

# Are They Soldiers? Or Are They Children? Preparing the Canadian Military for the Contemporary Security Environment

—Part One of Two



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CDAI GRADUATE STUDENT SYMPOSIUM

Over the past few decades there has been a fundamental redefinition of major power relations and the global security environment. This transformation in the international system, characterized by the rise of asymmetric conflict and powerful non-state actors, has produced an ongoing discourse on the need to reconceptualise Canadian

To many military personnel, child soldiers exist in an anomalous category somewhere between lethal combatant and innocent youth. Consequently, child soldiers pose unique dilemmas for CAF personnel, with which they should be familiarized during training and through mental health initiatives. Ultimately, this research project is intended to shed light on



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security and defence. The political, social, economic and technical transformation of the international security environment has enabled adversarial groups, like terrorist organizations and rebel factions, to inflict damage on even the strongest opponents through asymmetric techniques. Of these tactics, the use of children as soldiers has created pressing security and mental health related concerns for professional Western militaries like the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

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some of the issues that arise when CAF personnel encounter child soldiers, and to analyse current CAF training and mental health resources with regards to these interactions. Due to the fact that the focus of this research is on confrontations between professional forces and child soldiers, many other important issues related to children in conflict—like recruiting child soldiers; legal issues; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs; and the detention of child soldiers —will not be examined in this article.

To date, there is an overabundance of documentation detailing specific aspects of the issue of child soldiers, like why and how they enter armed groups as well as the roles they perform in conflict; however, there is almost no information available that focuses on the Canadian military personnel who

face children in combat, nor how they should prepare for or handle the psychological ramifications of such interactions.<sup>1</sup> However, there have been studies conducted in the United States, like those undertaken by the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO), as well as in the United Kingdom from which one can draw inferences regarding this topic.

Currently, information in Canada concerning child soldiers is lacking simply because the data is not available; the Government of Canada has not conducted any publically available inquiries on the topic. Given that there is a large gap in knowledge on this subject, this research project becomes of seminal importance. However, it was announced at a presentation at the 4th Canadian Division Headquarters on 25 April, 2016 that the Canadian Army will soon be publishing a “doctrine note” entitled “Child Soldiers and Vulnerable Populations” to instruct members of the Canadian Army in the nuances of dealing with Child Soldiers and protecting at risk groups.<sup>2</sup> This evidences the seriousness with which this subject is being considered. In the meantime, this paper is intended to help moderate the current information gap and to promote further discussion on the topic among security and defence experts, scholars, and mental health practitioners. Furthermore, the findings could be shared with the CAF in order to facilitate the institutionalization of training and post-conflict care for military personnel with regards to encounters with child soldiers.

### **Children Who Soldier**

Throughout history, children have been involved in armed conflict on almost every continent. For instance, during the nineteenth century the British Army recruited youth for their Gurkha regiments in Nepal, and in East Africa indigenous groups like the Maasai frequently inducted adolescents as warriors.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in the West, children fought in both the Union and Confederate armies during the American Civil War.<sup>4</sup> Mark Drumbl, professor of law and director of the Transnational Law Institute at Washington and Lee University, has illustrated that children performed a variety of roles during these conflicts including “fighting as soldiers; maintaining morale as drummer boys; cooking, portering, and sustaining garrison life; and serving as a defence of last resort.”<sup>5</sup>

The participation of children in conflict continued to expand throughout the twentieth century. This is partly a consequence of the development of modern weapons that are both deadly efficient and easy to operate, like the 1947 *Avtomat Kalashnikova*,<sup>6</sup> or (AK47), when compared to preceding weapons systems, such as black powder muskets. This period of technological development also coincides with the emergence of Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW), as discussed in more detail later in this paper alongside its successor, Fifth Generation Warfare (5GW). Moreover, it is important to note that the use of child soldiers has not solely been confined to Eastern nations. During the rise of the Third Reich from 1933 to 1945,

children between the ages of 10 and 13 were strong-armed into joining socialist youth groups like the *Hitlerjugend*, or Hitler Youth, to consolidate Nazi identity in young Germans.<sup>7</sup> Many of these children were later drafted into the German Army, often only at 16 years of age, and sometimes younger, to fight against Allied forces in the Second World War.

Despite the recent emphasis on developing more comprehensive international humanitarian and human rights laws, the practice of child soldiering continues to be pervasive. It has frequently been cited that roughly 250,000 to 300,000 children across the globe are associated with armed forces or armed groups.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, scholars have maintained that children have been involved in armed struggle in roughly 75 percent of global conflict.<sup>9</sup> Although these numbers have become embedded in public discourse, they are subject to a degree of contestation as the actual number of child soldiers is rather difficult to ascertain. This is due to a variety of reasons including, but not limited to: the concealment of the age of child soldiers by commanders or by the children themselves; that children may be present in remote regions or may perform low-visibility roles; and that regional borders where child soldiers are most prevalent can be quite porous—like some regions in Africa and the Middle East—which can cause child soldiering to become a cross-border issue and thus less easily quantifiable.<sup>10</sup> Taken as a whole, the number of child soldiers has likely declined since the turn of the century, however the practice remains endemic.<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, in the past decade the definition of child soldiers has expanded to encompass the multidimensional aspects of child soldiering. As described in the 2007 United Nations accepted Paris Principles, which provide guidelines for interactions with children in conflict, child soldiers are “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.”<sup>12</sup> From this, it is evident that children who participate in contemporary conflicts through volunteerism, coercion, or abduction have become integral components of warring parties including a number of government forces, rebel groups, and terrorist organizations. The recruitment of child soldiers by terrorist groups is not a new phenomenon, however it does pose a particular concern to Western professional forces. Many terrorist organizations exploited children to achieve their objectives; al-Qaeda has released training videos depicting young boys setting explosives and manufacturing bombs, Palestinian Islamic *Jihad* and *Hamas* have used children as young as 13 as suicide bombers, children are estimated to comprise 40 percent of the ranks of Boko Haram, and hundreds of youth who support the Taliban have been arrested in Afghanistan by the Afghan Northern Alliance forces.<sup>13</sup> However, of pressing concern are recent reports the United Nations have received pertaining to the

creation of an Islamic State youth division called ‘*Fityan Al Islam*,’ or ‘Boys of Islam.’<sup>14</sup>

Recently, the United States announced that the Islamic State (IS) has been relying more heavily on the asymmetric value of child soldiers to reinforce their military capabilities<sup>15</sup> and to secure the continuation of the ‘caliphate.’ This worrisome issue has been well-examined in a recent report prepared by The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative and the Quilliam Foundation of the United Kingdom.<sup>16</sup> In this report, the authors note that the “the largest amount of Islamic State media featuring children relates to violence, comprising either of children directly participating in violence, or being exposed and normalised to violence.”<sup>17</sup> This notion is consistent with propaganda footage the IS has posted online, particularly images depicting the brutal training of child soldiers, youth in combat and acting as suicide bombers, and of children participating in public executions—either as spectators or as those conducting the executions.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the future of children born and raised in the Islamic state is grim and poses an urgent problem not only for Western professional forces, but for the international community at large. These children are more committed to radical ideologies and, as such, are viewed as more lethal fighters than the current generation of fighters. Therefore, children in the IS are not only being used as instruments for propaganda purposes, but also as a means of ensuring the generational continuance of the IS.<sup>19</sup> According to the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, by indoctrinating children in extremist views and normalising them to violence, the IS prioritizes “children as a vehicle for ensuring long-term loyalty, adherence to their ideology and a cadre of devoted fighters that will see violence as a way of life.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Child Soldiers and the Global Security Environment**

One can characterize the security challenges of the twenty-first century, particularly the issues arising from the use of child soldiers by terrorist groups, by using the notion of asymmetry. Asymmetry depicts a manner of conflict, in which a weaker opponent uses a stronger adversary’s vulnerabilities to achieve a temporary or lasting advantage. An article in the *Marine Corps Gazette*, by American military researcher Bill Lind, “The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation,” broached the idea that asymmetry would become the commonplace form of war in 1989. He called this evolution of conflict Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW). According to Lind the focus of 4GW was attacking populations as opposed to militaries, the former being much weaker and vulnerable to non-state actors. Resultantly, 4GW adversaries would focus more on a population’s support for the war and their social-cultural composition than conventional means of war. Furthermore, the difference between activities of war and activities of peace would become blurred, along with that the distinctions between civilian and military participation.<sup>21</sup> The 1996 Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict—otherwise

known as the Machel Report—expressed a similar sentiment in its evaluation of conflict related fatalities, noting that “[i]n recent decades, the proportion of war victims who are civilians has leaped dramatically from 5 percent to over 90 percent.”<sup>22</sup>

Since then, a former United States Marine Corps Colonel, T.X. Hammes argued that the environment of conflict had further changed and Fifth Generation Warfare (5GW) had emerged. In this conceptual approach Hammes argued that continuing political, economic, social, and technical transformation had permitted smaller groups and even individuals to inflict damage on the strongest opponents through technically enabled asymmetric techniques.<sup>23</sup> In line with these ideas, during the early 1990s futurists Alvin and Heidi Toffler outlined the concept of “niche war,” which reflected the burgeoning era of information technology and specialized production means. The Tofflers opined that responses to “niche threats” could be met in an analogous fashion to how industry was changing to deal with small and precise consumer demands—with specifically designed and “on order” production. It was a prediction that argued for agile security forces scaled and constructed to address the needs of varied threats, which ranged across a spectrum of conflict.<sup>24</sup> The Tofflers viewed niche warfare as: “...someday waged not only by governments but international agencies like the UN [United Nations] itself—even perhaps by non-national players on the global stage, from transnational corporations covertly employing mercenaries to fanatic religious movements.”<sup>25</sup> Consequently, there are numerous current security challenges, like those posed by terrorist groups and their use of child soldiers, that have proven at times difficult to discern, define and neutralize. In this atmosphere, countries have domestic and international responsibilities, to anticipate and deal with the negative influences in ever-changing regional and global settings.

The current security environment is fraught with numerous crises afflicting various important regions in the world, however terrorism remains a primary focal point for Canadian security and defence policy.<sup>26</sup> In the Middle East, the Islamic State (IS) continues to pose a threat to the international community and their respective forces through its asymmetric tactics, like exploiting children to achieve its objectives. Arguably, the IS recruits children for their unique physical attributes, which enables them to be both ruthless combatants and creates unique moral challenges for Western forces, who are often reluctant to fire on children.<sup>27</sup> To ensure that Canadian soldiers can effectively counter the potential threats posed by encounters with child combatants, it becomes necessary to incorporate the topic of child soldiers into standard training exercises and mental health services. In the ever-changing security environment of the twenty-first century, countries have the responsibility to anticipate and deal with niche threats posed by groups and individuals, like child soldiers, along with other crises and conflicts. Thusly, military capabilities and forces must be balanced in order to

counter a broad range of threats and requirements, from conventional to asymmetric warfare, in addition to non-combat operations like humanitarian relief and the gamut of peace and stability missions.

### Threat Perceptions of Western Forces

As modern warfare continues to blur the lines between combatants and civilians, professional soldiers increasingly encounter child soldiers in regions afflicted by conflict. Moreover, child soldiers pose unique challenges to professional military forces, like the CAF. Peter Singer, a political scientist and scholar of international relations, highlights some of the reasons why children are so distinct from their adult soldier counterparts in his article “Western Militaries Confront Child Soldiers Threat.”<sup>28</sup> Singer maintains that: 1) where children are involved, conflicts are usually protracted with extensive casualties, 2) child soldiers do not respect the laws of war or follow any codified rules of engagement, and 3) children are effective combatants who operate with a frightening degree of audacity that is often not displayed by adults.<sup>29</sup> Resultantly, child soldiering creates tangible security threats that must be considered in both policy and military strategy.

The use of child soldiers is inherently linked to the severity of conflict; research has found that when child soldiers are present, conflicts are typically more difficult to end and involve a greater number of fatalities.<sup>30</sup> In part, this is because armed forces or armed groups that utilize child soldiers normally do not respect the laws of war, engaging in widespread atrocities and massive violations of human rights.<sup>31</sup> Child soldiers have been known not only to kill civilians and prisoners, but also their own wounded.<sup>32</sup> These brutalities tend to fuel grievances and acts of retaliation between warring parties, thereby making peace seem more unattainable. Furthermore, child soldiers who grow up inculcated in violence and become experienced fighters are likely to continue the cycle of violence by inducting new children into the hostilities.

In the past few decades, a wealth of literature has emerged which demonstrates that children can be effective combatants, especially when motivated by religious and political ideologies or when under the influence of narcotics.<sup>33</sup> Child soldiers are often skilled and experienced fighters, normally more willing to engage in extremes of violence with little provocation than adult soldiers, thus making them an unpredictable force.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the use of child soldiers in combat holds some distinct strategic advantages, particularly when fighting in urban environments. This includes the fact that their small size allows easy concealment, and also that due to them being children, they have been known to slow the progress of professional forces who are in doubt as to whether they should engage them.<sup>35</sup> Ultimately, these children are lethal combatants who should not be underestimated; a weapon in the hands of a child is just as effective as a weapon used by an adult. This is evidenced by countless observations during recent military operations. For instance, in January

2002, Sergeant Nathan Chapman became the first American service member to be killed in the War on Terror.<sup>36</sup> The highly skilled special forces soldier was shot by a young Afghan boy, aged 14. Moreover, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces, including Canadian military personnel, continued to report encounters with child soldiers throughout the Afghanistan campaign. During a foot patrol conducted by Afghan and Canadian troops in 2008 in the *Zhari* district of *Kandahar* province, for example, were attacked by a suicide bomber described as a young boy of roughly 10 to 11 years of age. The incident wounded all four soldiers in the immediate vicinity—one of whom later succumbed to their injuries while being treated at *Kandahar Airfield*.<sup>37</sup>

To professional forces, like the CAF, an armed child is a dangerous combatant and must be dealt with accordingly. In spite of this adversarial mentality, members of armed forces who encounter children in combat will be vulnerable to psychological trauma, which can stem from a sort of moral Catch-22. Child soldiers are both soldiers and children with the latter to be protected and the former to be fought. Resulting from this, and as explored in the next section, encounters with child soldiers present a unique threat to professional soldiers by posing moral and psychological dilemmas resulting from the conflicting realms of duty and culture.

### Child Soldiers Pose a Moral Dilemma

Ferry de Kerckhove, a former Canadian diplomat and current Executive Vice-President of the Conference of Defence Associations (CDA) Institute, eloquently stated that Canadian military engagements abroad “have rested upon a clear sense of the values we wish to uphold, in fighting oppression, extremism, authoritarianism, and exclusion.”<sup>38</sup> These values have been engrained into the moral professionalism of the CAF, both at the institutional and individual levels. However, these values are challenged when CAF personnel encounter child soldiers who can be viewed as both threatening and non-threatening, as perpetrators of violence and innocent victims.<sup>39</sup> The dichotomy between these two perceptions casts doubt over how children in conflict should be treated by professional soldiers, often manifesting in these soldiers as an intense moral dilemma. Moral dilemmas are essentially internalized conflicts; they occur when individuals have to choose between two actions, and there are morally valid reasons attached to each of them.<sup>40</sup>

In Western societies, “childhood” and “adulthood” stand in contrast to one another, with childhood typifying characteristics such as innocence, vulnerability, and dependency upon adults.<sup>41</sup> Unlike the majority of nations in which child soldiers are present, Western children are generally considered adults only when they turn 18 years old.<sup>42</sup> This cultural perspective of children directly translates into how child soldiers are perceived by Western professional forces. Rooted in this is the imagery that child soldiers constitute a “nonresponsible” threat. In line with the thoughts of philoso-

pher Jeff McMahan, a nonresponsible threat is a person who harms another but who's actions are "wholly nonvoluntary."<sup>43</sup> Even though child soldiers enter into conflict in a variety of ways, including volunteering or through force and coercion, the cultural notion that children are not to blame for their actions does have an impact on the psychological background of the military forces who face child soldiers.<sup>44</sup> Attributable to this, using violence against child soldiers—even as a means of self-defence—creates a moral dilemma as it goes against the ethical grounding of Western soldiers.

In a similar vein, Western professional forces tend to assume that a normal combat situation is between two clearly recognizable and rational, adult belligerents. In other words, children are not considered proper military combatants. This has the effect of situating the classification of child soldiers as a group outside the periphery of the usual manner in which professional soldiers define enemies.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, this makes it difficult for Western forces to recognize and accept the demoralizing reality that children can be protagonists in combat situations.<sup>46</sup> In turn, this reluctance to acknowledge child soldiers as a potentially lethal enemy can cause professional forces to hesitate in combat, thereby giving children a greater advantage—particularly if they have been taught to shoot first.<sup>47</sup> Taken as a whole, the use of child soldiers can be perceived as a tactical asymmetric innovation designed to attack the psyche of professional soldiers and disrupt cognitive processes.<sup>48</sup>

The consequences of this hesitation to engage with children in combat has been evidenced on numerous occasions, but perhaps most notably during the events which lead up to Operation BARRAS. In 2000, a twelve-man patrol from the British Royal Irish Regiment, was captured by a rebel group composed mainly of children known as the 'West Side Boys.'<sup>49</sup> It has been argued that the soldiers had been captured after "their squad commander had been unwilling to fire on children armed with [AK47's]."<sup>50</sup> The rescue, known as Operation BARRAS, was launched by the Special Air Service (SAS) and concluded in the recovery the captured British soldiers, and the deaths of at least 25 rebels as well as one SAS soldier. Although the operation was largely considered a success, it demonstrates that "professional soldiers must be prepared to use lethal force in order to defend themselves from child soldiers, who no longer constitute merely a peripheral crisis."<sup>51</sup> ❖

**To be concluded in our February 2017 issue.**

**The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute or its members.**

#### NOTES

1 Importantly, the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative has published material which focuses on the impact of encounters with child soldiers on troop resilience and effectiveness, tools for harm prevention and reduction and training gaps and opportunities. This research is

incredibly valuable and unique, creating a strong starting point for facilitating discussion on the topic.

2 Canada, Department of National Defence, Canadian Army Training and Doctrine Command, "Army Doctrine Centre Update and Performance Review," a presentation given at 4th Canadian Division Headquarters, Toronto, Ontario on 25 April 2016, slide 20.

3 Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State* (London, UK: Quilliam Foundation, March 2016), p. 21

4 Mark. A. Drumbl, *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 28.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

6 Russian for *Kalashnikov's Automatic Rifle*, named after its inventor Mikhail Kalashnikov.

7 See Michael Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

8 "Canadian Dept of National Defence: Proposed amendment to the National Defence Act to reflect commitment to the new UN Protocol on child soldiers." *M2 Presswire*, 22 Mar 2000, p.1; and Mark. A. Drumbl, *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 26.

9 Lieutenant Colonel Judith A. Hughes, "Child Soldiers: Are US Military Members Prepared to Deal with the Threat?" *Air and Space Power Journal* (March 2008).

10 Mark. A. Drumbl, *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 26.

11 Child Soldiers International, *Louder than Words: An Agenda for Action to End State Use of Child Soldiers* (London, UK: Child Soldiers International, 2012), p. 15.

12 The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (February 2007), principle 2.1.

13 Peter W. Singer, "Western militaries confront child soldiers threat," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (January 2005): p. 4; Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State* (London, UK: Quilliam Foundation, March 2016), p. 22; Shelly Whitman, "Coming face-to-face with a child soldier," last modified 21 October 2015, accessed 20 April 2016, <https://www.opencanada.org/features/coming-face-face-child-soldier/>; and Mark. A. Drumbl, *Reimagining Child Soldiers in International Law and Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 31.14 Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State* (London, UK: Quilliam Foundation, March 2016), p. 22.

15 "Desertions prompting IS to rely on child soldiers: Washington," last modified March 14, 2016, accessed 24 March 2016. [http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Desertions\\_prompting\\_IS\\_to\\_rely\\_on\\_child\\_soldiers\\_Washington\\_999.html](http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Desertions_prompting_IS_to_rely_on_child_soldiers_Washington_999.html).

16 See Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State* (London, UK: Quilliam Foundation, March 2016).

17 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

18 Logan, Nick. "New ISIS video shows training of child soldiers in Iraq." *Global News*, 25 November 2014. Accessed 16 April 2016. <http://globalnews.ca/news/1689987/new-isis-video-shows-training-child-soldiers-in-iraq/>; and Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State* (London, UK: Quilliam Foundation, March 2016), p. 8.

19 Noman Benotman and Nikita Malik, *The Children of Islamic State* (London, UK: Quilliam Foundation, March 2016), p. 8 and 14.

20 United Nations, "Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria," *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* (November 2014): p. 10.

21 See William S. Lind, *et al*, "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation," *Marine Corps Gazette* 73, no. 10 (October 1989): 22-26.

22 United Nations General Assembly. *Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children: Impact of armed conflict on children*. Report of the expert of the Secretary-General, Ms. Grac'a Machel. 26 August 1996. Document A/51/306.

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