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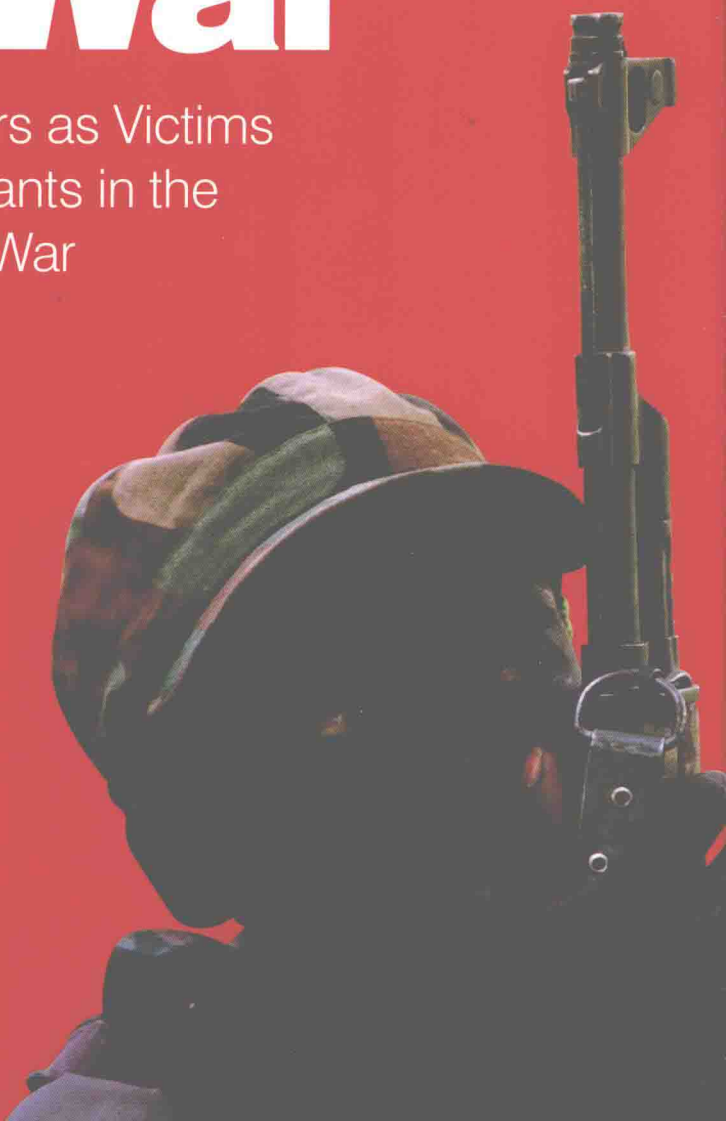
Children
of War

Child Soldiers as Victims
and Participants in the
Sudan Civil War

THE CHILDREN OF WAR

Child Soldiers as Victims and Participants
in the Sudan Civil War

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Figure 0.1   Map of Sudan[1]

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INTRODUCTION

'The military recruitment of children (under-18s) and their use in hostilities is a much larger phenomenon that still takes place in one form or another in at least 86 countries and territories worldwide.'[2]

'On the ground, the consensus would appear to be reflected most clearly by a decrease in the number of conflicts in which children are directly involved – from 27 in 2004 to 17 by the end of 2007 ... this downward trend is more the result of conflicts ending than the impact of initiatives to end child soldier recruitment and use.'[3]

The increased use of child soldiers has been marked as a new 'phenomenon' of modern warfare by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and bodies of contemporary literature. This rise has been particularly observed in Africa, where the increase of child soldiers has been attributed to both the shifting military landscape, notably small arms proliferation, and to the widespread poverty found in most African countries. Dire social conditions have been further compacted by the onset of AIDS, which has also shifted the demographic landscape by decreasing the able-bodied adult population.[4] Today nearly 50 percent of Africa's population is under the age of 18; this in turn leaves only a small pool of the population to be of legal recruiting age, while at the same time, a never ending supply of children to recruit.[5] Every conflict in Africa uses child soldiers to some degree; however, the severity of treatment and level of involvement differs between areas, conflicts and armed groups.[6] This book focuses on child soldiers by considering one specific fighting faction and conflict that has been recognised for its wide use of child

soldiers: the Sudan People's Liberation Army during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005).

Even if children are not involved in war as a child soldier, they are involved as a junior citizen and could be even more vulnerable. The acceptance of children as a part of war brings up the issue of their lacking a role in political involvement and peace resolution. These preliminary questions below serve as themes to this book and it is not my intention to answer them directly; however, I hope to offer suggestions as to how they may be approached and inform necessary academic debate on these issues.

- If child soldiering is an accepted/normal part of African warfare then why do some children risk their lives to avoid military participation?
- If there is no element of coercion to conscription, then why do some children choose to enlist in armed forces?
- Can the use of child soldiers be seen as a positive individual political step of involvement (an imperfect beginning perhaps?), or is the use of child soldiers negative however you look at it?

The debate over child rights on an international level began in 1924 with the Declaration of the Rights of the Child by the League of Nations.[7] While the contested use of children in warfare bubbled beneath the surface through the twentieth century, an international agreement on the issue was not reached until 1990. The United Nations' (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), put into force in 1990, ruled that 'State parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities'.[8] This has since entered into law with the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), put into force in 2002, stating that 'Conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into the national armed forces or using them to participate actively in hostilities' is a war crime.[9] The age of conscription was later raised from 15 to 18 with the 'Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict' ratified in 2000 and entered into force in 2002.[10] Today Sudan is counted amongst the signatories of the

Optional Protocol, having ratified it in 2005 – some six months after the end of its Second Civil War.[11]

Much of the debate surrounding the issue of child soldiers focuses on the age of conscription, which has put into question the lines that are drawn for what constitutes an adult or child. It is argued that since the boundaries to age groups are formed on a cultural basis rather than scientific, the limit of 18 years of age outlined by the UN is from a Western perspective. In order to test the validity of such standards put forward by the UN and international organisations that are determined to stamp out the 'problem' of child soldiers, further research and informed debate is essential.

Child Soldiers

The humanitarian community has defined a child soldier as one involved in conflict under the age of 18.[12] Children have participated in many of Africa's civil wars, including those of Mozambique, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda to name a few.[13] Although child participation in conflicts is not restricted to Africa, it is seen as an area of the world that holds a higher risk for the continuing and possible increased use of child soldiers.[14]

A debate within the issue of child soldiers is the claim that there has been an increased use since roughly the end of the Cold War.[15] In considering the difficulty of proving such a claim, many authors have opted for more generic language, such as the 'increased awareness' of child soldiers. One observation of historical importance is that child soldiers have always been present in conflict; therefore they fail to be a new 'symptom' of contemporary wars.[16] Another pre-existing condition to consider is that children participate militarily not only in times of war but also in times of peace.[17]

It is suggested that lightweight weapons are the cause of the increased use of child soldiers.[18] Furthering this debate it is claimed that small arms are partly to blame for the increased use of child soldiers and that the design of the automatic weapons of modern warfare facilitate use by children.[19] In support of this argument is

the observation that weapons have reduced in weight and size, and therefore have become more utilisable by children. Rosen, a leading academic on child soldiers, quickly dismantles the suggestion that weapons have been a main contributor and draws on many historical examples to conclude that there is no direct link.[20] As it is claimed that the changes in arms have not contributed to a greater degree of child participation in conflict, one consideration is that many of the killings in the Sierra Leone conflict were done with common objects such as machetes.[21] The issue of small arms proliferation does not necessarily incorporate the issue of child soldiers;[22] however, some support the idea that small arms are contributing to the increased use of child soldiers in Africa.[23]

Another motivation identified as causing the participation of child soldiers is self-protection.[24] Children find themselves in a position where remaining as an unarmed civilian would be more dangerous than joining an armed faction.[25] Within these predicaments it is difficult to quantify a child's free will of choice. In analysing the motivations for participation it is necessary to consider practical motivations, such as safety and food, as well as personal motivations, such as political beliefs. One child soldier could have many possible motivations for becoming militarily involved. There are economic reasons, as well as reasons regarding personal safety, as to why children have chosen to join the military.[26] The military serves as a way to access resources and of securing personal safety from rebel groups or government forces.

It is important to look at the transitional elements that created the context for war. Specifically, the need to look at the conditions in which children were living prior to the outbreak of conflict. Violence prior to a conflict includes such things as slavery, human rights abuses, discrimination, and exploitation. It could be argued that the international community ignores the exploitation and political violence that children existed in before a conflict.[27]

Evidence that children have historically participated in conflict in many capacities contradicts the assertion that child soldiers are a new 'phenomenon'.[28] The historical account of children's participation in war is not meant to justify their participation in modern-day warfare.

In generalising historic examples, this could result in ignoring the possibility that although there can be found historic examples of child soldiers, the extent of the participation might be considerably more in modern conflicts.

The conceptualisation of the 'child soldier' across cultures and through time must also be explored and at times the occupational and honourable status that being a child soldier has had.[29] The attention the issue of child soldiering has received over the last decade may be due to a change in Western perspective rather than an increase in children's participation. The boundaries and perceptions of childhood are altered in times of conflict.[30] In demonstrating how modern conceptualisations of childhood have mythologised the past role of children in conflict, this may also overshadow any differences between the military roles children have played in conflicts over the last 300 years and those of the last two decades.

Regarding the simplification of the issue of child soldiers and the international-law perspective, Duffield notes that the Declaration of the Rights of the Child allows humanitarian groups to civilise the South by passing judgement on how a country treats its children.[31] The issue of taking away children's rights is not limited to the child soldier nor contained within the declaration of war.

An aspect of the international law perspective that is challenged by academic debate is that emphasising a child's weak position actually encourages them being targeted. As in the case of Sudan, children were presented as innocent bystanders used for liberal peace agendas.[32] Although children were used for political rationales, their political agency was not brought into the liberal debate.

In tracing the history of the image of the child, it was through the Middle Ages that children were breaking away from adults, becoming their own category. The perception of the child has continued to change and it is not always the case that the humanitarian community acknowledges or considers this fact in their policies. Criticism has focused on the humanitarian community for not possessing self-awareness regarding the historical roots of the modern day construction of the child and the concepts involved with childhood.[33]

Humanitarian agendas are ignoring the historical continuum of the soldier and the role of the child in conflict.[34] Traditionally there has been an element of heroism and bravery associated with defending oneself or one's family in armed conflict. It is thought that the way modern conflict is conceptualised juxtaposes the traditional image by criminalising those involved with military life.[35]

It is not that modern warfare has changed per se but rather the international political environment that has shaped conflict in the developing world, as well as its interpretation.[36] An observation is that there has been a change in the international community's attitude towards liberation movements and a move towards portraying them as full of apolitical bandits who abuse children.[37] There is a need for awareness of the political lens in measuring the characteristics of warfare.

Contrary to the humanitarian dichotomy of military membership, there exists a wide range of participation in a conflict. Attention is called to the attempt made by humanitarian groups to reduce the complexities of the child soldier down to a Westernised infant-like version. It is therefore dissatisfying how the humanitarian community describes children as incapable of critical thinking and at the same time places them far removed from a normal life experienced by ordinary soldiers.[38] Accepting the infant-like description of children thus removes credibility from any political decisions a child makes. Humanitarian-inspired theory ignores the fact that to create the image of the 'child' automatically creates a juxtaposed image of the 'adult'. These two categories thus exclude any overlapping characteristics, while at the same time separating children and adults as opposites in assuming that what the child is the adult is not, or what the child lacks the adult does not.[39] Not enough credit is given to the rational choices executed by children and their ability to weigh consequences versus benefits.

The debate also entails questioning the motivations and incentives of the humanitarian groups involved with child soldiers. Considering the lack of empirical evidence humanitarian theory uses for its claims, Rosen finds it worth questioning the context and environment in which these groups are making their claims. The issue of child soldiers has become a new 'phenomenon' only in part to their rise in conflict

participation.[40] Humanitarian groups are enmeshed in the political realm and their policies cannot escape this reality.[41] Humanitarian groups' core beliefs are drawn from a set period of time and culture's values. Once this has been realised and considered, one can begin to problematise the universalism of human rights as an agreed body of norms.

CHAPTER ONE

SUDAN CONFLICT HISTORY

It is important to summarise the extensive conflict history of Southern Sudan from its independence in 1956 to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 in order to present a backdrop and context to the former child soldiers' testimonies.

South Sudan refers to the area covered by the country's three most southern regions: Bahr el-Ghazal, Equatoria, and Upper Nile (*see figure 0.1*). While the boundaries of these territories have changed over the course of the last 50 years since independence, the area known as Southern Sudan has remained constant for hundreds of years.

As one travels south up the Nile River, it splits into two main sources: the White Nile and the Blue Nile. The Blue Nile heads east to Ethiopia, whilst the White Nile travels south to the Ugandan border. South of Malakal there is an area along the Blue Nile known as *the Sudd*,[42] swamp-like conditions that were only penetrated by Western explorers in the 19th century.[43] These conditions made for one of the most isolated regions in the world, even from other parts of Sudan.

The original formation of the Northern and Southern territories of Sudan can be viewed as a convergence of two regional areas: the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. This offers some insight into the 'Arab vs. African' dichotomy often cited today – indeed even in the meaning of the medieval Islamic name, *Bilad al-Sudan*, or 'land of the blacks'.[44] Such divisions were further accentuated by dissimilarities in colonisation between North and South. While Britain maintained arbitrary control over the whole country, the management of the North fell

under the control of the Egyptians. The South was treated as a separate region, detached from the rest of Sudan as a result of 'closed door' policies, which barred northern Sudanese from entering or working in the South. The British colonial administration discouraged the spread of Islam, the practice of Arab customs, and the wearing of Arab dress, while making efforts to revitalise African customs and tribal life that the slave trade had disrupted. As far as the British were concerned the region and its people were distinct from the North and the region was to be prepared for eventual integration with British East Africa.[45] This uneven pattern of colonisation, and the policies adopted by the colonisers, manifests today by divisions along lines of 'colonial' religions and languages.

Beyond demography, natural resources are also a key distinction between the two regions, and one that is becoming increasingly important. Much of the Northern Sudan Government's revenue is derived from oil money; however, 85 percent of Sudan's oil is taken from the South. While many commentators attempt to explain Sudan's conflict on ethnic lines, the economic arguments cannot be overlooked.

The divisions used to define the Northern and Southern regions are manifold, based on religion, culture, history, lineage, geographical characteristics, and language. However, to construe the South as a homogeneous entity, would be incorrect. One quarter of Sudan's population inhabit the Southern territories, and it contains over a hundred different ethnic groups and the majority of the 114 languages spoken in Sudan.[46] While the main religion is Christianity (in contrast to Islam in the North), there are also numerous indigenous religions.[47]

According to authors such as Jok, the government of Sudan had an agenda of genocidal proportions in its conflict with the South.[48] Speculation as to the North's desire to culturally eliminate or convert the South has been supported by the manifestation of their polices, such as the targeting of the family unit.

In moving towards independence many promises were made to the South in an effort to gain its support. In 1946, in a reversal of its previous policy, the British colonial authority decided to integrate North

and South Sudan under one government with a common administrative authority situated in the North.

There followed the implementation of 'Sudanisation'; however this was a Northern-driven process of homogenisation.[49] Its purpose was to create unity but this unity was soon argued to be one based on Islamisation and Arabisation.[50]

Independence was declared on the 1 January 1956. At independence, the South faced not only losing the realisation of their own vision of political power within their territory, but also faced surrendering to the North's vision of Arab and Islamic domination.[51]

For Southerners, Sudanese independence did not fulfil their expectations and instead only supported fears of Northern dominance.[52] With widespread discontent in the Southern provinces, the First Civil War is believed to have begun in response to actions taken by the Northern government, namely their rejection of federalism for the South as well as their overall lack of political involvement.

Signed in February 1972, the Addis Ababa Agreement allowed for the Southern region to commence self-government and ended 17 years of conflict. This period of peace could also be considered a time of suspended conflict, as most of the agreements reached were not upheld.[53]

The South, as a united territory under the Addis Ababa Agreement, would be more capable of having a united political voice, posing a greater balance of power for the government in Khartoum. Such advantages for the South were seen in the North as threats to the status quo.[54]

President Numeiry also faced internal pressure from those groups that supported the implementation of Shari'a law throughout the country.[55] Where the Addis Ababa Agreement assured the South religious freedom, this would be undermined if Shari'a were imposed.

Further tensions emerged with the discovery of oil in the Southern region in 1976, four years after the Addis Ababa Agreement was signed. The Southern government was not involved with the decisions concerning oil exploration and was left out of the negotiations with the international oil companies, Chevron and Total.[56] Numeiry's power to control the economic benefits of the production of oil in the South, and therefore in