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# Child Soldiers in the Salvadoran Civil War

Samantha Miller

For centuries children have been used in warfare in a variety of roles, including as drummer boys, messengers, and soldiers. Modern weaponry has made it easier for children to become soldiers but at the same time it has made life increasingly dangerous for those children involved in conflict. It is estimated that in 2015 there is 250,000 child soldiers worldwide and that number is continuing to grow.<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the child soldiers who participated in the Salvadoran Civil War, both through their experiences during the war and the effect the war had on the child soldiers and families in general. There is little previous work done comparing the role of child soldier on both sides of the Salvadoran Civil War, instead most scholars focus on one side or the other. However, a comparison allows us to see the direct impact the treatment of child soldiers had on those children after the war was over.

## Background

A military junta came to power in El Salvador in 1979. In response to this right-winged military regime a variety of leftist guerilla groups formed, which merged in October 1980 to form the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The Salvadoran Civil War was a conflict between the military junta's army, the Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador (FAES), and the rebel guerillas (FMLN) which lasted from 1979-1992. Over the course of the war the FAES was supported

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<sup>1</sup> Ilse Derluyn, Wouter Vandenhoele, Stephan Parmentier, and Cindy Mels, "Victims and/or Perpetrators? Towards an Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Child Soldiers," *BMC International Health & Human Rights* 15 (2015): 1.

financially and militarily by the United States, who opposed the FMLN because it was viewed as a communist organization, while technically “only one branch of the FMLN was overtly Marxist; most of the guerilla army was made up of peasants simply seeking a better life...The United States, fueled by an irrational "red scare," backed the Salvadoran government to the tune of millions of dollars and trained many of their military personnel.”<sup>2</sup> The red scare was the main reason for much of the United States’ involvement in Latin America during the Cold War. During the Salvadoran Civil War battle raged everywhere, in both cities and villages. Which meant that the war directly affected everyday life for the entire country of almost 5 million people who inhabited El Salvador during the war.<sup>3</sup> The Civil War did not come to an end until the United Nations brokered a cease-fire in January of 1992.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the war the role of child soldiers was minimized or forgotten in order for El Salvador to maintain in good standing with other nations, however, this stance has increasingly been criticized by human’s rights groups and by the Salvadoran people.

Over the course of the war both the FAES and FMLN committed many crimes against humanity. This includes the rape of women, the burning of villages, and the killing of many innocent people including children and the elderly. During the war an estimated total of 80,000 people were killed, many of them civilians.<sup>5</sup> The crime against humanity that both sides committed that is the focus of this paper is the recruitment, kidnapping, and mistreatment of thousands of children who were used as child soldiers during the war.

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<sup>2</sup> Kay Read, “When is a Kid a Kid? Negotiating Children’s Rights in El Salvador’s Civil War,” *History of Religions* 41, no. 4 (2002): 394.

<sup>3</sup> "PopulationPyramid.net" PopulationPyramid.net, N.p., 2015, Web, 11 Dec. 2015, <<http://populationpyramid.net/el-salvador/1980/>>.

<sup>4</sup> Richard J. Regan, *Just War: Principles and Cases*, 2nd ed. (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 2013), 172.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Dickson-Gómez, "Growing Up in Guerrilla Camps: The Long-Term Impact of Being a Child Soldier in El Salvador's Civil War," *Ethos* 30, no. 4 (2002): 328.

According to the United Nations the term child soldier “refers to any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes.”<sup>6</sup> Children are often used due to their “lack of fear and [they] can be easily indoctrinated.”<sup>7</sup> For many groups that use child soldiers they do so because they feel justified in doing so in order to obtain their preferred outcome. During the Salvadoran Civil War “of the 60,000 military personnel in the Salvadoran army, about 48,000, or 80 percent, were under eighteen years of age. As for the approximately 8,500-strong FMLN army, around 2,000 guerillas were under eighteen years of age at any given time during the war, or a little over 20 percent of the troops.”<sup>8</sup> This shows that a large percent of the combatants in the Salvadoran Civil War were children who were persuaded or forced to join either the FAES or the FMLN. The fact that both sides of the conflict in the Salvadoran Civil War used child soldiers is unique. In other conflicts it has been more common for child soldiers to be used on the rebel or guerilla side of that conflict. This aspect of the conflict makes the Salvadoran Civil War unique, and yet it is not a frequently studied aspect of the war.

My inspiration for studying this topic was the film *Innocent Voices*, which tells the story of 11 year old Chava, who experiences the threat of being taken by the FAES and the ideological pull of the FMLN.<sup>9</sup> The film is loosely based off of the childhood experiences of the screenplay co-writer, Oscar Torres, who grew up in El Salvador

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<sup>6</sup> "Child Recruitment: United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict," *United Nations*, accessed November 20, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Young, J. "Child Soldiers." *Sunday Herald Sun* (Melbourne, Australia): July 15, 1990: 1.

<sup>8</sup> Jocelyn Courtney, "The Civil War That Was Fought by Children: Understanding the Role of Child Combatants in El Salvador's Civil War 1980-1992," *Journal of Military History* 74, no. 2 (2010): 525.

<sup>9</sup> *Innocent Voices*, Director Luis Mandoki, 20th Century Fox, 2004, DVD.

during the Civil War.<sup>10</sup> Many of the experiences shown in the film are things that will also be discussed throughout this paper, for example, recruitment methods, family ties, and the role of women. This film gives any viewer the chance to see what daily life was like for Salvadorans during the Civil War, including the joys of flying kites and first love as well as the fear of attacks and recruitment. Reviews even stated that “as an outcry against the forcible conscription of children into armies around the world, *Innocent Voices*, is an honorable film.”<sup>11</sup> However, the film didn’t give any backstory about the war and on its own would leave many viewers confused about what exactly was going on in El Salvador.

### **During the War**

In order to get large numbers of child soldiers there had to be an enormous amount of recruitment occurring on both sides of the conflict. Shortages of manpower led both the FAES and the FMLN to turn to recruiting children to aid their fight. This desperate need for people led to the recruitment of children by both sides, which occurred throughout the war as it was necessary. Those most at risk for recruitment were boys who “tended to be older, physically larger, economically impoverished, or orphans.”<sup>12</sup> These children were either persuaded to join by other child soldiers, death of family members, the benefit of protection, economic benefits, or were simply abducted.<sup>13</sup> However, “of the FMLN youth surveyed by UNICEF after the war, 91.7 percent said they joined voluntarily, compared to 46.7 percent of the FAES youth.”<sup>14</sup> This means that a large portion of child soldiers, especially within the FAES, had been coerced or abducted to join instead of doing so voluntarily.

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Holden, "Fallout from a Ruinous Civil War Seen Through a Child's Eyes," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY): Oct.14, 2005: E17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Courtney, 533.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 534-7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 542.

There is a multitude of stories about abduction of children during the Salvadoran Civil War, and most of those that were male were assumed to have been abducted into the military. A variety of methods were used to recruit children, “the armed forces used round-ups to fill the ranks, taking young men out of buses and cars, away from market-places or churches or as they walked down the road.”<sup>15</sup> Journalist, James Brockman, who interviewed Salvadorans during the war has stated that some “residents of El Salvador told me that the common way to recruit for the army is to grab young men as a movie house lets out, or at a village fiesta. Of course, only the poor are taken.”<sup>16</sup> This reinforces the idea that boys were susceptible to being abducted anywhere, especially if they were economically disadvantaged because it was the impoverished areas that the soldiers targeted. Even if children were not formally recruited by the FAES they were still “used by the Armed Forces as soldiers and informers. Children were paid to point out suspected subversives. This practice created a dangerous situation for the child.”<sup>17</sup> Children were placed between the two sides, used to spy on one another, and often given rewards for turning on their own families.

Those children who had been abducted often did not fight back or run away out of fear for their lives or more likely the lives of their family members.<sup>18</sup> This is because “children often fear losing their families in conditions of war more than they fear for their own lives.”<sup>19</sup> When the FAES was extremely low on soldiers they would raid orphanages or schools, recruiting even younger children than usual.<sup>20</sup> The raid on schools was portrayed in the film *Innocent Voices*, as FAES soldiers “storm into a school in the heart of an impoverished rural village,

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<sup>15</sup> Ilene Cohn and Guy S. Goodwin-Gill, *Child Soldiers: The Role of Children in Armed Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>16</sup> James Brockman, “The Child Soldiers of Latin America,” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), Section A; Column 4; Editorial Desk, May 6, 1982: 26.

<sup>17</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 330.

<sup>18</sup> Courtney, 534.

<sup>19</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 337.

<sup>20</sup> Courtney, 535.

bark out a list of names and forcibly conscript any boy over 12 into the military.”<sup>21</sup> This occurred as other students and the teachers stood by out of fear for their own lives. Some children, after they had been abducted, would not return to their families because they were receiving food and money from the troops which they didn’t have at home.<sup>22</sup> These benefits kept them in the army, a very dangerous place to be.

Some newspapers featured the stories of those child soldiers who had been abducted. For example, an article in *Newsweek* focused on the story of Tomas Duran Cafia, a 17-year-old who had been abducted and became a soldier with the FAES, he had been serving for only a month and a half when he was captured by the FMLN during a raid on Puerto Parada. Tomas is quoted as saying: “‘I’m afraid they will do something to me,’ he admitted timidly, nodding toward his battle-toughened captors. He said two of his brothers had joined the guerrilla forces. He too had planned to join the guerrillas, but had been inducted ‘by force’ into the army. ‘If they send me away,’ he said, ‘the armed forces will come looking for me.’ Duran, like most Salvadorans, found himself dangerously caught between two sides.”<sup>23</sup> Another example is from *The New York Times*, “six-teen-year-old Jorge went to the beach and ended up in the army. He was on his way home from frolicking in the surf 15 months ago when soldiers stopped his bus and took him and two friends to a local barracks. The three youths were held for two days. Their hair was clipped and they were sent for 15 weeks of basic training in La Unión... ‘I told the soldiers I didn’t want to go but they said it was my duty.’”<sup>24</sup>

Both of these examples show young boys who have been forced into service for the FAES against their will. Tomas even says that he was planning to join the FMLN but was forced into the army before he

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<sup>21</sup> Holden, E17.

<sup>22</sup> “Children in Combat,” Human Rights Watch Children’s Rights Project 8, no. 1 (Jan. 1996): 6-7.

<sup>23</sup> “In Guerrilla Territory,” *Newsweek* 5 Apr. 1982, International sec.: 51.

<sup>24</sup> Lindsey Gruson, “Salvador Army Fills Ranks by Force,” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY): April 21, 1989, A3.

could do so. Showing that some soldiers fighting in the army did not even believe the ideology of the side they were fighting for. These two stories support Jocelyn Courtney's argument that "although the same kinds of children (homeless, orphaned, displaced, and economically impoverished) were likely to be recruited by both the FAES and the FMLN, the government troops relied more on forced recruitment, abduction, and coercive indoctrination methods (based on physical punishment) than the FMLN guerillas."<sup>25</sup> This argument is just one example of how the two sides in the war were very different in the ways they treated their child soldiers.

On the side of the FMLN children were more often recruited voluntarily. Some did it to avoid becoming one of the soldiers for the FAES.<sup>26</sup> For others it was family dynamics which led to their early involvement in the FMLN. For example, "some Salvadoran children followed their siblings or relatives to the FMLN, while other combatants are children of guerilla fighters and were literally born into the rebel movement."<sup>27</sup> While this doesn't necessarily show that their involvement was completely voluntary, it does show that they were less likely to have been abducted into the conflict. In the film *Innocent Voices* the protagonist Chava is pulled in by the ideology of the FMLN because of his Uncle Beto who is an FMLN member.<sup>28</sup>

The FMLN only used forced recruitment in the early years of the war and then primarily depended on a quota system instead of abducting children.<sup>29</sup> Forced recruitment stopped for the FMLN, mostly due to their reliance on the public to gain both combatants and material aid. However, there was still a quota system that soldiers participated in. Those quotas were often filled by sending "kids units" into villages to help recruit other young children into the FMLN. For his book *Guerrillas*, Jon Lee Anderson visited the FMLN "liberated zone" and interviewed FMLN soldiers. These interviews included young men

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<sup>25</sup> Courtney, 531.

<sup>26</sup> Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 40-1.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> *Innocent Voices*.

<sup>29</sup> Courtney, 537-8.

who were part of the “kids unit” who recruited increasingly younger children for the cause. Carmelo and Geronimo were two of these soldiers. They were charged with recruiting more child soldiers, “like Pied Pipers, Carmelo and Geronimo lead their youthful charges back and forth through their own home villages, picking up new volunteers on each swing through. Each new kid is like gold to the guerillas, adding to their strength.”<sup>30</sup> The more children Carmelo and Geronimo recruited the stronger the FMLN grew, this was the ideology that pushed both sides to use extreme recruitment techniques.

Jocelyn Courtney’s article, “The Civil War That Was Fought by Children: Understanding the Role of Child Combatants in El Salvador’s Civil War, 1980-1992,” focuses on how both the FAES and the FMLN used child soldiers. Courtney’s comparison used many of the other sources also being discussed in this paper and is a more recent publication, which means that it incorporates some new information. You will notice these factors contribute to Courtney being a valuable, and often used, source throughout this paper for information on both sides of the conflict.

The child soldiers who fought for the FAES during the Civil War were trained using a three-pronged approach. The FAES “dehumanized the enemy, glorified their own image, and demanded total obedience from their troops, quelling resistance with harsh physical punishment.”<sup>31</sup> The image of the child-hero was used by the FAES to glorify the military and the child soldier’s role in helping their country.<sup>32</sup> Many of the child soldiers were sent for a 15 week basic training program in La Unión where this three pronged approach was used to mentally train them while also teaching them physical skills to be used in combat. Some of the child soldiers were

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<sup>30</sup> Jon Lee Anderson, *Guerrillas* (New York Times Books, 1992), 212.

<sup>31</sup> Courtney, 543.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Peterson and Kay Read, “Victims, Heroes, Enemies: Children in Central American Wars,” in *Minor Omissions: Children in Latin American History and Society*, Ed. Tobias Hecht (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2002), 221.

even sent to the United States to be trained, both at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and Fort Benning, Georgia.<sup>33</sup> The indoctrination that occurred during training often concluded with participation in forced acts of violence that bonded the child soldiers more tightly to the other FAES soldiers, as well as showed their total obedience to the FAES.

The FAES child soldiers had an active role in the Civil War, typically through spying, running messages, scouting, or fighting. These children put their lives at risk on a daily basis to complete the tasks they had been assigned to. However, many of them knew that disobeying an order also would have put their lives at risk from their commanding officers. Some children were ordered to injure or kill their own families or members of their villages to prove their obedience, they complied out of fear for their own lives.<sup>34</sup> Some children willingly stayed with the FAES because they had their basic needs met through military supplies, and they occasionally were paid a salary for their job.<sup>35</sup>

On the other side of the Civil War “the FMNL took a greater protective role towards the children and indoctrinated them through normative motivators (based on the offer or withdrawal of psychological awards, like group acceptance or honor) and reinforced by familial relations.”<sup>36</sup> Schools were created in FMLN camps that had the necessary resources to educate the children residing there. At school the children would memorize biographies of local heroes and learn about the revolutions that had taken place in Nicaragua and Cuba, as well as how to be a good revolutionary.<sup>37</sup> There was also the ideal of communal solidarity which made the FMLN seem more like a family.<sup>38</sup> The child soldiers had shared experiences which made

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<sup>33</sup> Raymond Bonner, “Salvador Deploys U.S.A-Trained Unit.” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY): June 13, 1982. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Courtney, 544.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 537.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

<sup>37</sup> Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 94.

<sup>38</sup> Courtney, 545.

them connect very easily and form family-like groups. Within these groups the child soldiers would grow up together and “the common experiences they have had and the life they share now gives them a bond that is perhaps greater than if they were true blood siblings.”<sup>39</sup>

Many of the child soldiers used by the FMLN had experienced the loss of one or both parents, which meant that they wanted to find a family which also included older individuals who could be seen as parental figures. In *Guerrillas*, Jon Lee Anderson interviewed multiple FMLN soldiers including Ulises who had taken 13 year old Melvin under his wing to teach him the radio code used by the FMLN. Ulises said the following about Melvin in the interview, “it’s like he needed the fatherly influence. He liked to have someone pay attention to him.”<sup>40</sup> This shows just how much the FMLN formed families while they fought. These family, unlike the FAES, included female guerillas as well. Women and girls could “provide backup support, managed the camps, and served in active combat.”<sup>41</sup>

The women of the FMLN had a greater amount of equality than was traditional in Salvadoran society. Women and girls were present in every aspect of the war in the FMLN, both in supporting and active roles. In fact “the majority of women and girls who joined the FMLN participated in supporting roles, cooking and sewing uniforms. Others took a more active role as medics or in logistics, carrying supplies and coordinating the movements of soldiers. A minority of women and girls fought as combatants.”<sup>42</sup> Women and girls were especially valuable as nurses or medics. One of the FMLN members interviewed for Jon Lee Anderson’s book *Guerrillas* was the young nurse Aracely, who worked in one of the FMLN kids units. She had been involved in the FMLN for five years and at nineteen was the oldest girl in the unit, this means that she was looked up to like an older sister by the other girls around her, which shows the family

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<sup>39</sup> Anderson, 217.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Courtney, 547.

<sup>42</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 330.

dynamic achieved by the FMLN.<sup>43</sup> Some girls also joined in on the fighting like Elva, a former child soldier interviewed for Julia Dickson-Gomez's article "Growing up in Guerrilla Camps: The Long-Term Impact of Being a Child Soldier in El Salvador's Civil War." In Elva's case she was a combatant, which "violated Salvadoran gender roles in which it is unacceptable and dangerous for a woman to express anger or aggression."<sup>44</sup> However, to the FMLN women were valuable fighters who added to their numbers.

Another fact of life that occurred due to the mixture of both genders in the FMLN camps was casual sex resulting in pregnancy. Many female guerillas told of accidental pregnancies which caused them to leave the front for a time for their safety. They would then return to the front after giving birth. The FMLN gave female members twelve months to spend with their newborn babies, but many returned earlier to continue the fight.<sup>45</sup> Some of those females were child soldiers, like Aracely who was fourteen when she got pregnant.<sup>46</sup> Those females often left their children with mothers or grandmothers who lived in safer areas, this can be seen both in Aracely's story and also with others like Elva who got pregnant at fifteen and left her son with her mother.<sup>47</sup>

At the beginning of the conflict FMLN child soldiers primarily held support positions, but as the conflict increased they transitioned to active combat roles. Child soldiers occupied support roles like "porter, cook, and sentry... young fighters did everything from preparing tortillas and coffee to putting together explosives and popular armaments. They also worked as backup personnel- as *correos* (runners) to carry messages between commanders."<sup>48</sup> Later their roles became more active as they infiltrated the FAES to gather

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<sup>43</sup> Anderson, 214.

<sup>44</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 342.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson, 220.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>47</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 333.

<sup>48</sup> Courtney, 545.

intelligence and became armed fighters among the FMLN ranks.<sup>49</sup> One example of the expanding roles of child soldiers in the FMLN is Samuel. Samuel joined the FMLN at eleven years old, after his father death, and first worked as a messenger and porter before becoming a combatant who fought alongside the other FMLN soldiers.<sup>50</sup>

Child soldiers on both sides of the Civil War had to leave their childhoods behind and become premature adults due to the circumstances of war. Those children had to make political and economic decisions typically reserved for adults.<sup>51</sup> Often times this occurred due to the loss of one or both parental figures, especially when it was the loss of the father which caused a lack of economic support for a family. When this occurred “that burden falls on boys who must become the ‘man of the house’ when the father is absent,”<sup>52</sup> either due to death or due to commitment to the war.

However, these are not simply occurrences due to the war. Children having to step up to provide for the family due to a lack of parental support had occurred before the war began. The children who stepped into those responsibilities showed a sense of selflessness that is “due in large part to the degree to which children's identities are bound to their families.”<sup>53</sup> The notion of childhood innocence is an extremely Euro-American ideal that has only recently been developed.<sup>54</sup> This means that children in El Salvador increasingly played a role in the Civil War due to a tradition of children helping within the family, which seemed strange to Westerners who pushed for the idea of a protected childhood. In many cultures around the world, as well as in the history of Western societies, children begin helping their families and communities when they are very young and

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<sup>49</sup> Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 95.

<sup>50</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 333.

<sup>51</sup> Anna Peterson and Kay Read, "Victims, Heroes, Enemies: Children in Central American Wars," (2002), 219.

<sup>52</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 335.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>54</sup> Read, 398.

gain more responsibilities as they get older.<sup>55</sup> This means that in El Salvador there was already an unclear distinction between adulthood and childhood as responsibilities were placed on individuals no matter their age.

The war foisted moral questions upon the children of El Salvador, especially by forcing them to choose a side in the conflict. It has been shown in El Salvador that often times when the child was able to pick a side, they chose the FMLN. Various conflicts around the world have shown that “children’s political commitments, like those of adults, combine political ideology and moral idealism with personal loyalties and collective memories of suffering that must be vindicated.”<sup>56</sup> Research has shown that children are moral agents. Children begin caring about others at 18 months old, and that care for others tends to get stronger as they get older.<sup>57</sup> This shows that, even at a young age, children are “active moral agents continually developing a concern for the common good, and not as completely innocent beings isolated from adult cares.”<sup>58</sup> So while some parts of the world, especially the United States, views childhood as an isolated time, it is viewed very differently in other areas of the world. Years of research on the front lines of wars in Africa led Carolyn Nordstrom to observe that “children often have a well-developed moral, political, and philosophical understanding of the events in their lives and worlds. Years of research on the front lines of war have taught me that even very young children have profound opinions on conditions of justice and injustice, violence and peace, in their lives.”<sup>59</sup> These observations have since been extended to apply to all children, including the child soldiers of El Salvador.

Child soldiers were routinely exposed to violence from very young ages, both in the FAES and the FMLN. They were also given the task

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<sup>55</sup> Peterson and Read, 227.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>57</sup> Read, 400.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Carolyn Nordstrom, "Girls behind the (Front) Lines," *Peace Review* 8, no. 3 (1996): 409.

of committing acts of violence and also defending themselves from acts of violence. For example, FAES soldier in training at La Unión had to learn to fight and also had to defend themselves when the FMLN attacked their base.<sup>60</sup> Children exposed to routine acts of violence at a young age are more likely to become violent adults. This was a concern due to the normalization of violence that occurs during times of war, especially a Civil War as bloody as the one seen in El Salvador. Child soldiers are also more likely to resent both sides of a conflict, have psychological damage, be socially impaired, and unable to be financially independent in the future.<sup>61</sup> Some experiences of violence can even go so far as to cause “psychosomatic reactions such as headaches, as well as severe psychosis, such as schizophrenia.”<sup>62</sup> All of these combined to make readjustment to normal life after the war that much more difficult for the child soldiers.

### **After the War**

After the Civil War ended in January 1992 children were excluded from the programs created for the veterans of combat, simply because neither side would recognize that they had used child soldiers. In fact both sides “attempted to demobilize children before the formal process began to avoid negative international attention and to minimize the government’s support obligations.”<sup>63</sup> This meant that children were cast out from the bases and camps that they had been in and “they usually had no more than their weapons and the clothes on their backs.”<sup>64</sup> They were forced to return to homes that were often destroyed or inhabited by other families, and where they were often looked down upon depending on what side they had fought for during the war. Although there are some records of FMLN child soldiers who were still in the camps when UNICEF demobilized the guerillas,

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<sup>60</sup> James LeMoyné, “40 Salvador Soldiers Killed by Rebels,” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY): Oct 11, 1985. A3.

<sup>61</sup> Courtney, 524.

<sup>62</sup> Peterson and Read, 219.

<sup>63</sup> Courtney, 549.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 551.

however, there were no programs created to assist them in returning to civilian life.<sup>65</sup> However, the peace and stability of post-war society depended on reintegrating all soldiers, even children, back into society.

It was in this reintegration that El Salvador failed. Six years after the end of the war “71 percent of all former child soldiers said ‘nothing had helped them transition to civilian life’”<sup>66</sup> There was a lack of economic opportunities which meant rampant unemployment. Many soldiers, especially children, were forgotten about and they turned to whatever means necessary to support themselves and their families. Child delinquency in El Salvador has risen since the end of the war.<sup>67</sup> Violent crimes have also increase after the war due to the “inadequate employment opportunities and support services and easy availability of military weapons.”<sup>68</sup> Many former members of the FAES and FMLN formed criminal organizations and gangs, turning to “violence as a survival technique.”<sup>69</sup>

The lack of economic opportunities was not the only problem, there was also a lack of accessible education. Some literacy training programs had existed during the war but they were largely ineffective.<sup>70</sup> Basically the child soldier’s “didn’t return from the war educated, they returned traumatized.”<sup>71</sup> Even after the war education was not available to all and there were many impediments against child soldiers getting an education. Those impediments include: education facilities that had been destroyed during the war, a shortage of qualified teachers, and the need for the former child soldiers to be in the workplace instead of in schools.<sup>72</sup> There was also a lack of funds for expanding education opportunities, which further limited

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<sup>65</sup> Courtney, 550.

<sup>66</sup> Courtney, 554.

<sup>67</sup> Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 114.

<sup>68</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 346.

<sup>69</sup> Courtney, 555.

<sup>70</sup> Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 139.

<sup>71</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 344.

<sup>72</sup> Courtney, 552.

former child soldiers' ability to gain an education which might assist them economically.<sup>73</sup> Some child soldiers who managed to go back to school were embarrassed to be in classes with students so much younger than themselves that they gave up. This led to a generation of Salvadorans who had little to no education at all.

Another problem that many child soldiers faced was the psychological damage caused by the violence they had both experienced and inflicted on others. Many children who participated as combatants in war have nightmares of their experiences, often reflecting the death of loved ones or the horrors of fighting. Research has shown that "child soldiers were far more disturbed than children who were victims of violence."<sup>74</sup> There is concern that the long-term psychological effects of the experiences of child soldiers in the Salvadoran Civil War will be the break-down of morality, but research on the topic is basically nonexistent.<sup>75</sup> There is also the challenging aspect of gender due to the role of female child soldiers in the FMLN. For example, "some research has suggested that girls show greater psychological resilience in times of war because they are given greater freedom to express fear and sadness. While this may hold true in some contexts of war, expression of fear and sadness was necessarily repressed for both boys and girls in El Salvador because to express such emotions would label one as a subversive and therefore target one for repression."<sup>76</sup> While it is typically seen as acceptable for girls to express their emotions, it is not acceptable for former child soldier of either gender to show any emotion or they will become targets. This only serves to add to the psychological effects of the war and may worsen the reintegration process.

Many of the problems that occurred after the war have since been attributed to the displacement of children and families during the war. There are many "negative effects of displacement on the education,

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<sup>73</sup> Read, 394.

<sup>74</sup> Young, J. "Child Soldiers." Sunday Herald Sun (Melbourne, Australia): July 15, 1990: 3.

<sup>75</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 349-50.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

health care, nutrition, economic stability, and physical and mental health of Salvadoran children and their families.”<sup>77</sup> Due to displacement it was difficult to provide services to families who were in need after the war. Displacement also meant that many of the people with the skills needed for those services, like teachers and doctors, had left due to the war and there simply was not people there able to provide the needed services. This drastically affected many Salvadorans and prevented them from being able to fully reintegrate to society upon the end of the war.

Much of what the FMLN had promised during the war had been discarded in the effort to make peace. This led to disillusionment of revolutionary ideology and the FMLN after the war. Some of the FMLN child soldiers who had joined the war for ideological reasons felt disillusioned at the end of the war when the “social justice promised by the FMLN had not been achieved.”<sup>78</sup> The soldiers, both children and adults, “resented the lack of assistance they received from their FMLN leaders after the conflict ended.”<sup>79</sup> Disillusionment was common, however, it was “perhaps greater for youth because they had even less control and choice over their participation.”<sup>80</sup>

The FMLN had promoted gender equality during the war which also did not occur when peace came.<sup>81</sup> Women had been promised economic, social, and political equality by the FMLN during the war and were usually treated as equal to their male counterparts during the war. Also after the war ended the role that women and girls had played and their contributions were often minimized or completely ignored. As a result the female soldiers who returned home typically went right back to the gendered task of caring for their families. At the same time women who remained politically active after the war were punished socially for doing so, often times by being abandoned or ostracized. For example, Elva, a child soldier who had had

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<sup>77</sup> Peterson and Read, 219.

<sup>78</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 347.

<sup>79</sup> Courtney, 552.

<sup>80</sup> Dickson-Gómez, 343.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

children during the war, returned to her village to take care of her family. She received an education, got a job, and was the primary source of income for her family. Elva's position of power led to jealousy issues which resulted in her husband's abandonment. This meant that Elva became a single mother to five children when she was just 25-years-old herself.<sup>82</sup>

Single parent households, especially single mothers, were a common sight at the end of the Civil War. As men were less financially stable and turned to alcoholism they increasingly abandoned their families, leaving women to care for families alone.<sup>83</sup> Another contribution to single parent households were men who moved to other countries for better economic opportunities. This can be seen in the story of Yesenia who became a single mother when her son's father moved to the United States. In telling her story Yesenia said "in my case, I'm a single mother. I didn't agree, my son's father went to the U.S. when he was six. The years went by and he decided to stay. I said to myself, okay, we'll just have to figure this out ourselves."<sup>84</sup> Another story that also shows the struggles of a single mother is the fictional portrayal in *Innocent Voices*. In the film, Kella is a single mother to three children because her husband left for a job in the United States.<sup>85</sup> She does whatever she can to provide for her children, working multiple jobs and even moving to a safer area. The stories of Elva, Yesenia, and Kella show that many women rose above obstacles and continued to support their families, in spite of the challenges that single mothers faced in the Salvadoran economy and society.

The recruitment and use of child soldiers was not the only crime against humanity that occurred for Salvadoran children during the Civil War. Many children were also kidnapped and then sent to

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>84</sup> Patricia Goudvis and Alice Stone, "Yesenia: When We Were Young There Was A War," *Central American Stories*, N.p., 2012, accessed 11 Dec. 2015, <<http://www.centralamericanstories.com/characters/yesenia/>>.

<sup>85</sup> *Innocent Voices*.

foreign countries to be adopted, which became a source of money for the FAES. These children had either been given up for adoption by their parents for protection or had been “stolen as war trophies by bands of soldiers.”<sup>86</sup> This use of stolen children “was part counterinsurgency strategy and part business venture. Many of the stolen children were sent to orphanages, where they were adopted internationally in a wartime system that had tinges of compassion and greed.”<sup>87</sup> This means that Salvadoran children who had been adopted internationally “grew up in the United States and Europe, curious about their heritage but knowing nothing of their original families. Many thought their relatives were dead.”<sup>88</sup> The usefulness of male children as child soldiers for the FAES means that a majority of the children sent for international adoption were female.

In the early 2000s a database was put together by the University of California Berkeley and Pro-Búsquesda, a Salvadoran organization, to reconnect disappeared children to their families. This database was used in the cases of Angela Fillingim and Suzanne Berghaus, two women who had been adopted by families in the United States during the Salvadoran Civil War. Angela was given up by her mother, to “protect her from war as well as from her family’s disapproval of her unwed pregnancy.”<sup>89</sup> Angela was only 6 months old when she was given up in 1985. She was then adopted by a family in northern California and at 21 years old she was able to reconnect with her mother and brother in El Salvador.<sup>90</sup> Suzanne was kidnapped by FAES soldiers in 1982 when she was 14 months old amidst her mother’s objections. She was adopted by a family in Massachusetts and at 26 years old she was able to reconnect with the family that she

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<sup>86</sup> Jesse McKinley, "Separated by War, Reunited Through DNA," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY): Dec. 22, 2006: A31.

<sup>87</sup> Marc Lacey, "A Daughter Stolen in Wartime Returns to El Salvador," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY): April 5, 2007: A4.

<sup>88</sup> Andrew Buncombe, "El Salvador's War Children Return to their Roots," *Independent* (London, England): July 17, 2006: 22.

<sup>89</sup> McKinley, A31.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

had been taken from.<sup>91</sup> Pro-Búsquesda has made several complaints about the Salvadoran government due to its unhelpfulness at reuniting these families. This may stem from an unwillingness on the governments part to acknowledge the past misdeeds committed by its armed forces. The Salvadoran government has created its own organization to reunite families, but it is dismissed by many because it has not been as successful as the Pro-Búsquesda database.<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

As this paper has shown, the child soldiers of the Salvadoran Civil War were treated poorly on both sides, both during and after the war. However, the children in the FAES had a drastically different experience than the children in the FMLN, both in recruitment, training, experiences, and treatment after the war. The FAES was stricter, more violent, and focused on results, all while ignoring the actual needs of the children they had forcibly recruited. The FMLN was driven by ideology, connected like a family, included female combatants, and yet at the end of the war they also forgot about the role of the child soldiers. The Salvadoran Civil War affected every aspect of society and fundamentally changed a generation of people as they were physically and psychologically scared by the violence of the war and the lack of assistance they received after the war ended.

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<sup>91</sup> Marc Lacey, "A Daughter Stolen in Wartime Returns to El Salvador," *The New York Times* (New York City, NY): April 5, 2007: A4.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

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