Children of War

Though nearly all nations agree that children should not serve as soldiers, today some 300,000 do. The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which set the minimum age for recruitment into the military and other armed groups at 15 years, is the most widely subscribed human rights instrument in international law, ratified by 193 states. (The United States and Somalia signed, but have not ratified, the accord.) A protocol appended in 2000 and ratified by 110 countries established the minimum age as 18. Yet all this agreement doesn’t prevent children’s participation in roughly two-thirds of the world’s conflicts.

In Liberia and Sierra Leone, the devastating civil wars of the 1990s, whose effects continue to reverberate through West Africa, were perhaps most infamous for the “small-boy units” of children under 12 who committed unspeakable crimes. In northern Uganda, until a recent tenuous truce, the Lord’s Resistance Army did more than put guns into the hands of preteens: By sexually enslaving young girls and “marrying” them to his fighters, rebel leader Joseph Kony saw to it that children were literally born into the conflict. A recent study by the United Nations Children’s Fund puts the average age of recruitment for child soldiers in six Asian countries at 13 years; more than a third of all child soldiers are under 12.

In the past few years, the body of literature devoted to the use of child soldiers—political and security analyses, sociological explorations, case studies of specific conflicts—has been growing. But largely unheard in these books are the voices of the child soldiers themselves, who more often than not are the object of mere voyeuristic attention, when they are not dismissed entirely as an irredeemable lost generation. Michael Wessells, a professor of psychology at Randolph-Macon College and Columbia University and a senior adviser on child protection issues with the Christian Chil-

The Liberian boy standing guard beside a comrade in arms is one of more than 300,000 child soldiers who participate in violent conflicts around the world.
Dren’s Fund, now fills that gap in the literature with an admirable work based not just on his own extensive research but on interviews with hundreds of former child soldiers.

The stories of young Sierra Leoneans who were ensnared in civil war illustrate the scope of human devastation. Twelve-year-old girls were “married” to the men who burned their villages, then were forced to carry heavy supplies. Rebels sought to sever young conscripts from their families. One boy, 16 at the time Wessells interviewed him, described being given a rifle and told to kill his aunt: “She was my relative and I didn’t want to hurt her. They told me to shoot her or I would be shot. So I shot her.” When the fighting stopped, former child soldiers’ troubles weren’t over. “I haven’t been in my village since I was a little boy,” said one young man, a veteran fighter at the age of 20. “My parents saw me last as a child. I have no job, and people look at me like maybe I am a troublemaker.”

In later chapters, Wessells focuses on the still largely unexamined question of how to reintegrate these former soldiers into their societies. He contends that postconflict reintegration efforts ought to link former child soldiers’ deep yearning for normalcy and acceptance with society’s need for reconciliation and peace, as the Christian Children’s Fund did when it established community infrastructure projects in Sierra Leone that employed former child soldiers alongside other youths, some of whom had been victims of their attacks. So often, former combatants are depicted as predators beyond rehabilitation. Wessells’s optimism about their resilience and the restorative power of community offers cause for hope.

Wessells’s concluding chapter, in which he recommends more stringent legal standards, war crimes prosecution, and conflict prevention, lapses into somewhat conventional discourse, but the book as a whole is perhaps the best general introduction published to date on the role of children in modern warfare. It serves as a salutary reminder of what must—and can—be done to end this tragedy.

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