CHAPTER I

Children and War

The rebels told me to join them, but I said no. Then they killed my smaller brother. I changed my mind. —L., age seven[1]

One of the original sins of humanity has been its inability to live at peace. From the very beginning of history, conflicts over food, territory, riches, power, and prestige have been an almost constant recurrence. Indeed, much of what is written in human history is simply a history of warfare. The world that we know today, from the states that we live in to the technology that we use daily, has been greatly shaped by violent struggle.[2]

Yet even in this most terrible realm of societal violence, rules of behavior developed. Among the very first was the differentiation between warriors and civilians. In even the most primitive societies, a distinction was made between those who chose to bear the risks involved in the profession of fighting and those who lay outside the field of battle. In a sense, a bargain was struck. Honor and power were accorded to the warriors. In exchange, civilians were granted a sort of guarantee of protection from their depredations. While it applied to all those who were unarmed, special immunity was usually given to certain groups: the old, the infirm, women, and, most particularly, children.[3]

While certainly not always complied with, this "law of the innocents" had been one of the most enduring rules of war, arguably the

most important of what legal theorists term *jus in bello* (laws in war). The deliberate targeting of civilians, in particular children, has been the single greatest taboo of all, extending from ancient Chinese philosophy and traditional African tribal societies to the state signatories of the modern-day Geneva Conventions.

Unfortunately, in the chaos and callousness of modern-day warfare, this law has seemingly broken down. Where rules and limits once governed the practice of war, these standards no longer hold in much of warfare at the turn of the twenty-first century. Michael Ignatieff, an ethicist at Harvard University, sums up the changes as simply being a massive breakdown in what he terms the "Warrior's Honor."[4] The participants in battle are often no longer honored warriors, guided by an ethical code, but rather new predators, who target the weakest of society. The result of this breakdown has been a disturbing change in the morbidity of contemporary conflicts.

> *If you join the paramilitaries [the AUC in Colombia], your first duty is to kill. They tell you, "Here you are going to kill." From the very beginning, they teach you how to kill. I mean when you arrive at the camp, the first thing they do is kill a guy, and if you are a recruit they call you over to prick at him, to chop off his hands and arms.* —A., age twelve[5]

The ancient distinction between combatants and civilians as targets of violence has arguably disappeared, or, even worse, swung the other way, creating a new pattern of warfare. Civilians have always suffered in war, but the difference is that in many present-day conflicts they are the primary target. Tactics of ethnic cleansing and genocide have replaced the strict codes of conduct and chivalry that guided such military social orders as medieval European feudalism and ancient Japanese Bushido. Whereas wars were once fought almost exclusively between soldiers, in recent decades the worldwide percentage of victims from wars has become predominantly civilian. In World War I, the percentage of casualties that were civilian was under 10 percent of the total; in World War II, the percentage had risen to nearly 50 percent. The evolution continued through the next fifty years, to the point

that now the overwhelming majority of those killed in conflicts are civilians instead of soldiers. For example, of all the persons killed in African conflicts in the late twentieth century, the overwhelming preponderance (92 percent) were civilians. Similar figures hold true for the wars in the Balkans.[6] Civilians once had no place on the battlefield; now the battlefield is almost incomplete without them.

Michael Klare, a professor at Hampshire College who studies modern warfare, describes this change:

> The widespread slaughter of civilians in recent conflicts forces us to rethink what we mean by the concept of war. In the past, "war" meant a series of armed encounters between the armed forces of established states, usually for the purpose of territorial conquest or some other clearly defined strategic objective. But the conflicts of the current era bear little resemblance to this model: most take place within the borders of a single state and entail attacks by paramilitary and irregular forces on unarmed civilians for the purpose of pillage, rape, or ethnic slaughter—or some combination of all three.[7]

Because the most basic laws of war have increasingly been abandoned, conflicts have been characterized by horrific levels of violence. In particular, the once unimaginable targeting of children has become a widespread tactic of war. Examples run from the Serb snipers during the Sarajevo siege who deliberately shot at children walking between their parents, to Rwandan radio broadcasts before the 1994 genocide that reminded genocidal Hutu killers to be sure not to forget "the little ones." The resulting tolls from this shift in attitudes are staggering. In the last decade of warfare, more than two million children have been killed, a rate of more than five hundred a day, or one every three minutes, for a full ten years.

For those children who are touched by war but still survive, the experiences are nonetheless devastating. Six million more children have been disabled or seriously injured in wars over the last decade, and one million children have been orphaned. Almost twenty-five million more children have been driven from their homes by conflict, roughly 50

percent of the current total number of refugees in the world. Another ten million children have been psychologically traumatized by war.[8] As you read this book, these numbers are growing only larger.

The New Warriors

As the most basic laws of war have been increasingly violated, there is a new, perhaps even more disturbing element. Not only have children become the new targets of violence and atrocities in war, but many now have also become the perpetrators.

As the twenty-first century opens, a new practice in warfare has emerged. Indeed, it is becoming so common that it can be thought of as an entirely new doctrine of warfare ("doctrines" are what militaries think of as a set of guidelines about the use of force). While not formalized in a drill manual, it represents a new body of fundamental principles, deliberate instrumental choices, and transferred teachings about how to fight.[9] This new doctrine, though, is the dark underbelly of the display of high technology and clean, distant precision used by U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, commonly referred to as the Revolution in Military Affairs, or RMA. Instead, it encapsulates modern warfare in its rawest and most troubling form. This new doctrine prescribes the methods and circumstances of children's employment in battle.

The use of child soldiers is far more widespread than the scant attention it typically receives. In over three fourths of the armed conflicts around the world, there are now significant numbers of children participating as active combatants. These are not just youths who are on the cusp of adulthood, but also include minors as young as six years old.

> *We were frightened because we were young children and we didn't know anything about the army. Even on the shooting range, when they tell you to fire, you're always very scared. For me to overcome that fear, I had to kill someone at the training camp. They brought someone to me one night when I was on duty guarding an entrance. It was a child, whose face they'd covered, and they told*

me he was a rebel, an enemy, and I had to kill him. That's exactly what I did. On the spot. With my knife. That night, after doing that, I couldn't sleep. —G., age ten[10]

A "child soldier" is generally defined (under both international law and common practice) as any person under eighteen years of age who is engaged in deadly combat or combat support as part of an armed force or group.[11] That this definition is even necessary is a horrifying proof of how the nature of the warrior has changed. The presence of children has become a fact of modern combat, violating the once universal rule that they simply have no part in warfare, either as target or participant.

While this definition seems simple enough, the choice of eighteen as the onset of adulthood has sometimes been a source of contention. Obviously, childhood is a not a fixed state, simply bounded by eighteen years as its upper limit. What determines an individual's capacities is shaped by social, political, and economic contexts, as well as by genetic heritage.

However, every culture withholds powers and responsibilities from youngsters and places them under the care and control of guardians. These are usually the parents, but also include the broader community as well, which exercises its guidance through differing laws and practices that seek to regulate the treatment of children. Once they are judged able to conduct themselves in a mature and fully rational manner, they are granted equal standing as adults. Pre-literate societies were not able to keep age records, so certain physical events (generally puberty) or social rites of passage marked the transition to adulthood. In our modern societies, adulthood is granted at the onset of a predetermined age.[12]

Around the world, eighteen years has become the generally accepted transition point to adulthood. Not only do the overwhelming majority of UN states not grant political rights, such as the right to vote, until a citizen is that age, but they also generally apply their laws and distribute their public services differently to those below this threshold. For example, criminal sanctions are lighter for those under the age of eighteen, including special dispensations with regard to the death penalty in the United States, while those below eighteen qualify

for different social benefits, such as education and health care. Simply put, the age itself has emerged as the international norm for adulthood. As explored in the following chapters, this age point also had carried over into the military realm, generally determining who was allowed to serve as a warrior and who was ineligible to be targeted.[13] More important, we will see that the problem of child soldiers extends to young ages far below the eighteen years mark, disturbingly so.

CHAPTER 2

It's a Small World After All: Child Soldiers Around the Globe

The use of child soldiers is probably the world's most unrecognized form of child abuse. —*New York Times*[1]

From its very beginning, human warfare has been an almost exclusively adult male domain. The battlefield was an arena generally closed to all others for nearly four millennia.[2] Indeed, only within the last few decades have able-bodied adult women even been considered capable of participating in war, and this change is far from widespread.

Children and War: The View from History

The exclusion of children from warfare has held true in almost every traditional culture. For example, in pre-colonial African armies the general practice was that the warriors typically joined three to four years after puberty. In the Zulu tribe, for instance, it was not until the ages of eighteen to twenty that members were eligible for *ukubuthwa* (the drafting or enrollment into the tribal regiments).[3] In the Kano region of West Africa, only married men were conscripted, as those unmarried were considered too immature for such an important job as war.[4] When

children of lesser ages served in ancient armies, such as the enrollment of Spartan boys into military training, at ages seven to nine, they typically did not serve in combat. Instead, they carried out more menial chores, such as herding cattle or bearing shields and mats for the more senior warriors. Likewise, the Bible tells of the young shepherd David slaying Goliath. But in absolutely no cases were traditional tribes or ancient civilizations reliant on fighting forces made up of young boys or girls.

The exclusion of children from war was not simply a matter of principle but was pragmatic too, as adult strength and training were needed to use pre-modern weapons. It also reflected the general importance of age in tribal organization. Most traditional cultures relied on a system of age grades for their ruling structures. These were social groupings determined by age cohorts that cut across ties created by kinship and common residence. Such a system enabled senior rulers and tribal elders to maintain command over young—and potentially unruly—subjects. For instance, in the Achioli tribe, in what is now northern Uganda, the system was known as "Lapir." Not only were children and women not to be targeted by the tribe's warriors, but clan elders were the only ones who could decide whether to go to war. This acted as an inherent force of stability.[5] Today, within this same tribe, the Lapir system has been turned on its head. Over the last decade, the area has become engulfed in conflict, with most of the fighting carried out by abducted child soldiers targeting civilians.

> *I grew up in a society where the concept of Lapir was very strong. Lapir denotes the cleanliness and weight of one's claim, which then attracts the blessing of the ancestors in recognition and support of that claim.*
>
> *Before declaring war, the elders would carefully examine their Lapir—to be sure that their community had a deep and well-founded grievance against the other side. If this was established to be the case, war might be declared, but never lightly. And in order to preserve one's Lapir, strict injunctions would be issued to regulate the actual conduct of the war. You did not attack children, women or the elderly; you did not destroy crops, granary stores or livestock.*

For to commit such taboos would be to soil your Lapir, with the consequence that you would forfeit the blessing of the ancestors, and thereby risk losing the war itself. . . .

But today, to paraphrase the poet W. B. Yeats, things have fallen apart, the moral centre is no longer holding. In so many conflicts today, anything goes. Children, women, the elderly, granary stores, crops, livestock—all have become fair game in the single-minded struggle for power, in an attempt not just to prevail but to humiliate, not simply to subdue but to annihilate the "enemy community" altogether. This is the phenomenon of total war.

—Olara Otunnu, UN special representative for children and armed conflict[6]

Similarly in European history, the exclusion of children was a general rule. However, some male children did play military roles, though not as active soldiers. Boy pages helped arm and maintain the knights of medieval Europe, while drummer boys and "powder monkeys" (small boys who ran ammunition to cannon crews) were a requisite part of any army and navy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The key is that these boys fulfilled minor or ancillary support roles and were not considered true combatants. They neither dealt out death nor were considered legitimate targets. Indeed, Henry V was so angered at the breaking of this rule at the battle of Agincourt (1415), where some of his army's boy pages were killed, that he in turn slaughtered all his French prisoners, as famously described by Shakespeare.

Fluellen: *Kill the boys and the luggage! 'Tis expressly against the law of arms: 'tis as arrant a piece of knavery, mark you now, as can be offer't: in your conscience now, is it not?*

Gower: *'Tis certain there's not a boy left alive; and the cowardly rascals that ran from the battle ha' done this slaughter: besides, they have burned and carried away all that was in the King's tent; wherefore the King, most worthily, hath caused every soldier to cut his prisoner's throat. Oh, 'tis a gallant King!*

—William Shakespeare, *Henry the Fifth*[7]

Even the new mass armies and general mobilization of society that the French Revolution brought about in 1789 did not lead to children serving as soldiers. Rather, children who joined worked exclusively behind the lines, helping women and elderly tend to the wounded.

Perhaps the most well-known use of supposed child soldiers in history is the famous "Children's Crusade" in the Middle Ages. Interestingly, the reality is that the crusade was not an actual case of children at war. Instead, it was a march of thousands of mostly unarmed boys from northern France and western Germany who sought to take back the Holy Land by the sheer power of their faith. Crowds of disenfranchised boys, who had been excluded from the prevailing feudal social structure, were inspired by a French peasant boy named Stephen from a village near Vendôme and a German boy named Nicholas from Cologne. The two claimed to have met Jesus Christ, whom they said had given them a plan to succeed at taking back Jerusalem where the adult crusaders had failed. The boys would march to the Mediterranean Sea, which would part for them, and they would continue on to the Holy Land, whereupon the infidels would bow down before their innocence. What actually happened is that while Stephen and Nicholas succeeded in gathering roughly thirty thousand boys, the crowd was robbed and attacked along its way to the Mediterranean. Once there, the sea did not part. Eventually, a small number of the children were able to embark on seven boats provided by local merchants in Marseilles. Two of the boats sank with all lives lost. The other five did not make it to the Holy Land but landed instead in Algiers, whereupon the boat captains sold the children into slavery to the local ruler.[8]

Another historic myth of child soldiers was the Janissary of the Ottoman Empire. This was a corps made up of Christian captives, often youths rounded up by the civil authorities as a form of tax on non-Muslim families. Separated from their families, they were crafted into an elite group that was answerable only to the sultan. The youths, though, were not deployed until they had gone through a strict program of education, religious instruction, and then military training, thus only until they had become adults. The Janissary evolved into one of the first standing professional armies and thus gave the Ottomans an edge over the Western feudal armies of the period. Because of its gain

in power and influence, the Janissary corps soon became a hereditary organization and lost any youth or Christian aspect. In time, it became a primary palace guard rather than a feared army. It was folded by Sultan Mahmud II in 1826 because he feared its threat to his power.

Stories of children's involvement in warfare are also found in American history, all the way back to the fictional Johnny Tremain, who grows from apprentice to patriot during the Revolution.[9] While the earliest regulations of the U.S. Army (1802) stated that no person under the age of twenty-one could enlist without his parents' permission, there was no minimum age if the child had his parents' consent.[10] This meant that a small number of young boys served as musicians, powder monkeys, and midshipmen (teenage gentlemen officers in training) in the nascent American military. In 1813 new rules lowered the age of admission without parental permission to eighteen, but also standardized the roles of those younger with parental permission. The regulations stated that "healthy, active" boys between fourteen and eighteen could enlist as musicians with parental consent. These boys' musician positions existed until 1916.

The musicians, though, were different from regular soldiers or sailors. The boys were clearly differentiated from active combatants, often by different uniforms. Additionally, U.S. forces were far from reliant on their presence. Their roles still did entail great risk, though, and many conducted themselves with bravery, sometimes going outside their established areas. Perhaps the most notable boy to serve in the U.S. Army was fifteen-year-old bugler John Cook, the only child to ever win the Medal of Honor. At the Civil War battle of Antietam (September 17, 1862), the bloodiest day in U.S. history, Cook was serving as a courier for a Union artillery battery. While running messages to other units, he discovered two unmanned cannons. He then took it upon himself to serve them. Just five feet tall, he single-handedly carried out the job of a four-man gun crew. While he was firing the guns, Union brigadier general John Gibbon spotted him. While it certainly wasn't the best role for either the boy or the general, Gibbon jumped off his horse and joined Cook in firing the guns until the end of the battle. By the end of the war, Cook had served in more than twenty battles.[11]