

Review of Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection

DAVID M. ROSEN

Department of Social Sciences and History, Fairleigh Dickinson University, Madison, New Jersey, USA

Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection

By Michael Wessells

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, (pb) ISBN 978-0-674-03255-2

Child soldiers have been with us for a very long time, perhaps since the beginning of warfare. The armies of the West were filled with boy soldiers for centuries. If they were not noticed earlier, it was only because nobody was looking. To give just one example, Andrew Jackson, the 7th President of the United States, joined the armed forces of the American Revolution at age 13, approximately the same age as Ishmael Beah, whose 2008 memoir, *A Long Way Gone*, became one of the most popular accounts of being a modern day child soldier. What is really interesting about child soldiers is not their empirical novelty but that they have been discovered as an issue only over the last two or three decades.

Accordingly, one of the first things I liked about Michael Wessells' book *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* is that the cover photograph is not of an African child soldier. Since one of Wessells' stated goals for the book is to break stereotypes, this is certainly one stereotype that has to go. Wessells rightly argues for the need to contextualize our understanding of child soldiers, to understand that childhoods outside of the West may be shaped by different values, to avoid either infantilizing child soldiers or sensationalizing their brutality, to get away from the idea that children who serve in armies are somehow damaged for life, and to pay serious attention to the presence of girl soldiers. Wessells' point is that in order to effectively integrate child soldiers back into society we must work from an empirical rather than an ideological analysis of the formidable problems they face, including the persistence of extreme forms of poverty and continued conflict in so-called post-conflict countries.

Notwithstanding his convincing argument, Wessells' book is a good example of the difficulties scholars have in sorting out hard research from advocacy claims. Given the long history of children serving as soldiers, it's hard to fully accept the

idea that the use of child soldiers is a new form of barbarism or exploitation. Equally problematic is his claim that the attainment of human rights is indivisible from peace building. Even though the “right to revolution” may be marginalized in current human rights thinking, there is a long history of revolutionary struggle for human rights that cannot be ignored—including the American and French Revolutions. So, what are we to make of Wessel’s argument that children may be victimized and exploited if they “see violence as an acceptable way of replacing a social order with one offering social justice and positive economic opportunities” (p. 3). What if their assessment is indeed correct and the only way to achieve justice is through violence? Are peace and the protection of children supposed to trump the attainment of fundamental human rights? I say this merely to show that the idea of protecting children from all risk, an idea which permeates much humanitarian thinking about child soldiers, has not really been fully explored logically or philosophically.

Wessells interviewed more than 400 former child soldiers in Afghanistan, Angola, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Uganda. The first half of the book focuses on recruitment and the experiences of children in various armed forces and will be familiar terrain to people who have read reports from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other humanitarian and human rights advocacy groups. Indeed, much of the interview data here seems to be drawn from these sources rather than from Wessells’ own research. The second portion of the book deals with the problem of integrating former child soldiers into society and this section draws on the real strengths of Wessells’ research

Wessells correctly points out that most children who are recruited as child soldiers are quite resilient and that their identities as soldiers should not be essentialized as key way of defining them as persons. Moreover, just as wars are different so are the ways in which children are incorporated into them. Wessells correctly warns us that the experiences of girl soldiers are frequently sensationalized and portray the girls as the victims of mass rape or sexual exploitation, when in fact, girls and boys experience a diversity of roles as soldiers. Indeed, even when girls are exploited, many of the tasks they perform may not be very different from the peacetime roles they would assume in their own societies. Clearly there are some situations in which children are brutally exploited, such as in the cases of the Palestinian child suicide bombers of Islamic Jihad and the kidnapped recruits of the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone or the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda. But even in Uganda data from the *Survey of War Affected Youth* suggests that the picture is more nuanced than sensationalized reporting in the media would suggest.

The real strength of this book is Wessells’ examination of the disarmament processes and the transition to civil life. The difficulties of helping children make the transition from soldiers to civilians can be quite daunting when families are broken by war, communities are overwhelmed by poverty, and job opportunities are absent. Sometimes family reintegration is a component of the solution, but sometimes it is not, especially where children have long assumed adult roles and are no longer regarded as children by their families and communities or even by themselves. Insisting that they be treated as children is a pointless exercise of Western hubris. Wessells advocates a much more fact-based approach based upon local knowledge of the kinds of solutions that will work. He also argues that a great deal of advance

preparation is needed, as well as extensive follow-up with families trying to adapt to the return of child soldiers.

Wessells is critical of counselling approaches to reintegration, especially in situations where people are struggling to meet basic needs. In his view, counselling should be less about “healing wounds” or mental illness than helping young people socially integrate into the practical rhythms of civil life. Various forms of counselling and help, whether psychological counselling, traditional healing or exercises in non-violent conflict resolution, need to be harnessed in support of the key goal, which is to enable former child soldiers to make decent lives for themselves in situations plagued by chronic poverty. Finally, Wessells says there is a real need for agencies to help former child soldiers to acknowledge the abilities of children to take charge of their own lives. Children return from war, but humanitarian groups rarely respect children’s ability to participate in decision making processes, even though they routinely make pro forma declarations in support of children’s agency and empowerment. Wessells’ rigorous analysis of these factors shows him to be an experienced, humane, and wise advocate for children who are trying to build new lives under extremely difficult circumstances.