completely overturn both tradition and the physical and psychological limitations of young children. To be sure, the use of child soldiers is evolving, but that evolution can be attributed to politics just as much as technology.

It bears repeating that this distinction between adult and child soldiers is primarily visible in very young children. As children age, they become more like adults both physically and mentally, so armed forces are unlikely to see teenage recruits as a unique resource. For this reason, the SBU only recruited children from roughly ages eight to fourteen. This is not to say that armed groups in Liberia and Sierra Leone did

not recruit older children, but older children tended to become mixed with adult soldiers, with leaders treating the two with little distinction.

Also, the conclusions of this article do not necessarily apply outside of Liberia and Sierra Leone. Different demographics, culture, natural resources, and politics could lead to an entirely different calculus on the part of armed forces. It is unclear, for example, how many armed groups have divisions similar to the Small Boys Unit.

As I stated in the introduction, this article focuses on the demand side of child soldiers – how armed forces use child recruits – rather than the supply side, which focuses on systemic factors like poverty, family structure, and political beliefs, all of which help explain why children would be in a position to join armed groups. However, researchers can learn much from examining the intersection of the two factors. It seems likely that systemic, supply side factors play a role in determining how armed groups use their children. If there is a particularly large population of displaced children, for instance, armed groups would probably value the lives of their child soldiers less. The intersection of supply and demand side theories once again illustrates how demand side calculations are different depending on the social and political context. Both the supply and demand factors are likely entirely different in a country like Burma than they are in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Another lingering question is how very young child soldiers move through the hierarchy of armed groups as they age. It is clear that children recruited at a very young age serve different roles than older children or adults, but what happens when young child soldiers grow up? Do they eventually become high-ranking members of the armed group, or do they remain in similar roles, perhaps as trainers for new child recruits?

Traditionally, academic works on child soldiers conclude by proposing a number of measures to curb the proliferation of child soldiers. This article does not presume to apply its methods too broadly, and will therefore hope only to illustrate that child soldiers are not a uniform phenomenon, and the experiences of child soldiers can vary immensely depending on the context and nature of the conflict in which they fight. Often, commentators describe child soldiers as individuals with stolen youths, whose childhood is ignored by adults with more immediate concerns. But as Liberia and Sierra

Leone show us, child soldiers too often see their youth perverted and manipulated, but not disregarded. Such is the cynical calculus of those who employ child soldiers.

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