

Child Soldier Use: The Diffusion of a Tactical Innovation

(Robert Tynes)

The Taliban is teaching five year old boys to kill British troops. The children are being converted into soldiers at an al-Qaeda training camp in Pakistan. The terrorist group turns boys into fighters, human shields, and suicide bombers (Owen 2008). Even though the sight of explosives strapped to a little child is an extreme image, children engaged in battle are a common sight in contemporary warfare. For the 107 armed conflicts that occurred from 1987-2007, 78% involved child soldiers. Government forces used child soldiers in almost 49% of the conflicts while opposition forces used child soldiers in about 67% of the conflicts (Tynes 2010).¹ The insurgents fighting the war in Afghanistan are continuing this trend of child soldier use.

Child soldier use is clearly not an anomalous act that lacks a precise goal. The point is to disorient and weaken the opponent through psychological means and to disrupt kinetic action with an attack on the morals. It is tactical.² This paper sketches out the evolution of child soldier use, showing how children have been pulled deeper and deeper into battle. I believe child soldier use is a *tactical innovation* (McAdam 1982, 1983). The practice is a fairly new method that developed in response to large-scale social forces and the ground-level needs of guerilla fighters. This paper outlines the historical foundations of child soldier use, locates the point of origin, and provides a skeletal view of how the tactic has diffused via terrorist training camps.

Diffusion of Innovation & Social Networks

Rosen (2005) argues that child soldiers are not a new phenomenon. He provides evidence from 17th Europe, when 11-13 year olds served as commissioned officers in the army and navy, to support his claim. Children have been used to bolster troops for centuries. However, it is not until after World War II that children became a tactic. Uncovering this movement from child-as-troop-fortifier to child-as tactical-weapon requires both historical analysis and social network analysis. Even though child soldiers are very apparent in contemporary armed conflict, the social processes involved to produce the change are what Pierson (2003) might define as “slow moving, and... invisible” (p. 177). The shift from troop fortifier to tactic is cumulative, which is why a broader historical perspective is essential for understanding *why* the shift has occurred.

Once the stage is set, an innovation can take place. Then we see the diffusion of the innovation, or “a kind of social change...the process by which alteration occurs in the structure and function of a social system” (Rogers 2003, p. 6). After the norm has been established and a new structure has evolved, we can map parts of the child soldier use network. Adding social network analysis (SNA) helps trace the flow of communication between groups involved, thereby providing insight into *how* the child soldier use norm is learned and diffused among multiple actors.³ SNA reveals what Wellman (1983) calls “deep structures—regular network patterns beneath the often complex surface of social systems” (p. 157).

Researchers have frequently used diffusion of innovations theory and social network analysis to study military technology and power, insurgency, terrorism and suicide bombing (e.g. Goldman and Eliason 2003; Horowitz 2010a; Reed 2007; Sageman 2004; Horowitz 2010b), but these concepts and techniques have yet to be applied to child soldier use.

Structural Shifts

After World War II, a shift occurs on the battlefield. Child soldiers move from being, at most, a means of troop fortification, to being a significant, socio-psychological weapon of war. The insurgents are at the forefront of this structural shift. But it was the grander, socio-historical forces that loosened the structure of the old network so that a reconfiguration could occur. Three important socio-historical processes occur around the mid-19th

¹ For this data, child soldier is defined as anyone 15 years of age or younger “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, messenger 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” (UNICEF 1997, p. 8).

² The term *tactic* is used following the Clausewitzian (1968 [1832]) notion that *strategy* is the assemblage of battles in war that seek to serve a political goal, and *tactics* are how those battles are fought.

³ As Mitchell (1969) observes, the flow of information through a network is the site where norms are transmitted, disputed, transformed or discarded.

century and into the 20th century. First, we see a rise in political engagement on behalf of, and by, youth. In the U.S. and Britain, we find children gaining more independence from the family and more power in society thanks to labor unions and child rights groups. In 1900 and 1901, activist Mother Jones led strikes in Carbondale and Scranton, Pennsylvania, on behalf of and with young girls, many between the ages of 12-16, who worked in the textile mills (Steppenoff 1997). The Factory Acts of 1833 and 1844 in the United Kingdom set a minimum age for workers at 8-9 years old and work day length (9 and 7 hours), and included requirements for schooling, several hours per day (Kirby 2003). In 1919, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson presented a list of child welfare standards the most essential of which were “inalienable rights,” and “an extension of democracy to children” (Marshall 2008, p. 353). By 1959, children gained power at the global level through international human rights law, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

In the military social network, children assumed a more prominent role. The formation of the Hitler Jugend (HJ) by the Third Reich gave children power. The process removed youth from the authority of the family, church and schools and supplied them with a commanding agency above many adults (Kater 2004; Michaud 1997). Youth gained “an incomparable sense of authority over average German citizens of any age, even when they were Nazis, and nearly absolute power over those who were not” (Kater 2004, p. 3). During the war, HJ (some as young as 12 years old) served as canoneers, in tank crews, and as human landmines (Kater 2004). Against the British, the youths had been seen lying down and letting tanks drive over them as they detonated grenades underneath the vehicles (p. 214). In Russia, the Komosol, or Communist Association of Youth, fought in the Civil War for the Bolsheviks acting “as agitators, commissars, and shock troops” (Fainsod 1951 p. 21). Fighting as partisans in World War II, Komosol members (boys, the ages of 14 and 12) were known to have attacked Nazi staff cars, and to have blown up bridges. One partisan, age 10, set fire to a tank in an ambush (Soviet War News 1942 p. 29). In China, youth contributed to Mao’s Communist revolution (1920s-1040s) and the Cultural Revolution (1960s). Children were placed in “harassment squads, called “humiliation teams,”” charged with pressuring others to join the Red Army; and “teenagers were sometimes encouraged to serve as executioners of ‘class enemies’” (Chang and Halliday 2006, p. 105). According to one Chinese observer, during the Cultural Revolution thousands of youths were mobilized “to prosecute numerous counter-revolutionary elements guilty of heinous crimes and to denounce the criminal acts of corrupt elements and law-breaking capitalists” (Funnel 1970, p. 114). The development of worker and child rights, the increase in battlefield engagement, and the encouragement to be the strong arm for the state, all contribute to the empowering of children. These processes have given youth new roles and privileges, making the step into child soldiering more accessible.

The second socio-historical process involves civilians. Here, we see ambiguity regarding the sanctity of civilian life in armed conflict. According to historian Caleb Carr (2003), civilians have been the intended targets of military campaigns since antiquity. Today, states Carr, we call this strategy “terrorism,” but “from the time of the Roman republic to the late eighteenth century...the phrase that was most often used was *destructive war*” (p. 32). International law began to protect civilians with the First Geneva Convention of 1864. The treaty called for the neutrality of doctors and nurses on the battlefield and advocated care for the wounded and sick, no matter which nation they belonged to (Ahlström 1991). The Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907 followed, the first of which called for restraints on weapons that caused unnecessary suffering such as dum-dum bullets and “asphyxiating or deleterious gases” (p. 29). The second conference produced a definition for who qualified as a combatant and how civilians should be treated. During World War I (WWI), many of the Hague guidelines were violated: “from poison gas to mass murder on the high seas, Europeans and Americans broke nearly every code of wartime conduct they had previously established for themselves” (pp. 177-178). The international community responded post-WWI by drafting more agreements concerning the rules of war. The Geneva Protocol of 1925 provided a more detailed prohibition of poisonous gases and biological warfare, and the Geneva Conventions of 1929 and 1949 outlined how prisoners of war should be treated (Ahlström 1991). During World War II, however, civilians still fared poorly as witnessed by the German bombings of British cities, the mass extermination of Jews, the US incendiary bombing of Japan as, and finally the dropping of atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 (Carr 2003). According to Alhstrom (1991), in WWII, 67% of all deaths were civilians. When examining armed conflicts from 1988-1989, Alhstrom also observed that 5,000,000 people were killed during this time frame and “nine out of ten of all victims” were civilians (p. 19). He concluded that contemporary wars involved much more targeting of noncombatants. Even with international laws and norms in place, the role of noncombatant did not preclude combat engagement.

The third process, advances in war technology, has increased the need for tactical innovations by insurgents. Following the strategies set forth by Mao Tse-tung concerning protracted war, insurgencies (and eventually states) have turned to child soldier use as a tactic to counter big guns and big bombs. The ever-increasing sophistication of weaponry raises the costs of fighting against the state and, in response, opposition forces search for new methods that will raise the costs for states. Guerilla forces understand the weaponry gap that exists between state forces and insurgencies. In Brazilian guerilla leader Carlos Marighella's *Mini-Manual of the Urban Guerilla* (2003 [1969]), he emphasizes that even though the urban guerilla has inferior weapons, he can defeat the opposition, if he thinks creatively. This means not only relying on light weaponry such as the submachine gun, which is "efficient and easy to shoot" (p. 9), but also shifting the battlefield to include psychological terrains. The fighter should develop tactics that "wear out, demoralize and distract the enemy" (p. 13). War historian Van Creveld (1989) notes that this approach has helped guerillas and terrorists win conflicts. He states, "Victory, if and when it came, was usually the result not of outright military superiority on their side but of a crisis of confidence which caused the opponent's will and/or forces to melt away" (p. 300). Child soldier use is one tactic that attempts to counter inventions such as the tank, the jet fighter and possibly unmanned aerial vehicle (UAVs). The tactic attempts to decrease the leverage of money-fortified warfare by shifting the battle into a social-psychological arena.

Origins and Appearance

The empowerment of youth, the blurring of lines for what it means to be a civilian, and the need to find leverage against overwhelming weaponry has created the space where the child soldier use tactic could appear. Its network structure begins with Mao Tse-tung and his theories of guerilla warfare. When the Japanese invaded China in 1937 they did so with superior force, which, according to Mao, ruled out a "quick victory" for the Chinese (Tse-Tung 2001, p. 13). Despite the overwhelming might of the Japanese, Mao did not consider them unbeatable: "...the danger of subjugation is there. But in other respects the enemy has shortcomings and we have advantages" (p. 31). It was the shortcomings and advantages that Mao focused on in his analysis of irregular war in a pamphlet—*On Guerilla Warfare* (Tse-tung 2005)—and in a series of lectures outlining his theory of protracted war (Tse-tung 2001). In order to overcome the imbalance of force, Mao realized that the resource-laden enemy had to be slowed down so that the weaker opposition could build up its force and reverse the momentum of the conflict. The key was to turn the fighting into a protracted war.

One essential component was the inclusion of psychological force. Mao acknowledged that the weaker side would eventually have to build up its material strength, but the path to power for a guerilla faction was through the mind: "Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is the people, not things, that are decisive. The contest of strength is not only a contest of military and economic power, but also a contest of human power and morale" (p. 44). Guerilla warfare was "ruthless in nature," said Mao (p. 40), and depended on the efficient use of concentrated force.

Following Mao's victories, we find an effective implementation of his theories by the Viet Minh in the First Indochina War. The Vietminh organized and utilized men and women from villages into popular troops for the tasks of infiltration, propagandizing, "sabotaging, harassing, ambushing and attacking" (Woodside 1976, p. 25). According to French Lt. Col. Marc E. Geneste (1962), who fought in the First Indochina War, Viet Minh leader General Giap changed the rules of war. Fighters no longer wore uniforms, which effectively blurred the lines between who should be fired at and who should be protected. Civilians were pulled deep into the battle theater, "willingly or not, everyone has a role. Even children bring messages or weapons" (p. 266). The Vietminh style, said Geneste, was disorienting. General Giap made it the job of the guerilla fighter "to strike, to harass, confuse and demoralize" (Jonas and Tanham 1962, p. 287). According to Trinquier (2006), terrorism was the Vietminh's weapon. It was one of the core principles of Giap's tactics—to ruthlessly "undermine enemy morale in every way possible" (Tanham 1961, p. 75). The extensive use of civilians pushed the notion of partisan fighters beyond its World War II position, and the use of terrorism (sometimes even against the Vietminh's own popular support) became the new tactic in guerilla warfare, a step beyond the tactics outlined in Maoist doctrine (Johnson 1968).

During the Korean War, the North Korean People's Army (NKPA) had far greater strength than South Korea at the start of the conflict:

Supplied generously by the Soviet Union, North Korea had 150 medium-sized tanks and a small tactical air force; South Korea had no tanks and virtually no military aircraft. North Korea had a three-

to-one numerical advantage in divisional artillery, and its best guns far outranged those of South Korea (Steuck 1995, p. 11).

Troop size was about equal, but the NKPA had many more soldiers who had fought in the Chinese civil war. They were hardened, experienced war veterans (Steuck 1995). Even though both sides of the conflict were steeped in conventional war strategies and able to access significant artillery and airpower, the war was not solely a conventional affair. The NKPA was well-endowed with arms and soldiers, but it utilized *mixed tactics* against the U.S. Army (Minnich 2005). The NKPA “practiced conventional combined-arms warfare, tactics that combined infantry, artillery, and tanks. Unlike the U.S. Army, the NKPA also relied heavily on infiltration tactics, the practice of slipping groups of soldiers through enemy lines to gather intelligence, to attack artillery positions and supply points, and to block roads” (US Department of the Army 2001, p. 30). The introduction of mixed tactics sets the precedent for later use of children in war by larger armies, especially government forces.

During the Vietnam War, we see a more active engagement by civilians and the pulling of children into more soldier-like roles. Psychological warfare was the dominate approach for the Vietcong. The Viet Cong were amplifying and extending tactics practiced in the First Indochina War, most importantly the militarization of civilians and an “opportunistic readiness to exploit any social ‘contradiction’ in order to bring about the violent defeat of the enemy” (Johnson 1968, p. 447). The Viet Cong would attack quickly and then withdraw without trying to win the battle. They would ambush American soldiers; they would blend in with civilians; they would target civilians. Schools were bombed, health centers were bombed. “A teenager was used to throw a grenade into a holiday crowd in downtown Saigon” (Pike 1970 p. 96). Any method that could pull the enemy off balance would be used. The disappearance of front lines and a clearly identifiable enemy was disorienting. It induced fear and paranoia: “Frustrated and frightened, U.S. soldiers tended to view all Vietnamese with distrust” (Lawrence 2008, p. 107). This distrust weakened the morale of American troops and lowered their respect for Vietnamese life. The tactics, in effect, weakened the soldiers’ attachment to laws of war and rules of engagement, making the destruction of homes and private property and the abuse of civilians much more palatable. As one American soldier commented, “Children were suspect, women were suspect...It’s very easy to slip into a primitive state of mind” (p. 108).

The Viet Cong used children as spies (Peer 1970), suicide bombers, and sappers. Recruiters preferred the young for sapper cells “because they are more easily influenced in their thinking, are willing to run risks, physically are better able to carry out their assignments, are less likely to question the arrangements for an operation, and are less apt to become double agents” (Pike 1970, pp. 74-75).). Some youths were volunteers while many others were forcibly recruited (Goure 1965). The lowest age for recruitment into formal Viet Cong forces was 17, and boys 15-16 years old were eligible for “youth duties” in local hamlet militia (Donnell 1967, p. 8-11). However, even younger children were utilized for special operations. Fourteen year olds were known to have worked for demolition units laying land mines (Elliot and Elliot 1969), and to have thrown bombs into police headquarters. A twelve year old was coerced into throwing a grenade into a village. A Viet Cong fighter was known to have given a small school girl an unpinned hand grenade and then told her to take it to her teacher: “At the classroom door the child drops the grenade, killing herself and injuring nine children” (Pike 1970, p. 107). The tactic appeared to work on the notion that the younger the child, the greater the psychological force. The Viet Cong had produced a tactical innovation with their use of children in war.

Knowledge Exchange

Why do we see the Taliban using the same indoctrination techniques for training child fighters as the Khmer Rouge once did?⁴ Why is it that child fighters in Columbia are utilized in the same manner as in the Democratic Republic of Congo? How is this knowledge about the tactic being transmitted?

The Viet Cong may have created the tactical innovation of child soldier use, but there was no guarantee that it would diffuse to other insurgencies. If diffusion is: “the process by which an *innovation* is *communicated* through certain *channels* over *time* among members of a *social system*” (Rogers, p. 11); then a supportive social network must exist for the innovation to spread and endure. Without a network, such knowledge and innovation dies.

Therefore, final component to the child soldiers tactic is the rise of a global terrorist network. The development of organizational links since World War II between numerous groups and states in the world has

⁴ Information provided by U.S. soldier in a confidential interview, 2009.

produced multiple learning centers that facilitate the transmission of knowledge, even for guerilla warfare. The global terrorist network has been developing since the 1960s. Knowledge sharing and the sharing of norms for waging war has occurred through mass media, such as books and television, and through interpersonal contact, including conferences and training camps (Forest 2006a). Cuba, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Nicaragua, Afghanistan and Sudan have all hosted terrorist groups either at conferences or training facilities (Bodansky 1993; Sterling 1981; Smith 1995; Marks 1996). These country nodes have been the points of contact for terrorist and insurgency groups—points of contact that have helped institute and maintain a terrorist network structure. The network is an environment where tactics can be discussed, fine-tuned, and made to flourish.⁵ Given the fertile space that the terrorist network is for insurgency war tactics, we can hypothesize:

If there is an increase in a terrorist network activity, then there is an increase in the likelihood that a tactical innovation, such as child soldier use, could utilize the network for diffusion.

To test the hypothesis, a set of sites where significant terrorist conferences and/or training occurred was selected, beginning with the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Cuba and spanning to 2007.⁶ A database listing all the terrorist groups that have attended these sites was created, pairing actors with locations. A social network was drawn using the data with the NodeXL program (Smith et al 2010). Once the network was constructed, terrorist and insurgency groups that did not use child soldiers were removed from the network.⁷ The result produced a skeletal structure of the child soldier tactic (CST) network (See Graph 1).

[INSERT Graph 1 HERE]

The most significant finding is that Libya is the major hub in the CST network. Numerous groups have passed through the training camps, representing Africa, the Middle East, South America and Europe. Except for the absence of Asia, this correlates with the regional spread of child soldier using groups in armed conflicts from 1987-2007. For the 83 conflicts that have child soldiers, Africa contains 26 (31.3%), Asia has 26 (31.3%), Europe's share is 11 (13.3%), the Middle East has 11 (13.3%) and North and South America make up the remaining 9 (10.8%) (Tynes 2010). Terrorist/Insurgent groups include: the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the National Resistance Movement (NRM), the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL), Sudanese rebels, National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), the Sandinistas, Guatemalan insurgents, Basque insurgents (ETA), the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Fatah. The second major hub for the CST network is Nicaragua. Here we find South American groups (M-19, the Sandinistas and the Uruguayan Tupamaros) and Europeans (the ETA and the IRA). It is important to notice that numerous trainers from North Korea, Vietnam, East Germany, Bulgaria, Libya, Palestine and Cuba have passed through Nicaragua. These trainers link Nicaragua with Iran as well. Sudan and Palestine are notable for their generation of a sizable portion of the CST network in the Middle East (Hamas, Hezbollah, Fatah, the PLO, the PFLP, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Sudanese rebels and Al Qaeda). Syria and Lebanon contribute links to the PLO, Hezbollah, the PIJ, Fatah, the PFLP, and the ETA and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), and Afghanistan is built upon the Taliban, Al Qaeda and the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA). Two groups, rather than places, exhibit strong connections: the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) and Al Qaeda. Their presence further indicates that interpersonal communication is strong in the CST network.

⁵ According to Forest (2006b), training camps in particular “are the most common type of institutions that support the transfer of operational knowledge” (p. 69).

⁶ Terrorism data was drawn from the following sources: Bodansky 1993; Sterling 1981; Smith 1995; Marks 1996; Forest 2006a, Forest 2006c, U.S. Congress 1986; Segal 1986; Cooley 1987; Abdullah and Muana 1998; Clapham 1998)

⁷ Child soldier data was drawn from Tynes (2010).

Conclusion

Socio-historical forces have shifted the norms regarding children and civilians over the last century and half. And exponential advances in war technology have produced a never-ending need for new tactics. Mao's guerilla fighting style and theories initiated the process of problem-solving, i.e. how to defeat an enemy who had the preponderance of force. The Viet Cong developed new techniques to counter a powerful American military. Child soldier use was one of their tactics. The creation of a terrorist network provided a structure for the diffusion of this tactic by numerous adopters. Terrorist training camps and interpersonal contact helped weaken the moral boundary prohibiting child soldier use and increased the ease with which fighting groups could learn the practice. This is how the CST network was finally created.

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