



David M. Rosen. *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism.* New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005. xi + 199 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-3568-5.



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Let the Children Kill!

“Humanitarian” efforts to ban child soldiers in international law are ill-conceived. Naively, they fail to recognize that armed children are not victims of adult manipulation but thinking agents of their own destiny. Ignorantly, they treat child combatants as a pernicious aspect of modern war rather than a natural human activity; at the same time they fail to acknowledge broad cross-cultural differences in conceptions of childhood. Cynically, they prohibit the use of child soldiers only by non-state actors, allowing organized states an unfair advantage. Hypocritically, and worst of all, they refuse to acknowledge, let alone condemn, the use of child soldiers by the Palestinians. Moreover, humanitarians, in their puritan concern about the victimization of children, overlook the positive energy that young people bring to war. Rather than heeding the seductive claims of the child protection lobby, serious people will think twice before depriving children of their right to bear arms.

In support of these propositions, David M. Rosen’s *Armies of the Young* offers a short essay on “War and Childhood” and three case studies of children in combat: Jewish children fighting the Germans in World War

II, child soldiers in Sierra Leone, and Palestinians in the *Intifada*. Each section contains a striking argument for rethinking the conventional wisdom on child soldiers, and in each case the unconventionality of that argument draws attention from its fundamental flaws.

For example, “War and Childhood” accurately notes that “child soldiers have always been present on the battlefield” (p.12), but Rosen does not notice the difference between adult armies containing children acculturated to emulate adult behavior and child armies lacking institutional standards of conduct. Moreover, Rosen has put some thought into defining “child” but none into defining “soldier.” Child soldiers are a concern not only for those who want to protect children from abuse but also for those who wish to protect adult soldiers from having to fight against children. Children are a difficult enemy, not only for emotional and moral reasons, but because they lack adult rationality and will fight not only in hopeless situations but in pointless ones.

But Rosen’s discussion of the nature of childhood ignores neurological development, the fact that the teenage brain is not fully wired to make rational choices. It seems

strange that can suggest that adult military enlistment hardly represents “free and unfettered rational choice or informed consent in the absence of any social pressure” (p.134) while asserting that children should be free to make such choices. Military recruiters focus their efforts on the young explicitly because they are more susceptible to the very pressures Rosen believes that adults fail to resist. Rosen’s suggestion that some children, especially girls, find combat “empowering and liberating” (p.17) is undoubtedly true, but perhaps there is a better way.

The chapter on youthful resistance to the Holocaust is bizarre. Since no one has charged the Resistance with exploitation, that it was better for Jewish children to die fighting the Germans than in the gas chambers is an unnecessary argument for legalizing child soldiers. It is better to see the children’s courage as another indictment of the Germans, who stole from them, in addition to everything else, their childhood. In this chapter, moreover, Rosen might usefully compare the youthful Jewish resisters with their German counterparts drafted into the *Wehrmacht*. Would they also have represented for him the virtues attributed to the Jewish children: “energy, flexibility, and brazenness” (p.55)?

The Sierra Leone case study purports to demonstrate that youth violence may be so embedded in a culture that it cannot be disentangled. Peacetime history may

explain wartime exploitation, but it does not justify it. Even stranger is the argument that, while the conflict forced children into a “slave system,” many of them profited from the system’s internal hierarchy. Thus, “rebel child soldiers were more privileged and more powerful than sex slaves,” and “the most powerful and violent girls were not sex slaves but major participants in fighting and terrorism” (p.86-87).

Throughout his narrative of the Palestinian struggle against Zionism and, later, Israel, Rosen again praises youthful soldiers for escalating war’s violence. Youthful militancy not only energized the resistance but “enthralled” the Palestinians (p.117) with “the seductive power of the child hero bearing arms” (p.126). His conclusion about the *Intifada*, that the “sacrifice of the young” is part of the Palestinian cultural idiom (p.131), may explain why so many Palestinian children have died fighting the Israeli Army but not why outsiders are wrong to find their deaths dismaying.

Rosen presumably does not intend his book to promote the use of child soldiers but as a crusade against muddle-headed humanitarians and, especially, against the pro-Palestinian bias of the anti-child-soldier lobby. His logic, however, is certainly no better than theirs. Even cold-hearted child haters can come up with good reasons to keep children out of war.

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