

Children in Terrorism¹

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Abstract

Recently, the world watched in horror as an armed group of young children belonging to Islamic terrorist organizations, dressed in combat gear, marched through the streets of Beirut, chanting their willingness to die for their leader or god². The role of children in various armed conflicts dates back a long time. In the XXth century the child soldiers were known as members of the Hitlerjugend organization. However, in addition to the Germans, the British and the Americans, also used minors for violent actions. Nowadays, the topic, though, has been revived by the Islamic State terrorist organization. The highest child mortality rate was reported in Aleppo, where more than 2,000 children died as a result of the attack. There are many examples in history of the involvement of child soldiers, still, by 1990, this problem had been pushed into the background. The change is largely due to a study by a Mozambican politician Graça Machel, who, at the request of the then UN Secretary-General, developed his work "Impact of armed conflict on children"³. He pointed out that children and women could be future targets for various extremist movements. Several EU Member States have confirmed that the number of their nationals, especially women and children, increased in various camps and prisons in March 2019 in north-eastern Syria⁴. There are currently ten countries where the children's participation in or joining the struggle is a common practice. These countries are: Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Congo, Iraq, Somalia, Yemen, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria⁵. In the present study, the author focuses on the participation of children in violent groups.

Keywords: children, armed conflict, victim, terrorist organization

¹ The study was prepared with the professional support of the New National Excellence Program of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology, code number ÚNKP-20-4-I-PTE-580, financed by the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund.

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² M. Nagy, *Női terrorizmus. PhD disszertáció (Female terrorism. PhD dissertation)*, 2020, Pécs, p. 46.

³ C.E. Gál, *Elrabolt ártatlanság – az Iszlám Állam gyerekkatonái [Innocence Stolen – The Child Soldiers of the Islamic State]*, Magyar Rendészet 5/2018, p. 93.

⁴ European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report (TE-SAT) 2020, European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation 2020, p. 48, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2020> [accessed on 30 August 2020].

⁵ <https://theirworld.org/news/10-countries-where-child-soldiers-are-still-recruited-in-armed-conflicts> [accessed on 28 October 2020].

I. Introduction

The armed conflicts of today show much higher figures on civilians becoming victims in comparison with previous centuries events. In World War I, 20 civilian casualties resulted, while in the 1990s, 90% of civilian casualties resulted⁶. As a consequence, children are also increased victims of such conflicts. Even if they are not “directly” affected by the negative consequences of the clash, the effects of “indirect” factors occur. Among other things, I mention hunger, malnutrition, inadequate health care, epidemics⁷ and, consequently, vulnerability to extremist movements and thus the emergence and performance of child military missions.

For the most of us, *war* and *children* and the combined use of these terms are unthinkable. Unfortunately, this is not, by any means, a new phenomenon, with many historical antecedents, using children in armed conflicts continuing to be used a proven trend for various extremist movements⁸. This seems to be confirmed, as until then, groups with no previously usage of children on the front, had adopted this approach in new and never-before-seen ways⁹. Children's participation is very often coercive, still increasingly voluntarily. There are still extremely high numbers of young people in the armed conflicts taking place today, according to a 2016 estimation, their number reaches 300,000, 40% of whom are girls¹⁰. Research shows that the participation of minors is most prevalent where opposing parties wage war breaching internationally accepted norms of warfare and consistently ignoring *ius in bellum*¹¹. My main characters are children who fight in adult battles, children who fight for the purposes of adults¹², children who – as a child soldiers – rob their childhood¹³.

II. Defining the Concept of *Child*

For many centuries, children were not allowed to participate in various legal transactions as legal subjects, due to the fact that the minor was considered the property of the father¹⁴. There was no sensitivity to the newborns either, the number of child mortality was very high in the Middle Ages, so the parents showed a kind of distancing from them. The little ones were treated in the same way as adults after the

⁶ G. Machel, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, Report of the expert of the Secretary-General, Ms. Graça Machel, submitted pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 48/157, point 24, p. 9.

⁷ Z. Csapó, *Nemzetközi jogi védőháló a fegyveres konfliktusokban érintett gyermekek oltalmára. PhD értekezés [International legal safety net for the protection of children involved in armed conflicts. PhD thesis]*, Pécs, 2009, p. 5.

⁸ E. Cardeli, M. Bloom, S. Gillespie, T. Zayed, B.H. Ellis, *Exploring the Social-Ecological Factors that Mobilize Children into Violence*, in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2019, 1.

⁹ G. Machel, *The Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children: Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, United Nations General Assembly 51st session, Item 108 (August 26, 1996), p. 1.

¹⁰ <https://www.goldinstitute.org/grassroots-solutions/child-soldier-map> [accessed on 14 November 2020].

¹¹ N. Pajter, *Gyermekekatonaság [Child soldiers]*, in *Migráció és Társadalom*, 2018/1, p. 27.

¹² Z. Csapó, *cited*, p. 3.

¹³ I. Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Nyitott Könyvműhely, Budapest, 2008, p. 5.

¹⁴ E. Végh, *Gyermekekatonák – a Sierra Leone-i polgárháború igazi áldozatai [Child soldiers – the real victims of the civil war in Sierra Leone]*, 2011, <https://btk.ppke.hu/uploads/articles/414/file/veghezster.pdf> [accessed on 14 November 2020].

age of 6 and 7, respectively¹⁵ artistic representations also support the spirituality of the age, as they mostly present children as small adults.

In 1989, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Resolution 44/25), which states that a child is a person who has not reached the age of eighteen, unless he or she has reached the age of discretion under national law¹⁶. Despite the creation of the concept, there is still no consentaneity on this issue in all parts of the world. Indeed, even today there is a huge difference between a child living in Europe and a minor living in an African tribe. While in Western civilization, a young person under the age of 18 is uniformly considered a child, this is not so clear in other societies (e.g., Africa, Asia). Tribal customs are very strongly present in these countries, serving as a basis for considering a 12-13 year-old as an adult. Typically, at a young age, they become breadwinners, marry and start a family. Another reason for the discrepancy is the length of life expectancy in the world. An 18-year-old has a different status in a society where 40-50 year life expectancy is typical, in comparison with a 70-80 year life expectancy¹⁷.

III. History of Child Soldiers

If we look back at the historical antecedents, we can already find records in the Bible and in Greek mythology about the armed service of children. These are considered to be the story of David, who is the king of Israel, Saul, it was the squire, and Hylas who fulfilled faithful service to Heracles¹⁸.

Going further in history, Sparta deserves a highlight. It is a well-known fact about Spartans that the children born here were part of a very special upbringing. They lived together with their child peers in so-called “flocks”. They gave them a weapon in their hands and taught them the smallest details of their use. The principles of education were grouped around order, discipline, and rigor. Education was primarily focused on physical fitness, with a focus on theoretical training. The move to adulthood took place in the cruel framework. Whips were dropped on the initiated child at the age of 17, who had to endure the abuse without any sound, and if he did not, he was ashamed and returned to the minors.

We can also find many sources about the details of the Middle Ages. The boys, who were meant to be knights or even the “kings” of the battlefields, were torn from their parents’ house at the age of 6-7 and fell into the hands of their master. They served there until they were 14 years old, learning all the tricks of weapon handling. By the age of 14-15, the young people had become “war prods”, also mastered the handling of heavier weapons and had regularly taken part in various campaigns of their lords. By the age of 18-21, the most distinguished of them had been able to be knighted in a solemn ceremony.

¹⁵ N. Faix, *A gyermeki jogok kialakulása a nemzetközi jogban és az igazságszolgáltatásra gyakorolt hatásuk* [The development of children's rights in international law and their impact on justice], in *Eljárásjogi szemle*, 4/2016, p. 1.

¹⁶ Convention on the Rights of the Child, <http://www.unicef.hu/gyermekjog-egyezmeny.jsp>, [accessed on 14 November 2020].

¹⁷ E. Végh, *cited*.

¹⁸ Z. Csapó, *cited*, p. 13.

The prevailing practice in the Ottoman Empire was the *devsirme* system, which was a Turkish term meaning *collecting*. In Europe, the word has become synonymous with "blood donation" and "child donation". It was not intended to serve any purpose other than to gather Christian children to replace the Janissary army. In the 16th century, boys aged 7-8 were collected in exchange for a "blood donor", later this age limit was pushed much higher. The parents tried to get their children back with various tricks. They were sometimes bought out or circumcised to be considered Muslim. Early marriage was also common, as only unmarried men were recruited, but they were usually hidden in mountains. The admitted boys were classified into different groups. According to the studies of Paul Fodor, those who were circumcised, the prettiest and smartest were taken to the Sultan's palace school and the strongest were given the necessary education in the palace garden. The remaining boys were placed with Turkish landlords, where they immersed themselves in the religion. The members of the first group had an easy life, but this could no longer be said of the other two groups, as many of them did not even reach the age of 10¹⁹.

Child soldiers were also associated with Bonaparte Napoleon's troops. Initially, they did not perform combat tasks, but were present as drummers and assistants. Later, however, the number of infantry dropped so much that little boys were replaced²⁰. The various records of the age also support the reality of these cruel deeds. Metternich said to Bonaparte in June 1813 at the Imperial Headquarters: "*I handed over his troops. They were just babies*"²¹.

Germany's *Hitlerjugend* (HJ) was a particularly famous organization under Hitler's leadership from 1926 to 1945. „*The future is in the hands of those who have youth*"²² – said the "Führer". He also created his military team of *Hitlerjugend*. The children were "Aryans", meaning, "racially pure", they were German youths with blond or blond-brown hair, blue eyes and a proper head shape. His group leader was Baldur von Schirach, who later said in the Nuremberg trial: "*The sin I have to present to God and the German people is to... teach German children in honor of a man who committed murders in millions. That's all I can bring to my excuse*"²³. The organization operated on the basis of Nazi ideology and very soon grew into a militaristic movement. The conditions were characterized by strict subordination, they had their own badges, flags and uniforms. The number of members has increased year by year. HJ, which numbered 1,200 in 1923, had surpassed 3 million by 1933, and by 1939 had approached 8 million. This included the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (German Girls' Association), the *Jungvolk* (Young People) and the *Jungmädelsgruppen* (Young Girls Groups). The trainings started from an early age after the age of 6. From the age of 10, they joined the *Jungvolk* organization, which was practically a forerunner of HJ. They were members of the HJ from 14 to 18 years old, it was no secret that Adolf Hitler's soldiers were trained here. In several HJ units, voluntary entry declarations into the SS were filled out as a "birthday present"²⁴. Young people began to be indoctrinated at the age

¹⁹ P. Fodor, K. Hegyi, M. Ivanics, *Török és tatár hódítók [Turkish and Tatar conquerors]*, Kossuth Könyvkiadó [Kossuth Publishing House], 1993, p. 19.

²⁰ Z. Csapó, *cited*, p. 22.

²¹ A. Castellet, *Napóleon*, Európa Könyvkiadó [Publishing House], Budapest, 1999, p. 535.

²² B. Ralph Lewis, *Hitlerjugend: a náci ifjúsági szervezete békében és háborúban [Hitler Youth: The Youth Organization of the Nazis During Peace and War]*, 1933-1945, Hajja, Debrecen, 2001, p. 7.

²³ B. Ralph Lewis, *cited*, p. 143; Z. Csapó Zsuzsanna, *cited*, p. 27.

²⁴ L. Tilkovszky, A. Holzträger: *A Hitler-Jugend harci bevetése az utolsó háborús hónapok zűrzavarában [The Combat Deployment of the Hitler Youth in the Chaos of the Last Months of the War]*, Századok, 6/1996, p. 1602.

when they were most receptive. In many cases, re-education was so effective that children turned against their parents if they did not accept a Nazi ideology. Members were taught the basics of Nazi ideology, emphasizing, among other things, the range of “main enemies”: Jews, gypsies, communists, homosexuals. Many of the members lost their lives in World War II. The Allies called them the “baby division”. Many times they were completely shocked by the fact that teenagers were facing them in full military equipment. The boys’ religion was Nazism and Hitler was their prophet. Alfons Heck recalled his childhood in the 1980s as follows: “*I belonged to Adolf Hitler in both body and soul.*”²⁵ In the period after the war, a large number of HJ soldiers were disappointed and realized how wrong they had been for many years²⁶.

Nor did the ideology of Italy and Mussolini despise the operation of youth organizations like Hitler. He considered the moral, physical and spiritual education of the young generation to be one of the tasks of fascism²⁷. He envisioned to achieve this educational trichotomic goal on three levels:

1. racial protection in the national mother and infant care association;
2. spiritual education in school;
3. physical, moral and military education in youth organizations²⁸.

The youth organization became known as *Balilla*. Its story is related to a little boy named Gian Battista Perasso whose nickname came after his movement Balilla. The boy began throwing stones at the Austrian soldiers in the War of the Austrian Succession on December 5, 1746, thus starting the struggle that ended with the expulsion of the Austrians from Italy. A statue was also erected in honor of the boy. The Act of 3 April 1926 established the Opera Nazionale Balilla (O. N. B.), which operated as a legal entity. Similar subsidiaries were also grouped under Balilla and all other factions were disbanded²⁹. In 1930, youth assault teams were formed with the aim, as a final step, to prepare young people between the ages of 18 and 21 to join the party. In 1937, the Balillas and the Assault Troops were unified as the G.I.L. (Gioventù Italiana del Littorio) Youth Section of the National Fascist Party. Its tasks consisted in:

1. Intellectual, sports and military training;
2. Primary and secondary school physical education;
3. Arranging courses;
4. Social care (camping, holidays, medical treatment etc.);
5. Travel (tourism, foreign, sea, trips, scholarships)³⁰.

An outside observer might have thought that there was only the physical education taking place in youth organizations, but after many years it was proven that the members of the movement were self-conscious cultivators of Mussolini’s triple slogan. “*Credere, obbedire, combattere*”, that is, “*To believe, to obey, to fight*”: believing in the

²⁵ <https://mult-kor.hu/hitlerhez-tartoztam-testben-es-lelekben-hogyan-nevelt-a-hitlerjugend-fanatikusokat-egy-nemet-generaciobol-20171212> [accessed on 15 November 2020].

²⁶ B. Ralph Lewis, *cited*, p. 42.

²⁷ „Uno dei compiti fondamentali del Fascismo é l’educazione spirituale, morale e fisica delle giovani generazioni” [“One of the fundamental tasks of Fascism is the spiritual, moral and physical education of the younger generations”] R. Marzolo, *Organizzazioni giovanili in Italia [Youth organizations in Italy]*, p. 7; A. Gauder, *Az olasz ifjúság szervezete [Italian youth organization]*, Nevelésügyi szemle, 7-8/1945, p. 165.

²⁸ J. Mester, *Az olasz nevelés a XIX. és XX Században [Italian Education in the XIX. and XX Century]*, Budapest, 1937, pp. 296-327, 1.

²⁹ A. Gauder, *cited*, p. 165.

³⁰ A. Gauder, *cited*, p. 168.

moral values created by the fascist state, obeying the knowledge of spiritual leaders, shaping and willing the future. Here the authoritative principle of the total view of the state emerged on the plane of youth. To fight, to fight for the realization of the Empire Romanum, was the teleological element. It all meant physical discipline, the fight against comfort³¹.

IV. Child Soldiers Nowadays

The Islamic State recognized that potential male perpetrators could raise suspicions during the terrorist attacks, so new assassins had to be selected. This is why it turned primarily to women and juveniles. Their innocence and weakness easily divert the attention of law enforcement authorities, and thanks to those, the success of a terrorist act could be effectively ensured. ISIS has opened offices to recruit children, with two such offices operating in two Syrian cities – al-Mayadin and al-Bokamal – where ISIS was working to attract children living in the territory of the Islamic State³². According to some authors, *“the role of children in the ‘Caliphate’ is the culmination of the phenomenon of child soldiers”*³³. A report for the period from 1 May to 31 October 2015 confirmed that the Islamic State had successfully recruited 1,227 adolescents, including adolescents aged 9 to 15, in various parts of Mosul³⁴. The formation of the youth wing of terrorists has become a feature, the young people of ISIS were referred to as *“Fityan Al Islam”* (Islamic boys)³⁵. Mia Bloom and John Horgan differentiate categories among joined minors: some were children of foreigners involved in the fight or children of supportive locals, but the organization also regularly increased the number of children with some found in the orphanages it controlled, and in addition with minors forcibly taken from parents and also with those stray children who volunteer for ISIS³⁶. Involving minors has many benefits for a terrorist organization. Among other things, providing less food, lower wages, their immaturity contribute to their quick engagement, making them quick to prove loyalty, and easy to shape because they have fewer pre-formed visions and beliefs that recruiters need to reverse or change³⁷. The moral judgment of young people is very easy to shape and influence. They do not need as much brainwashing as adults. Many reasonably behaving people cling to strange and cruel views simply because they have been firmly implanted in their brains early in their lives³⁸. The young generation also represents the future of a radical group, which is why leaders consider early indoctrination and armed training to be extremely important, because the soldiers and

³¹ A. Gauder, *cited*, p. 170.

³² K. Anderson, *“Cubs of the Caliphate”. The Systematic Recruitment, Training, and Use of Children in the Islamic State*, <https://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/ICT-Cubs-of-the-Caliphate-Anderson.pdf> [accessed on 28 October 2020].

³³ N. Benotman, N. Malik, *The Children of Islamic State*, The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, Dalhousie University, 2016, p. 23.

³⁴ C.E. Gál, *cited*, p. 93.

³⁵ N. Benotman, N. Malik, *cited*, p. 22.

³⁶ J. Horgan, M. Bloom, *“This Is How the Islamic State Manufactures Child Militants”*, VICE News RSS, 8 July 2015.

³⁷ War Child, *“Child Soldiers”*, Report, <http://www.warchild.org.uk/issues/child-soldiers>; G. Machel, *Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children*, 1996, p. 13, <https://resourcecentre.save-thechildren.net/document/promotion-and-protection-rights-children-impact-armed-conflict-children/>.

³⁸ S.H. Cardoso, *Inside the mind of a suicide bomber, Dying to kill: The mind of the terrorist*, <https://www.dana.org/article/dying-to-kill/> [accessed on 27 January 2020].

leaders of the future will rise from them. In schools, the curriculum is almost nothing more than an accurate, precise mastery and understanding of Islamic doctrines. Classes are intertwined around religion and learn the process of prayer on a daily basis, but instead the curriculum also includes a description of Mohamed's life and monotheism. They start religious education as little children, most children wouldn't even understand what is all about. A boy named Mohammed recounted that although he understood the concept of fasting and the importance of prayer, he did not understand the word "not believers" and why they should be fought³⁹. Of course, this is to the detriment of learning other necessary information, as students cannot even study classical subjects such as mathematics, social sciences, history, geography. The school week runs from Sunday to Thursday, where girls and boys go to separate classes. Primary school starts at 5, high school lasts 4 years, compulsory schooling is strictly adhered to, as children who do not attend religious education will be harder to shape⁴⁰. Children are also present in physical education classes on a daily basis, but this does not take place in the traditional way either, as they learn to shoot, box and fight⁴¹. These factors threaten the healthy physical, moral, and emotional development of children and will later be unable to contribute constructively to society⁴².

Indoctrination beginning in schools is intensifying in training camps where children between the ages of 10 and 15 are taught *Sharia*. Their training consists of several stages, almost identical to the training of adults. The location of the training usually takes place in abandoned training camps set up for them, far from their place of residence, which can also be found in Mosul, Aleppo and Rakka, for example. Young people need to undergo very intense physical training to increase their endurance. They are taught the most basic combat tactics as well as the use of weapons. The third part of the training is psychological influence, as part of which they have to be present as spectators in public executions. The purpose of this is to break the resentment against violence, to reshape it, and to silence the conscience⁴³. Once all the three steps have been successfully completed, they have the opportunity to complete the task assigned to them, which can be a suicide bombing or front-line armed service on the side of a veteran fighter. Once the children of the Islamic State have completed their training, a graduation ceremony will be held for them, where the new graduates will march in public, in full uniform and carrying weapons. Their trainers line up the graduates and start beating them with sticks, symbolizing the unity of strength and discipline. The goal of the ISIS trainings is strikingly similar to the goal of the infamous Hitler Youth program – to create perfect, loyal, and obedient soldiers for the future⁴⁴. One warrior said, *"It was a very difficult camp. We received very serious training. There were dense days: prayer, practice (use of firearms, religious teachings) followed by military studies,*

³⁹ K. Anderson, *"Cubs of the Caliphate" The Systematic Recruitment, Training, and Use of Children in the Islamic State*, <https://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/ICT-Cubs-of-the-Caliphate-Anderson.pdf> [accessed on 28 October 2020].

⁴⁰ Islamic State Wilayat Raqqqa, *Education in the Shade of the Caliphate*, https://archive.org/details/ta_rq [accessed on 30 October 2020].

⁴¹ Islamic State al-Hayat Media Center, *Race Towards Good*, https://archive.org/details/fstbqo_alkeeraat. [accessed on 30 October 2020].

⁴² N. Benotman, N. Malik, *cited*, p. 28.

⁴³ C.E. Gál, *cited*, p. 106.

⁴⁴ C. Vinograd, B. Ghazi, C.O. Ammar, *"ISIS Trains Child Soldiers at Camps for 'Cubs of the Islamic State'"*, NBC News, 7 November 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/isis-trains-child-soldiers-camps-cubs-islamic-state-n241821>, [accessed on 28 October 2020].

then further Sharía courses, then rest, prayer. Between the afternoon prayers, they were not allowed to sleep, they came into our tent and fired into the sky and were sent to guard a ditch. We often fell asleep in this ditch because we were so tired"⁴⁵. As noted by the doctrine, "these young people, in most cases, are literally cruel killing machines that execute literally all instructions"⁴⁶.

V. Conclusion

In the present study, I intended emphasize the role of child soldiers in different eras of history as well as in the Islamic State, which is playing an active role today. It can be noted that placing minors on the battlefield is not new, the change lies in the way of training. Development of technology has produced spectacular innovations in this area as well, perhaps making it even easier to spread extremist ideas. The goal remains ideological training and transformation to secure the future of the organization. It is perceptible that we have not been able to find a solution to this problem for centuries, all of which leading to innocent children continuing to play adult games.

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⁴⁵ K. Anderson, *"Cubs of the Caliphate" The Systematic Recruitment, Training, and Use of Children in the Islamic State*, <https://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/ICT-Cubs-of-the-Caliphate-Anderson.pdf> [accessed on 28 October 2020].

⁴⁶ D. Szijj, *Az „új” háborúk hozadéka: a gyerekkatonaság modernkori formái [The proceeds of the "new" wars: modern forms of child soldiering]*, in *Nemzet és Biztonság* 5/2010, p. 32.

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