Introduction: Child soldiers, iconography and the (il)logic of extremes

Over the past decade, images of child soldiers have inundated the popular media. Whether adorning the pages of popular magazines or newspapers, or flashing briefly before us in the form of video clips and news reports, images of boys armed with AK-47s appear ubiquitous, providing a cautionary tale not only of the reality of innocent childhood gone awry, but also of children as profoundly vulnerable, dangerous, victimized, disturbed and sometimes heroic. These images turn commonly held assumptions of protected and innocuous childhood on its head. They may simultaneously evoke collective shock, fear, revulsion, intrigue, pride, horror and sympathy. Such imagery harnesses our attention and compels us to look and perhaps read on momentarily. However, as captivating as these images are, what they obscure and conceal is equally illuminating.

We, of course, learn little about the child behind the gun – how he (‘he’ because rarely are girls portrayed or included in such images) came to pose menacingly with a weapon – the gun essentially defining him. Moreover, we have no sense of what might have happened to the child in the years since the image was captured. What happened to the boy? Did he, as many would predict, grow up to be part of a terrorist organization? A mercenary? A warlord? Did he, seemingly against conventional wisdom and great odds, manage to overcome his violent past and embrace a ‘civilian’ identity? What about the many war-affected girls who are notably absent from such media depictions? What became of them? Indeed, in the shadows and dimness of such powerful yet formulaic imagery lie profound silences and cavernous empty spaces.

This book explores the lives and realities of a group of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, both boys and girls, and traces what happened to these children during and following the 11-year civil war. It attempts to fill these silences and empty spaces with children’s personal stories and narratives and to put human accounts to the often dehumanizing
and pathologizing wartime imagery that we are so accustomed to consuming through the media.

What will become evident through the narratives of these Sierra Leonean youth is that their life histories intensely defy the limiting portrayals offered by media and popular discourse. While these children are frequently constructed through the logic of extremes (as either extreme victims, extreme perpetrators or extreme heroes), in reality, the lives, experiences and identities of these children fall within the messy, ambiguous and paradoxical zones of all three, which proves to be one of the most challenging aspects to contend with in their post-conflict lives.

Definitions and ambiguities: Defining ‘child soldiers’

Several terms have been used to represent the realities of children actively implicated and engaged in armed conflict. These terms, which are often used interchangeably, range from ‘child soldiers’, to ‘children associated with fighting forces’. It must be said, however, that neither of these terms adequately captures the realities of children implicated in war and both terms are inherently problematic. While the term ‘child soldier’ encapsulates the paradox of children’s involvement in wartime violence, particularly the blurring of constructed notions of childhood ‘innocence’ with the brutality and violence of war, defining what is considered a ‘child’ is invariably problematic. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as ‘every human being below eighteen years’ (Article 1). However, ‘childhood’ is indeed a contested concept and a social construction that varies in form and content across cultures and social groups, and is defined by localized understandings and values. Defining a childhood based solely upon age not only reflects a bias towards western notions of childhood which are rooted in biomedical theory (Kemper 2005), but also may overlook other salient cultural, social, economic, gendered, class and other status determinants that extend well beyond the notion of age. As Boyden and Levinson (2000) note:

Many different kinds of criteria – although seldom age – are used to demarcate childhood. These criteria include the commencement of work, end of schooling, onset of menarche, betrothal, and marriage amongst others ... Further, children in different social classes within the same society may reach adulthood at different stages, depending on their social and economic roles. (Boyden and Levinson 2000, p. 28)
Contexts of war render the position of children even more complex because children may acquire the status of an adult as they become sole caretakers of younger children or take on active roles in combat.

To complicate matters further, constructed and formalized definitions of ‘child’, ‘youth’, ‘adolescent’ or ‘young people’ differ between international organizations and, in some cases, overlap. While the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child considers a child to be anyone under the age of 18, the UN’s World Programme of Action for Youth identifies ‘youth’ as 15–24 years old (United Nations 2005). Moreover, the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) differentiate between ‘adolescents’ (15–19 years old), ‘youth’ (15–24 years old), and ‘young people’ (10–24 years old) (World Bank 2007b). Within Sierra Leone, the context to be explored in this book, the Sierra Leone National Youth Policy defines ‘youth’ as 15–35 years of age (Government of Sierra Leone 2003). Ultimately, defining who is a child is in fact ‘a process of negotiations between individuals, family members, peer groups and the wider community in the context of life events and rites of passage’ (Mawson 2004, p. 226).

Age is certainly not the only difficulty when considering the concept of ‘child soldier’. The term ‘soldier’ tends to conjure up archetypal symbols of uniformed men with extensive military training in active combat. This image counters the realities of most of the inadequately trained and outfitted child soldiers who fill the ranks of rebel groups in post-colonial wars (Honwana 2006). Moreover, the stereotypical conceptualization of ‘soldier’ conceals the realities of women and girls’ participation in war, as well as the many supporting roles that children take on during conflict as messengers, bodyguards, cooks, spies or porters.

Recognizing the varied roles that children take on in war which extend far beyond combat, the term ‘children associated with fighting forces’ has been recently introduced into the vernacular. Yet, this term is also problematic as it fails to adequately connote children’s active contributions to contemporary war, implying that they remain at the periphery. Also, the use of such a term may deny children who have served in wartime-supporting roles access to programmes provided to those labelled as ‘combatants’ in the period of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

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1 It should be noted, however, that in 2007, the Government of Sierra Leone passed a Child Rights Act that defines children as individuals under 18 years of age.
Importantly, the globalized use and broad encompassing nature of both terms, whether ‘child soldiers’ or ‘children associated with fighting forces’, also fail to capture the diversity and nuances of children’s wartime realities. While there may be similar experiences, implications and consequences for all children who are exposed to hostilities, regardless of whether they are in the developing or industrialized world, the experiences of a 12-year-old associated with an armed guerilla group in sub-Saharan Africa may be significantly different from a 17-year-old associated with an armed force in the United Kingdom, although both may be perceived as ‘child soldiers’. Moreover, although broad definitions are helpful in capturing the global realities of children’s involvement in armed conflict, they simultaneously hinder complex understandings of the individualized experiences and realities of war. However, at the same time, when such nuanced and individualized understandings are introduced, further complexity and debate are revealed. As an example, should children involved in armed violence around the world, such as armed children in the Brazilian favelas, Palestinian children involved in stone throwing, and armed gang members in North America who have organized command structures, be considered ‘child soldiers’?

While acknowledging its obvious imperfections and contradictions, this book will employ the term ‘child soldier’ and rely upon the definition provided in ‘The Paris Principles’, a set of guidelines on children in armed conflict established in 2007 at an international conference in Paris. The conference, organized by the French government and supported by UNICEF, introduced the following designation, which represents the most current internationally recognized definition of the child soldier phenomenon:

2 These Principles were developed by ‘States, human rights actors, humanitarian actors, development actors, military and security actors (state and non-state), associated organisations including UN organisations, other inter-governmental actors, national and international organisations and community-based organisations … [The Principles] were designed to guide interventions for the protection and well-being of … children and to assist in making policy and programming decisions … [T]he principles aim to prevent unlawful recruitment or use of children[,] … facilitate the release of children associated with armed forces and armed groups[,] … facilitate the reintegration of all children associated with armed forces and armed groups [and] to ensure the most protective environment for all children’ (UNICEF 2007, p. 6).

3 Similarly despite the earlier-noted imperfections, in this book the definition of a child will coincide with the definition set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (see p. 2). ‘Children’ refers to both boys and girls.
Any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities. (UNICEF 2007, p. 7)

According to ‘The Paris Principles’, the concept of an ‘armed force’ as noted in the above definition, refers to an armed force of a state, whereas an ‘armed group’ refers to groups distinct from armed forces as defined by Article 4 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.4 Noting the distinct differences between the two designations, this book will adhere to these terms throughout.

Definitions and conceptualizations of childhood and child soldiers obviously reflect current knowledge, and are thus continuing to alter and transform over time. Just as the notion of childhood as a social category constitutes a relatively recent concept (Ariès 1962; James and Prout 1990), prior to the induction of international legal instruments, protocols and protections, the recruitment of children into armed conflict was not banned or prohibited. This book aims to contribute to the transformative and changing conceptualizations of child soldiers by attempting to shift the boundaries and limits of our understanding of these young people. By revealing the multi-faceted and paradoxical lives of a group of child soldiers from Sierra Leone, I hope to bring forth a complex image of these children that contradicts the conventional and popular representations, which are highlighted below.

(Mis)understanding militarized children: Portrayals and representations

The past decade has seen burgeoning popular interest, advocacy and growing scholarly attention to the topic of child soldiers. Yet representing the (il)logic of extremes, children caught up in the cycle of war and

4 The Optional Protocol raised the minimum age for direct participation to 18 for state forces and prohibited the compulsory recruitment of under 18s into national armed forces. The Optional Protocol explicitly prohibits non-state armed groups from both recruiting and using persons until 18. State parties are also obliged to criminalize such activities.
violence have tended to be portrayed by the world’s media (whether through written, verbal or visual representation) and by policy discourse in largely contrastive ways as dangerous and disorderly, hapless victims and, most recently, as redeemed heroes. Notably absent from such imagery are girl soldiers, whose invisibility defines them. This powerful iconography and its implications are explored further below.

Dangerous and disorderly

As noted by several authors including Honwana (2006), Macmillan (2009), Rosen (2009) and Skinner (1999), child soldiers have tended to be stigmatized as dangerous and evil sociopaths – as ‘bandits’, ‘vermin’, ‘barbarians’ and ‘monsters’ – often fully aware of their actions. In newspaper reports, child soldiers have been described as ‘chillingly efficient killing machines’ (Schuler 1999), who hold little remorse for their victims: ‘Drug crazed child soldiers kill like unfeeling robots’ (The Montreal Gazette 1999). Particularly apparent when examining discussions of Africa, media reports and discourses suggest that not only is the continent falling prey to a ‘new barbarism’ (Kaplan 1994), but also that a myriad of interrelated circumstances have created a dangerous new class of armed thugs: ‘Ugandan child soldiers have been warped by war’ (Wasswa 1997); ‘Liberian boy soldiers leave a swathe of ruin’ (The Independent 1993). Highly racialized and imbued with stereotypes, these child soldiers act as fodder for those ‘who seek to present African warfare as inexplicable, brutal and disconnected from the “civilised” world order’ (Aning and McIntyre 2004, p. 77).

Moreover, according to such reports, the violence and disarray embodying the actions of child soldiers during conflict are said to be destined to continue in the war’s aftermath. Perceived to be lost in a cycle of unrelenting violence, irrationality and iniquity, children who have participated in armed conflict have generally been assumed to be permanently damaged: ‘fluent in the language of violence, but ignorant to the rudiments of living in a civil society … it’s often too late to salvage their lives’ (Newsweek 1995). ‘When they do return to civilian life, they are walking ghosts – damaged, uneducated pariahs’ (New York Times 2006).

Sensational media portrayals of child soldiers as dangerous and disorderly have also influenced the language and thought of policymakers. In a statement to the UN Security Council in January 1996,
Madeleine Albright, the US Ambassador to the UN, expressed outrage at the situation of child soldiers in Liberia who were ‘toting automatic weapons, slaughtering innocent civilians, and ignoring the rule of law’. Child soldiers, Albright said, ‘have no identity other than through the weapons they carry’ (cited in Cain 1999, p. 296). More recently in 2007, the French foreign minister, who was a keynote speaker at a conference on children and armed conflict, warned that child soldiers ‘are a time bomb that threatens stability and growth’ (BBC News 2007).

By portraying child soldiers as largely threatening and uncivilized, the bulk of international news reporting, and indeed much of academic and policy-oriented discourse, has tended to ‘pathologize’ children who have been caught up in armed conflict. The images of child soldiers have been used to convey the horror of childhood perverted from its ‘natural’ course of innocence, fragility and purity.

An example of a child soldier depicted by US authorities as potentially dangerous, pathological and threatening is Omar Khadr, a young Canadian currently being held in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Khadr has been held for the past 8 years for allegedly throwing a grenade that killed a US soldier in Afghanistan in 2002, when he was 15 years old. Khadr is the first child in US history to be tried for war crimes including murder, attempted murder, conspiring with Al Qaeda, providing material support for terrorism and spying on US military convoys in Afghanistan. Describing Khadr to the media in 2006, the former US chief military prosecutor Col. Morris Davis declared: ‘We’ll see evidence when we get into the courtroom of the smiling face Khadr as he builds bombs to kill Americans’ (Alberts 2006).

Similar threatening portrayals were given to Johnny and Luther Htoo, the (in)famous twins who in 2001, at the age of 12, were the leaders of a band of Karen rebels known as God’s Army against the government of Myanmar. The media referred to the pair as the ‘Terror twins’ (Newsweek 2000) and ‘Little lords of the jungle’ (Horn 2001) and photos were circulated globally of them smoking cigars – the epitome of dangerous youngsters whose age and pathology appeared to define them.

The hapless victim

In stark contrast to the construction of child soldiers as dangerous is their portrayal as hapless victims (Macmillan 2009; Rosen 2005;
Shepler 2005). Within this construction, children associated with fighting forces have been depicted as the pawns of deceitful yet powerful warlords, as well as broader undemocratic regimes and social forces. Such children are constructed as ‘traumatized children’, ‘permanently scarred’ (The Ottawa Citizen 1998), ‘lost young souls’ (The Los Angeles Times 1999), generally evoking deep compassion. Such imagery draws from some of our most fundamental and romanticized contemporary western conceptions of childhood and its association with innocence, vulnerability and the need for protection. Children are cast as wholly dependent, helpless and victimized – ultimately deserving of our sympathy.

Several authors have noted that representations of child soldiers as quintessential victims have been strategically propagated by some non-government organizations (NGOs) in order to capture world attention to the issue (McIntyre 2003; Rosen 2005). While not all NGOs propagate the image of child soldiers as victims, Machel (cited in McIntyre 2003) has nonetheless maintained that ‘in an effort to publicise a relief programme or organisation, or even make a political point, ex-child soldiers have been asked to pose with guns [and] … humanitarian organisations have been known to comply with requests from film makers and journalists to talk to … children with “more traumatic” stories’ (p. 9). Acting as visual indices of vulnerability and need that transcend culture and politics (Burman 1994), children’s innocent faces, particularly those offset by a menacing AK-47, demand responses. Positioned alone and out of place in a situation that is not of their making, child soldiers come to represent a compelling illustration of adult wrongdoing. As Brocklehurst (2006) notes: ‘particular images of children seem to symbolize or concretize at least the horror of a situation in the mind of the observer’ (p. 17).

Moreover, framed within the context of victimhood, the propagation of such imagery may, in some contexts, work to promote donor support for the issue, increase public outrage and response and, in the aftermath of war, facilitate child soldier demobilization, community acceptance, reintegration and even compensation, thus propelling some NGO agendas.

While such imagery may help to garner international attention and advocacy for child soldiers, it nonetheless has important implications. Burman (1994, p. 246) has named the imagery of children used in Third World emergencies as ‘the iconography of emergencies’, or ‘disaster
pornography’ – a term that describes the gruesome fascination with depicting and commercially benefiting from people’s suffering and degradation. Burman (1994) warns that while the imagery of children in Third World disasters may evoke sympathy, sympathy is a double-edged tool as ‘its evocation can threaten to be patronising and render recipients as “other”’ (p. 249). Children in such contexts become signifiers of distress and are dehumanized, as are their families and their cultures. They are rendered as passive objects of a western gaze that ‘seeks to confirm its own agency and omnipotence to ward off its own insecurities’ (Burman 1994, p. 238). Ultimately, such imagery maintains prevailing colonial and paternalistic relations.

The hero

The image of child soldiers as heroic figures is not particularly new. During the American Civil War, hundreds of boys who served as musicians and drummer boys in the Union and Confederate armies became associated with valour and heroism. Biographies and descriptions of young soldiers’ lives became staples in children’s literature. Newspapers, books and magazines featured stories and tales of drummer boys who were depicted as heroic adventurers (Marten 2004). Moreover, in many contexts around the world, children’s participation in war may bring unique social and cultural rewards of heroism through participation in a liberation struggle (Wessells 2006). Nonetheless, it is only quite recently that the portrayal of child soldiers as heroes has entered into western media discourses, often assigning celebrity status and even stardom to former child soldiers, particularly those living in the west. Unlike the Omar Khadrs of the world, these youth have been portrayed as brave survivors of extreme violence who have overcome great adversity and ultimately, despite their participation in violence, have been redeemed. An obvious example of this construction is the media’s early portrayal of author Ishmael Beah, whose memoir on his life as a child soldier in Sierra Leone gained him international attention. While Beah’s book has not been viewed as a simple, heroic tale, Beah’s journey in and out of armed violence was documented by some journalists as a heroic transformation from violence to redemption: ‘Once a drugged child soldier, Beah reclaims his soul’ (The San Francisco Chronicle 2007); ‘From child soldier to poster boy’ (The Independent 2007).
Symbolizing this powerful transformation, Beah was featured in *Playboy* magazine donning an Armani jacket and holding school books. Signifying his past, an AK-47 is seen on the floor in the background, jutting out of a camouflage bag. The media’s depiction of Beah and his constructed transformation from unknown African child soldier to global hero and fashion model is not entirely unique. There have been other examples of child soldiers who have captured the public’s attention and gained heroic stature as a result of their journeys out of wartime violence. A case in point is, Eritrean-born pop singer Senait Mehari whose story as a former child soldier is outlined in a 2004 autobiography entitled *Heart of Fire* (2006). Embodying her heroic passage from violence to civilian life and later to stardom, her book’s cover reads: ‘One girl’s extraordinary journey from child soldier to soul singer’. Luscombe (2007) wrote in *Time Magazine* that western society currently holds ‘a cultural sweet spot for the African child soldier’ and that ‘the kid-at-arms has become a pop-cultural trope of late. He’s in novels, movies, magazines and on TV, flaunting his Uzi like a giant foam hand at a baseball game.’

While youth such as Beah and Mehari have undoubtedly been instrumental in increasing public knowledge and awareness of the realities of child soldiers, there are inevitably implications to such portrayals. One former child soldier who is now living in the west has told me of his very conscious decision to avoid the media, despite constant solicitation for interviews, public appearances and offers of large amounts of money to feature his story in book form, as well as through film. For him, the western media’s seeming fascination with child soldiers, and especially the assigned hero status, brings forth profound discomfort and ambivalence. First, he does not want to be known solely and unidimensionally as a former child soldier. Perhaps most importantly for him, such celebrity comes at a price and with a heavy burden. How can he reconcile having committed horrible wartime atrocities and then is ultimately being rewarded, both implicitly and explicitly, with attention, status and celebrity as a result?

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5 To view this image go to www.playboy.com/style/fashion/bookjackets/ishmael-beah.html