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‘Little people do little things’: the motivation and recruitment of Viet Cong child soldiers

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ABSTRACT

Children have comprised a significant part of past and present military conflicts; however, attempts to understand their motivations have generally focused on coerced recruitment. When children join military groups without physical coercion, they are portrayed as being driven by economic and social deprivations. This article investigates factors that have been disproportionately overlooked as motivators for child soldiers – social contexts, relationships, and personal histories. To this end, I use a relational approach to analyse life histories of former Viet Cong child soldiers. I explore their lives prior to joining the Viet Cong guerrillas and trace how their choice to do so had been shaped by societal factors including family, perceptions of a good childhood, and previous war exposure. My interviews further indicate that children actively reproduced and appropriated the same practices that predisposed them to take up arms. Evaluated against the backdrop of their social and internal lives, the decision of child soldiers to participate in the Vietnam War is understood to be a product of their personal and social histories. These findings challenge the stereotypical image of the passive child soldier. Such historicisation of children’s recruitment helps to destigmatise child soldiers’ experience and allow for a more nuanced understanding of their decisions.

KEYWORDS

Child soldiers; Vietnam war; relational approach

Introduction

‘I first volunteered for the Viet Cong when I was 16, but I was too young and too skinny. At the health check, the doctor immediately refused to let me join. I cried, pricked a finger, and wrote a letter of determination. I begged for a long time. Then, the doctor said: “Let us do this: you and I will run seven kilometres. If you can do it, I will accept you”. I agreed. After running about 100m, the doctor said: “Okay let’s turn back, that’s enough”. After we returned, he wrote on the medical record: “Underweight, but with potential to develop”. So, I got to join the guerrillas. I was very happy’.

In portrayals of child soldiers by international humanitarian organisations, children are often represented as victims: helpless, passive, and forced to participate in war against their will. However, as Quan recounted his story of joining the Viet Cong to work as a sapper, a different picture emerged. His account of feeling pride and joy at the prospect of working with the guerrillas is far from unique; many former Viet Cong child soldiers articulated similar sentiments, which stood in stark contrast to the mainstream image of victimised young combatants.

Many scholars have argued in favour of identifying children in security discourse beyond their typical image as pathologised victims (e.g. Beier 2015; Brocklehurst 2015). In particular, Jacob (2015) demonstrated the usefulness of sociological methodology to reconceptualise children and

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childhood, contributing to the sociological turn in International Relations. This article builds on this literature and analyses how the Viet Cong's child soldiers' motivations cannot be categorised as either those of victims or thoughtless perpetrators; rather, they are best evaluated within the children's own social and historical contexts.

The Viet Cong presents particularly rich grounds for examining child soldiers' decisions in relation to wider society because the group drew heavily on Vietnamese history and traditions in its recruitment appeals. As such, the children's predisposition to join the guerrillas began in their early childhood. Through underlining the connections between child soldiers' recruitment and their lives prior to becoming guerrillas, this article analyses how children's decisions were a result of historical, societal, and cultural factors. I further demonstrate how they navigated this militarisation and in turn actively contributed to production of social practices. While the Vietnam War is a historic case, the idea of child soldiering being continuous to, and indeed shaped by, existing practices has been similarly demonstrated by researchers of contemporary conflicts (Shepler 2014). Nevertheless, these factors are still relatively understudied in comparison to the so-called 'push' factors such as poverty and societal collapse. Examining the participation of child soldiers in the Vietnam War thus not only brings attention to previously unnoticed experiences but can also be applied to understand the wider involvement of children in contemporary conflicts.

To this end, this article begins by analysing the current approaches to child soldiers, and their portrayal of their motivations. I then argue that a relational approach can help to position child soldier motivations within wider structures while also acknowledging their agency. I further draw on insights from childhood studies literature to conceptualise children as important political actors, with their own personal histories and social ties. In turn, these insights contribute to a more nuanced reading of the child soldier experience. To substantiate my arguments, I use the life histories method to trace the ways in which the actions of Viet Cong child soldiers stemmed from local notions of childhood and exposure to previous militarisation. However, I also point out that while it is important to acknowledge the children's social contexts, they were not passive recipients of their circumstances, but actively negotiated and appropriated many societal notions that surrounded them.

The role of agency in the child soldier experience

Children have comprised a significant part of many past and present conflicts; yet, as pointed out by Beier (2015), the presence of children in security discourse has remained severely limited. In the first instance, they are presented as victims with little understanding of the conflict in which they are participating. As Rosen (2005, 134) sums up, the common assumption about child soldiers is that 'Children only believe, or feel, or sense. They do not know, understand, judge, or decide'. In the second instance, when children's agency is acknowledged, they are frequently pathologised as problematic youth. A Canadian humanitarian, Dallaire (2010, 4), describes child soldiers as 'not truly children in any definition except biological'. Children and war – or indeed, any involvement in politics, which is traditionally assumed to be an adults' realm – are seen as antitheses to each other.

Nevertheless, there is also a wealth of literature which contests this dichotomy. Tabak (2020), for example, in critically investigating constructions surrounding child soldiers in media reports and international organisation studies, points out that they reduce children to objects of care and protection, building a world for children, but not *with* them. Further research problematised the formation of child soldiers' identities (Wessells 2016), conceptualised children's motivation beyond victimisation (Chen 2014), as well as categorised different types of children's agency (Honwana 2006). There is a growing recognition, then, as Huynh, D'Costa, and Lee-Koo (2015, 2) point out, that children 'contribute in positive, less than positive, sometimes unique and enlightening ways to conflict, peace and security'. Rather than being silenced, this participation needs to be recognised and theorised.

While there has been significant progress in understanding the child soldier experience, the precise effect of the structural and cultural factors which prompt children to join armed groups remain understudied. When examining voluntary recruitment, it is not rare to draw on children's presumed inability to exercise free will and independent thinking (Singer, as cited in Hart 2006). When children's agency is recognised, child soldiering is then framed in terms of economic deprivation. Brett and Specht (2004, 14), for example, noted how economic factors are often identified as '*the cause of child soldiering*'. However, there is space, as I show below, to uncover the role of personal histories, social contexts, and communities in children's decision to join wars.

Children as social actors

As the debates surrounding child soldiers' recruitment progressed, more attention shifted towards highlighting the environments within which children were embedded. Arguments for employing a relational approach with regards to children in security studies have been advocated by Jacob (2015), who stressed that: 'various socio-political practices can be scrutinized in a thick sociological setting that could otherwise not be identified'. Similarly, as Rosenoff (2010) argues in her exploration of a young girl's life in post-conflict Uganda, a relational framework provided more nuanced understanding of youth's life choices and identity formation, especially those that would not make sense outside of their specific context.

Their arguments are applicable for research on child soldier motivation, which has so far disproportionately overlooked how children's personal histories and social environment contributed to their decision to join the armed struggle. A relational perspective can be particularly helpful in framing child soldier motivations because it approaches humans' actions as a result of intertwined structures and subjective processes. It thus helps to move away from labelling children's motivations as inherently 'good' or 'bad'. Thoughts, subjective processes, and resulting actions are not presumed or given; rather, they are evaluated as consequences of the engagement of actors with one another, often in uncertain and difficult circumstances (Emirbayer 1997, 309). As such, rather than evaluating the decisions of child soldiers as rational or irrational, forced or voluntary, it is useful to view them in light of the framework in which they were operating.

Indeed, many conceptual insights can be gathered from sociological literature on civil war participation, which has shown that motivations to participate in war are not restricted to economic calculations or coerced recruitment. They are, rather, a product of history and the societal norms surrounding such violence. Bakonyi and de Guevara (2012, 4) point out, for example, that there are various modes of action to take in response to grievance, e.g. public protest or participation in strikes. The mode employed depends on societal norms and historical experiences. Engaging in violence, as they observe, is not an arbitrary choice, but a result of accumulated historical and subjective experiences. As such, it is the social context – previous exposure to violence, family history, social transformations induced by ongoing war – that shapes the actors' reasoning and courses of action. Similar sentiments are pointed out by Bultmann (2015) who suggested that, often, war eventually penetrates everyday life to the extent that the question is not why someone would participate in war, but why they would refrain from doing so. In addition, the relational approach highlights the role of social communities in motivating potential recruits to join armed struggles. Research on child soldiers has been relatively silent on this issue, and yet decisions about war participation are significantly driven by the social environment surrounding individuals (Schlichte 2014, 377).

The relational approach, then, can deepen the understanding of children's participation in violent conflict, and has already been illustrated to be useful in the studies carried out by Rosenoff (2010) and Jacob (2013). This article further develops a relational understanding of child soldiering. To do this, I will draw on the insights from broader childhood studies, where the concept of children as social actors has already been firmly established. For example, as early as Henriques et. al (1984), highlighted the importance of not separating children from their

social settings since children are actors who are co-constituting with structure. Mannion (2007) echoed these claims, suggesting that children's individual voices and relations provide 'a better reflection of the lived experience of both children and adults'. Cavazzoni et al. (2021, 366), who interviewed Palestinian children and their experiences with political violence similarly found that it was beneficial to acknowledge the 'complementary role of structure and agency', since it helped them to show that young people were able to exercise agency even in highly constrained social fields.

Several insights from childhood studies literature are useful for child soldier research. For example, family is rarely mentioned as a catalyst for child soldiering, only appearing as a push factor, e.g. to escape an abusive or broken family. Yet, the importance of family as an initial repository of values and political orientations has long been prominent within childhood studies literature (Jennings and Niemi 1968, 177). As noted by Varvantakis, Nolas, and Aruldoss (2019), it is also one of the most suitable contexts for political socialisation precisely because of the trust and intimate bond between family members. It is thus not surprising that many famous political leaders and student radicals followed in their parents' footsteps (Beck and Jennings 1982, 98), or that many instances of conscription have been linked to filial obedience (Symons 2020). Reay and Vincent (2014) explain that it is common for family traditions to be perpetuated through generations, celebrated, narrated as a sense of what is 'done' in this family. As such, child soldiers' agency and identity formation are best examined in light of their position in families.

Beyond family, childhood studies literature has demonstrated that children are embedded in their societies with culturally specific expectations. As Qvortrup (2004) put it: 'what children do and what is expected from them is largely historically and culturally determined'. The literature on childhoods in different societies, for example, reveals that the idea of an apolitical, innocent and vulnerable child is a largely Western idea. This results in defining certain activities, such as child labour, as unchildlike. Yet, for many cultures, child labour is seen as a positive contribution to families, bringing significant income to their households (Lancy 2015). Socialisation can provide important insights into child labour that economic explanations cannot account for, such as what kind of jobs children choose to do (Camacho 1999). These norms and values are transmitted to children and shape their subsequent choices.

Further arguments from childhood studies can be usefully implemented in investigating the lifeworlds of child soldiers, most prominently by uncovering children's place in political life, rather than separating them from politics entirely (Varvantakis, Nolas, and Aruldoss 2019). As Kallio and Häkli (2011, 4) note, from a relational perspective, the idea that children are somehow separate from politics is 'absurd', given that 'politics is a pervasive aspect of human life and political identities as socially embedded'. Children recite pledges of allegiance, talk about politics with their friends and volunteer for political organisations (Torney-Purta & Hess, 2017); they discover and negotiate the experiences of violence via play (Malik 2020). Reading children as political subjects thus 'brings children out of social and political otherness', acknowledging them as political agents (Kallio 2008, 295).

It is important to highlight that, as Ahlness (2020, 3) notes, 'war, violence, and militarized environments contribute to the construction of periods of life, including childhoods'. Acknowledging this, in turn, recognises childhood as a multifaceted and socially embedded notion. Children are not only shaped and by ongoing militarisation but engage in normalising and constructing it themselves (Malik 2020). This is pointed out, for example, by Kallio (2016, 169) who states that 'since children are active participants in the meaning making processes that allow them to understand new things, they also form personal understandings about political life based on their experiential and cognitive knowledge'. In other words, they internalise but also contribute to production of new knowledge and social practices of militarisation, infused with their own everyday experience. The argument that normalisation of militarism is perpetuated by both non-elite civilians as well as uniformed soldiers have already been made by scholars such as Enloe (2016); however, the same observations with regards to children are still under-researched (Ahlness 2020).

Utilising a relational approach and conceptualising children as social actors in their own right, then, helps to uncover how the encounters between childhood and militarisation were interpreted, reproduced, and even resisted by children themselves.

This article builds on the insights from childhood studies research which posits that while children are agents in their own right while also embedded in wider structural frameworks. This assumption can further be applied together with a relational perspective on conflict participation to trace wider historical processes that affect people's decisions to take up arms. Using the insights from both, I investigate the lives of former Vietnamese child soldiers prior to joining the conflict and the influence of various layers – family, prevailing norms around the role of children, and the presence of war – in their everyday lives. A relational framework is not only useful to examine how child soldier volunteering was shaped structurally and socially; it can also be used to investigate how children inhabited their social environments.

Life histories

Approaching children's motivations from a relational perspective requires a serious consideration of their social contexts and personal histories prior to joining the military conflict. To this end, I employ the life histories method to extract thick descriptions of child soldier experiences before joining armed groups. This method elicits life narratives and describes a person's life from their own perspective (Bertaux 1981). Because of its sensitivity to an individual's life as a completely unique and everchanging experience, Dhunpath (2000) describes it as 'probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience'. This method has already been used by Denov and Maclure to analyse the 'making' and 'unmaking' of child soldiers in Sierra Leone. They similarly note that the life history approach helps to 'examine the relationship between the details of an individual's biography [...] and the surrounding local contexts, social structures, and cultural mores that impinge on the sequence of an individual life' (Denov and Maclure 2007, 246).

To gain a more specific understanding of child soldier motivations and the recruitment process, I conducted life history interviews with former child soldiers in the Vietnam War. Two rounds of interviews in total were conducted in 2016 and 2019 for the first rounds of interviews, and 2021 for the second round. In total, there were 32 interviewees from various parts of Vietnam, who joined the Viet Cong when under the age of 18. For this study, the majority of participants were recruited via word of mouth and snowball sampling, while some were reached through specialised branches of the Vietnamese Veteran Association and social media. The interviews were a guided process, as I started with talking to the interviewees about their childhood before recruitment, followed to their experience of working with guerrillas, and ended with questions about their post-revolution lives. The project was granted ethical approval by Goldsmiths College Teaching and Research Committee.

All of my interviews were conducted in Vietnamese; I recorded, transcribed, and translated them to English. It needs to be acknowledged that 'no language is neutral and translation depicts the world of the author' (Goitom 2020, 553). I therefore followed Abalkhail's (2018) recommendation that 'translating is about ensuring that the cultural inscription of terms and certain themes are presented contextually and clearly'. To achieve this, I presented a description of the context within which Vietnamese child soldiering was taking place below. For some culturally specific phrases, I added both the literal meaning and the nearest English equivalent. To ensure that I captured the stories of my interviewees correctly, I often asked clarifying questions during the interview itself, and re-told my translated work as I understood it to the interviewees during the subsequent round of interviews, giving them an opportunity to correct me or stress any specific aspects of their story they felt were particularly important (following recommendation by Goitom 2020).

With the retrospective interviews method that this study employs, the accuracy of findings will be affected; it is inevitable that some things are forgotten, romanticised, and re-interpreted, as part of human experience (Sturken 1997). Nevertheless, I approach memories as forms of action, which are to be evaluated on their own terms. In this vein, Holstein and Gubrium (2003, 118) claim that it is natural for memory to not be an individual act; it is also a collective one – it is shaped by, and therefore can illuminate ‘what is thinkable and what is not, what is counted as appropriate, what is valued, what is noteworthy’. As such, memories are a source of valuable information, as the recounted experiences will still illustrate participants’ ideas of good and bad childhood and the role of children in wars. In the end, then, whether or not memory is objectively true, it will not obstruct locating the experiences of child soldiers, but can add to the stories by revealing how these events were responded to and perceived, both on individual and collective level.

With these considerations about issues of memory and translation in mind, I still aimed to gather and present consistent and coherent findings. To do so, I worked with my data to show *how* one story is possible (following McLeod 2003). I aimed to ensure that the data I gathered is consistent not only with wider literature on the Vietnamese military conflicts, but also with the *internal* logic that shaped my interviewees’ courses of actions; to the extent that the respondent’s world vision became ‘self-evident, necessary, taken for granted’ (Bourdieu 1996, 33). Following Goitom’s recommendation, I looked for threads *between* my interviews to better situate them in social and cultural context. Instead of pursuing hard ‘objective’ truth, as Power (2004) states, such methods offer ‘... a contextualised truth, with no claim to certainty, that, nevertheless, holds the potential to illuminate [...] the rich, complex social logic of human life’. Such method, in turn, is particularly appropriate for analysing children’s subjectivities and own experiences. Before elaborating on my empirical findings, however, I will contextualise them in the section below.

The Viet Cong and militarisation of the Vietnamese childhood

Life in Vietnam was already deeply militarised by the time the war with the US began, induced by the earlier war of independence against France. Over 400,000 people joined the Viet Minh guerrillas, and many more civilians were exposed to raids, sweeps and massacres. The ongoing presence of militarisation in civilian everyday life continued with the arrival of the American troops.

Childhood was not immune to militarisation. Throughout the war, children regularly hid in makeshift bomb shelters, brought first aid kits to school, and wore protective clothing made of straw. They were exposed to calls for patriotism and liberation, where guerrillas drew on Vietnamese notions of a ‘good’ childhood. The Vietnamese Confucian social order predisposes children to believe that they always exist as part of their communities, and the notion that children bear some responsibility and duties towards their social environment is ingrained in them from a very young age (Burr 2014; Pham 1999). The Viet Cong appealed to the children’s desire to be a good member of their community, and implied that in supporting the revolution, children would be able to fulfil their responsibilities. A common slogan addressed children: ‘Little people do little things, according to their capabilities – to participate in the revolution, to keep the peace’ (Tam 2020). There was acknowledgement that children were young, but in the eyes of the guerrilla leadership, childhood was not seen as a barrier to participation in political struggles. As highlighted in Ho Chi Minh’s encouragement to children: ‘Your age is still small. But small tasks turn into big successes’ (Tam 2020).

The Viet Cong, despite having some instances of forced recruitment, remained a largely volunteer-based group with a relatively selective recruitment process. Potential fighters had to be at least 18 years old and were judged on their health and family background (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009). As such, the involvement of children in the political struggle was generally expected to be limited to helping with production, farming, and joining the guerrillas once they were of age. Ho Chi Minh’s letter to children in 1951 (cited in Thanh 2013), for example, while teaching children to ‘hate, detest the French

colonialists, the American meddlers, the Vietnamese puppets', makes no request for children to join the battlefields. Rather, he encourages participation in the revolution through other actions: 'help the wounded and the soldiers' families, try to keep hygiene and be disciplined, study hard'.

Yet, many children have expressed eagerness to join the guerrillas directly. In order to further understand the children's decisions to do so, I will examine specific factors that have shaped their lives up until their recruitment. Through collecting and interpreting life histories, it became possible to identify how multiple forces have contributed to the making of Viet Cong child soldiers.

'I am a child of a family like that – how should I behave?': the revolutionary family and tradition of guerrilla membership

Throughout the stories of my interviewees, families often appeared as the primary site of militarisation. Many children who joined the Viet Cong came from 'revolutionary families', with their parents already being a part of the guerrilla group. This was the case for one of my interlocutors, My. Her father – a guerrilla himself – frequently brought her to guerrilla gatherings. She recounted that she received 'guidance' from guerrillas at the gatherings. They told her that she should not tolerate poverty and hardship, that her coming from a family supporting the revolution was a tradition, and that she thus ought to support the political struggle. After some consideration, My decided not to join combat as 'it is too easy to die', and at thirteen, she left her family to serve as a nurse in the battlefields. My's case, then, echoes Jennings and Niemi's (1968) observations that family is the 'repository' from which values and loyalties are initially drawn. These observations were further supported by her social environment which consistently reinforced the idea of 'family tradition' to support the revolution and eventually prompted her decision to volunteer for the Viet Cong.

However, while family shaped children's social environment and fostered specific political orientations, children did not join the struggle without prior critical reflection. This, in turn, confirms Beier and Tanak's (2020) observations that children were not merely objects of militarisation, but actively navigated it, sometimes participating and sometimes resisting. My second interviewee, Hong, was also a child of a revolutionary family. Her family interacted with 'almost everyone in the war zone', feeding, letting them sleep and hiding them from the Southern government. Hong's account of her internal reflections reveals that she had to negotiate the contradictory messages sent to her by the state and her family. Despite being exposed to the propaganda of the Southern Vietnamese government that portrayed communists in an unfavourable light, she was willing to question her own preconceived notions after sheltering the guerrillas and interacting with them: '... Back then, the propaganda was that Communists were like monkeys, but I thought that Communists were very heroic, very strong, very beautiful. So I thought, those puppet-government soldiers – they are lying! Why are they calling the Communists names?' As such, Hong's eventual decision to join the political struggle at 16 was a result of not only her environment, but also her own attempts to interpret the social world she inhabited, as well as critically assess her own role in the conflict.

The cases of both Hong and My highlight that even though the social context predisposed them to join the guerrillas, their final decision was not a result of solely passive acceptance. On the contrary, they tried to make sense of very complicated structural conditions: what did it take to become a good daughter? How did one join the struggle while still ensuring highest chances of survival? How could the contradicting messages from the state and the family need to be reconciled? Both women revealed that even as young children, they were thoughtful and active political actors, who both internalised ongoing militarisation but also made sense and reinterpreted it through the prism of what they considered desirable and important.

'It was a gift for the guerrilla uncle': daily interactions with guerrillas and militarisation of childhood

Not all former child soldiers grew up in revolutionary families. However, the presence of guerrillas was still a significant part of their everyday lives. In a study of Maoists in India, Shah (2013) noted the importance of intimate bonds between the guerrillas and the people, which helped sustain the movement. Similarly, the Viet Cong cadres deliberately settled, lived, and worked alongside villagers on the fields, always conducting themselves in an affable and polite manner.

These sentiments were reflected in the account of my interviewee, Hung. He met many guerrillas that operated in his village, remembering that 'the guerrillas lived wherever villagers lived'. As a nine-year-old boy, he frequently helped the Viet Cong by carrying out small errands, sneaking into American bases to steal weapons and gather intelligence. However, he thought of these errands as help for the guerrillas because he knew and liked them. At first, he simply heard a 'guerrilla uncle' being envious of the American equipment. Then, 'I told him to tell me where the base is. I will go there tomorrow and get the gun for him. He didn't believe me at first. He laughed and said: "You're joking"'. Later, Hung began receiving official missions to complete; before that, however: 'It was a favour [for the guerrillas]. The uncle said he liked it [the gun], so I gave it to him. I got it for him as a gift – it's nothing, no problem at all'.

The friendly guerrilla-villager relations led foreign correspondents to note that children dreaming of joining the Viet Cong when they grow up comes as no surprise (The New York Times 1964). Even without directly interacting with the guerrillas, villagers often came across special propaganda teams deployed by the Viet Cong, who used dancing and speeches to attract new recruits. The meetings occurred at least once a month, and glorified the war through appealing to the 'revolutionary heroism', 'readiness to sacrifice', and 'courage' of the civilians. In turn, they led to certain images of the war being widely adopted among the youth. For Quan, who had to persuade the doctor to let him join the guerrillas, this was the initial motivation: 'Everyone was excited to join, the battlefield was something honourable and glorious, it was beautiful. [. . .]. Going to the battlefield was like an ambition, a longing, among youth back then'. For him and other children, working for guerrillas was a viable option – their daily life had already been shaped by the ongoing war.

Even as militarisation of everyday life became normalised, it is important to highlight that children themselves actively engaged with it in their own spaces. One of my interviewees, Quyen, remembered frequently discussing guerrilla news and activities with his friends when he was eight or nine years old: one of their favourite activities was to have meals while sitting together under a loudspeaker, through which communist cadres would spread news. The children discussed what they heard, how touching the stories were, and in doing so, reproduced and reinterpreted the ongoing militarisation. 'Some people now say that we were indoctrinated [to volunteer], but it isn't true', Quyen insisted. 'They [the cadres] just talked about "mirrors of bravery" [famous Vietnamese Martyrs]. Who would tell a class of primary school children what to do?'. While his statement about indoctrination is up to debate, it is clear that these children-led spaces where they interpreted and made sense of militarisation were significant enough for Quyen to consider it an important source of shaping his own political orientation. This statement demonstrates that children possessed significant interest in political awareness and ability to learn, negotiate, and make sense the many messages they received daily from guerrillas.

'You would do the same': social practices continuous to child soldiering

The effect of the militarised environment on children's motivations, whether in family or in daily interactions with guerrillas, needs to be further elaborated upon in the context of wider societal notions with regards to a 'good childhood'. Many of these childhood-related practices existed before the Vietnam War, and eventually reinforced the perception that child soldiers were an unsurprising phenomenon.

For example, a prominent theme throughout the interviews was the denial of childhood as a time solely for play. One of my interviewees, Trung, thought of participating at 14 as normal because ‘children were already mature at 14’. Similarly, My also acknowledged that she participated from a young age, even stating that it made her everyday life harder because ‘at that age you are supposed to eat and sleep’. However, she also did not see being thirteen as a barrier to her work as a battlefield nurse: ‘When it came to participating in the war, age wasn’t an issue. At that age, you could participate in the war’. Her account acknowledges the biological differences between adults and children, while also highlighting the cultural meanings that later defined the child soldier experience.

Children thus grew up in an environment where they were assumed to be mature enough to work. As we have explored in the previous sections, the Viet Cong directly appealed to the children’s sense of responsibility towards their family and community. This expectation was a motivating factor for many potential child soldiers. It was the primary motivation for Binh, who was raised in Cu Chi, a Saigon district which was the site of several counterinsurgency campaigns. After regularly experiencing the US raids, his decision to join the guerrillas as a spy at 14 years old was shaped by the desire to change the lives of the people around him. He explained: ‘You just saw that that person, and that person were exploited. [...] It makes your heart angry’. Another interviewee implied that these norms still persist, as he explained his reasoning by asking me to imagine myself in his place: ‘Imagine, you wanted to protect your mother and father; you want to protect your brothers and sisters. Of course, you’d have to take up arms’.

The expectation that children will take responsibility for their families affected children’s lives even before they joined the Viet Cong. Prior to becoming child soldiers, many of my interviewees contributed to their family life by working. Doing so defined their subsequent transition to child soldiering, as children were already used to carrying out various errands, answering to superiors, and working collaboratively. This echoes Shepler’s (2014) findings about the relationship between child labour and child soldiering in Sierra Leone. Within this cultural framework, ‘a child who does not work is a bad child’ and the many jobs that Sierra Leonean child soldiers did were in line with their previous work (Shepler 2014, 31). Similarly, for my interviewees, child soldiering was considered an extension of their previous jobs. It was not rare for my interviewees to have been employed elsewhere prior to being recruited as a child soldier, starting from helping their families on the fields to working in a factory.

Particularly illustrative here is Vinh’s experience, who studied until seventh grade and then started working by organising finances for the provincial committee. When he joined the guerrillas, his main tasks were in the kitchen, cooking and preparing meals, alongside running small errands such as maintaining the camp, and buying cigarettes or coffee. For Vinh, these tasks were in line with things he had previously done. Other participants incorporated small errands into their everyday life. Hung and Hong, for example, recounted marking ‘message collecting’ spots, delivering messages, collecting banana leaves to cover mines, all while doing their usual farming work. For them, subsequent child soldiering was a logical and continuous practice stemming from culturally specific ideas with regards to children’s capabilities, duties and responsibilities.

It is notable how my interviewees navigated this specific expectation about children to achieve their own goals. For example, Xuan wanted to join the struggle at 16; however, knowing that her parents were likely to disapprove, she used the expectation of child labour as an excuse to leave home. She also demonstrated an impressive ability to allay their suspicions – for example, by carefully explaining that her job did not pay very well, meaning that she would not have any money to send home. Xuan’s case, then, highlights that while children were predisposed by their social context to participate in the struggle, they drew on the same social expectations to create elaborate plans and join the guerrillas.

Conclusion

This article argued that the decisions of children to take up arms and participate in an armed struggle is a result of an interaction between both structural and individual factors. A relational perspective revealed how deeply the Viet Cong child soldiers were embedded in broader social and cultural contexts and how their actions are a product of personal and social history. By focusing on the lives of my interviewees prior to joining the Viet Cong, I have demonstrated that for my interviewees, the journey leading to joining the guerrillas was shaped by factors that are often left out in discussions of the child soldier experience. The first is the cultural idea of what constitutes a good childhood. The notion of the Vietnamese childhood presupposed feeling a sense of responsibility for the community in which the children are embedded; thus, the Viet Cong child soldiers were at least partially motivated by a desire to protect their communities. In addition, this expectation motivated children to engage in child labour, which provided a steppingstone towards child soldiering. Vietnam is not unique in its attitude towards children: for example, Shepler (2014) demonstrated similar parallels between child soldiering and some social practices in Sierra Leone, where child labour and child fosterage were common. The second factor is the effect of militarised environments on children. As pointed out by Brenner (2019), rebellions can sometimes become an inseparable part of society, and participating in them is a normalised practice. My interviews provided evidence that children are not apolitical but are also deeply affected by militarisation.

Despite being predisposed and constrained by the circumstances, my interviewees' motivations were different to the victimised portrayals of child soldiering. Their decision to become guerrillas was not driven by senseless bloodlust or ignorance. Serious consideration went into almost every dimension of their decision to participate in the war: whether they should join the Viet Cong, what kind of jobs would guarantee a higher chance of survival, and how to negotiate their decisions with adults in their lives. Such elaborate thoughts and plans require intelligence and an ability to predict and navigate their social context, which children have demonstrated even within extremely limiting environments.

I have also highlighted that children were not just objects of militarisation, but also reinforced, made sense, and creatively navigated the social structures surrounding them. In valorising some responses to militarisation (e.g. taking up arms) while critiquing others (e.g. government propaganda against communists), these children did not blindly internalise the normalisation of militarisation, but infused it with their own understanding of what makes a good Vietnamese child, what is desirable and what is thinkable. The ways in which they did so was diverse, from discussing it in children-led collective spaces, to internal reflections and making plans to take up arms in secret. Such findings confirm Beier and Tabak (2020, 287) earlier arguments that 'militarization does not just happen to children; as complex political subjects, children navigate, engage with militarisms and through them, interpreting, (re)producing, remaking, and resisting'. After the revolution, my interviewees would be among the very people who legitimised the state and retained their faith in the communist ideology even as the Vietnamese post-war economy struggled to deliver promised growth and prosperity. This discussion is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it is an important point which highlights that children were producers of new cultural and political practices which contributed to the post-revolutionary social structures. As such, rather than conceptualising child soldiers as passive victims, deviant youth or rational actors, sociological methods can be used to investigate how children internalised, navigated, and co-produced the social structures they inhabited.

The experiences of my interviewees are particular to their geographical and historical context. While they cannot be generalised to include children from other places, they provide significant insights on the relationship between childhood and military conflicts. Militarisation reshapes childhood in significant ways, interacting with existing norms of what constitutes childhood, and children actively learn and interact with the militarised realities. The case of the Viet Cong child soldiers highlighted that 'normal' looks like for children whose childhood was shaped by labour,

political awareness, and responsibility. Their experience can be used to analyse what childhood looks like outside of the predominant framework which constructs childhood as inherently vulnerable and innocent. Tracing the sociocultural contexts of child soldiers can lead to more sensitive reintegration programmes which go beyond presumptions of abuse and barbarity. In doing so, they can accommodate children's needs better by providing opportunities for employment, economic benefits, or a prominent platform in peacebuilding efforts (Lee 2009). Acknowledging child soldiers' experience without judgement or valorisation will both contribute to their destigmatisation and enhance our understanding of the conflicts and societies in which they are located.

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