

# Survivors of the killing: child soldiers as refugees in Germany



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*Dima Zito, Wuppertal (Germany)*

*“There are things I did, that are unspeakable. People I killed come to me in the night. What gives me the power to go on living is the idea of finding a way to make up for it somehow. And maybe of finding my mother again one day.”*

*Statement of a former child soldier, from a therapy memo by the author*

This article presents the issue of former child soldiers as refugees in Germany and the question of support for these traumatized children.

They is an especially vulnerable group of young refugees, often unaccompanied minors, a) who have had (traumatic) experiences as victims, witnesses and perpetrators of extreme violence

b) who are often not recognized as entitled to asylum and who then live in Germany in a situation of enforced social exclusion and insecurity for years

c) who have special difficulty in obtaining adequate psychosocial support, as many institutions and professionals fear the complexity of demands (trauma, cultural diversity, active participation in violence).

## **Child Soldiers – a new phenomenon?**

According to the UNICEF definition „a child soldier is any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.“

The phenomenon of child soldiers is not new, nor is it confined to a particular ethnic or cultural group. Children and adolescents have taken part in armed combats throughout all times and cultures. They were combatants during the Thirty Years War in the 17th century Europe; they fought in the “Volkssturm” for Nazi-Germany and in the partisan movements against it. They participated in liberation and guerrilla movements in all continents. And they formed part of regular armies (e.g. as “God’s children” during the first Gulf War) and rebel groups.

Yet there seem to be new dimensions in the deployment of child soldiers since the 1990s as a result of the destruction of social structures, e.g. under the pressure of globalization. „These pressures attenuate the community’s capacity to nurture and protect children, and they increase the vulnerability of children to involvement in armed conflict.” (Honwana 2006, 47f)

By joining armed groups, children and adolescents seek a chance of survival in wars. And the longer wars last, the fewer adults and volunteers can be found to take part in fighting, the greater is the probability of (forced) recruitments of children. „Child soldiers (...) are cheap, easily recruitable, ‚efficiently‘ deployable and controllable without major problems.“ (Russmann 2004, 205)

## **Deployment of child soldiers worldwide**

Due to an increasing debate on child soldiers and intense lobbying of childrens’ rights organizations during the last decade, the deployment of child soldiers is now outlawed by a series of international conventions, especially the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the

Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, adopted by the U.N. and opened for signature in 2002. The deployment of under 15-year olds can be prosecuted at the International Criminal Court. Nevertheless there are currently about 200,000 – 300,000 child soldiers operating in more than 17 conflicts, in 86 countries child soldiers are being recruited. (Child soldiers Global Report 2008)

About 40 % of child soldiers are girls (cp. UNICEF 2007, <http://www.unicef.de/4258.html>). They partly have tasks in the reproductive sphere, but also take part in armed combat. Women and girls are especially affected by (sexualized) violence in wars and within armed groups.

To understand coping strategies of former child soldiers, a differentiation is necessary. Factors such as gender, the form of recruitment (abduction, voluntary enlistment), age at the time of recruitment, the duration of the deployment, the type of activities (porters, messengers, active participation in combat or acts of especial cruelty, acts against their own family, rape...), the treatment and the social situation within the armed group (e.g. significant others as protective elements) and the type of demobilization have to be taken into consideration as well as biographical backgrounds and structural conditions before recruitment (class, education...).

### **Current status of research and theoretical background**

In the German-speaking world several autobiographies of former child soldiers have been published (Beah 2007, Keitesi 2003 et al.) Scientific research concentrates on the situation of child soldiers or on reintegration projects in the countries of origin or on the international context. There is only one short qualitative study on the situation of this target group in Germany (Ludwig 2003). The situation and the perspectives of former child soldiers living as refugees in Germany are still largely unexplored.

### **Child soldiers as refugees in Germany – social inequality and exclusion**

Child soldiers experience the same situation of social inequality and exclusion as most refugees face in Germany. The recruitment as a child soldier (whether voluntary or forced) does not necessarily lead to a recognition as entitled to political asylum or protection from deportation by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, and the legal process of gaining a secure status of residence often takes years.

Refugees with an insecure status of residence are subject to numerous restrictions such as compulsory stay at the assigned location, detention camps, extreme poverty due to a ban on working (which means living from social benefits 35% less than the normal German unemployment assistance), and restrictions on medical and psychological care.

According to the German Youth Welfare Law (KJHG / Kick), unaccompanied minors have to be accommodated in facilities of the Youth Welfare Service. This is often not put into practice with 16 – 17 year olds. In some districts they are regarded as single persons and accommodated with adults without professional psychosocial care.

### **Trauma and coping strategies**

Another factor that must be taken into consideration when dealing with former child soldiers is the question of traumatization. If people experience something (life-)threatening, that is beyond their possibilities of coping, it can lead to psychic reactions such as the (complex) post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Generally there is a high amount of traumatizations (PTSD) among applicants for political asylum in Germany (approx. 40 %) (cf. Gäbel et al. 2006) Due to the special experiences of former child soldiers, the percentage of traumatized persons among them will probably be considerably higher.

Psychiatric concepts such as the PTSD can describe symptoms appropriately, but they can also contribute to the individualization and pathologicalization of suffering caused by structural conditions. It seems to be reasonable to employ trauma concepts that also take into consideration the external factors. Concerning young refugees, the concept of sequential traumatization, developed by Hans Keilson from an investigation of Jewish orphans after the

Holocaust is an interesting point of reference. According to Keilson, traumatization develops in phases. The third traumatic sequence, in this case the period after the direct persecution, when the surviving children lived in orphanages or with foster parents, is the decisive sequence. In a supportive environment, a better processing of the trauma was possible. With continuing stress, the psychological pressure became chronic. Transferring the results of this study to children and adolescents as refugees, we must attest that the third traumatic sequence takes place in Germany: the living conditions and psychosocial support shape the further development of the youngsters. This implies a great chance and responsibility for social work.

### **Research interest and methodology**

As there is only few knowledge about the situation of child soldiers, the PhD research of the author focuses on three questions:

- 1.) Processing: How do people process experiences of extreme violence, such as being involved in armed groups and conflicts, as children or adolescents?
- 2.) Structural Conditions: What impact do the living conditions of young refugees have?
- 3.) Psychosocial Support: What recommendations for psychosocial work with former child soldiers can be given, based on the results of the study?

To grasp the subjective perspective of the interviewees, it is necessary to use a preferably open approach. About 15 partially structured biographical-narrative interviews with former child soldiers are to be carried out, with the largest possible range regarding gender, age, country of origin and situation in Germany. Each interview is to consist of two sections: an open biographical-narrative section, followed by a framework of questions concerning the research interest (cf. Rosenthal 2005). The main focus will be the current living conditions (favourable or unfavourable external conditions) and the subjective interpretative patterns and action strategies of the adolescents. Their experiences before and during the war will also be taken into consideration in order to understand different coping strategies.

Contact with the interviewees will be made through the Psychosocial Centre for Refugees in Düsseldorf and professional refugee and trauma networks as well as terre des hommes and the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Minor Refugees (Bundesfachverband Unbegleitete Minderjährige Flüchtlinge e.V.).

When interviewing former child soldiers, possible traumatizations and the intercultural context have to be taken into consideration. The interviews will be evaluated with the methodology of content analyses (cf. Gahleitner 2005, Mayring 1990/2002).

As there are no statistics on child soldiers as refugees in Germany (estimates amount to at least 500, cf. terre des hommes 2007), the study is to be supplemented with a small quantitative investigation on child soldiers as clients of counselling centres for refugees.

There are about 250 counselling centres for refugees throughout Germany and about 25 psychosocial centres for refugees and victims of torture. These centres are being questioned regarding numbers, age, gender, origin, duration of stay, legal status, psychosocial situation and need of professional support of former child soldiers within their area.

In addition 10 – 15 professionals in the psychosocial field who have concrete experiences in working with former child soldiers will be consulted and their statements will be analyzed systematically in order to develop recommendations for future social work.

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