Children of War
Childhood, child soldiers and agency. A case study of the children of FARC

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Children of War: Childhood, child soldiers and agency. A case study of the children of FARC

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Abstract

Seeing children fighting wars is a reality that is hard to grasp for most people. News reports, activists and humanitarian laws tend to portray child soldiers as innocent and naïve individuals, victims of political interests and agents forcefully placing them in wars and conflict. This essay offers an approach that does not label the usage of children in war either under a dichotomy perspective of guilty or non-guilty (law), perpetrator or victim (social sciences). Instead, this essay examines under what circumstances children confronted with war and violence express their agency and make decisions for themselves.

By looking into the history of children in warfare, and by exploring stories from former child combatants in Colombia, this essay argues that circumstances, including the militarisation of their society, shape children’s agency. The decision to join armed groups is a choice children may make to improve their conditions of life. Instead of searching for policies that can fit all conflicts in which child soldiers are involved, it is crucial to take notice of the child soldiers’ circumstances and the environment in which they live.
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1 Introduction

The non-governmental organization (NGO) Save the Children estimates that 420 million children are living in conflict zones, which is double the amount of children that were living in those conditions by the end of the Cold War (Save the Children, 2019). Despite not being the main actors in armed conflict, according to the Dutch NGO War Child, more than 142 million children are having direct effects of violence and armed conflict (War Child, n.d.). Complementing this assessment, the NGO Their World estimates that there are around 250,000 child soldiers today, actively recruited in 20 countries around the world (Their World Organization, n.d.). In the Human Rights Watch report on child soldiers from 2008 states that between the years of 2004 and 2008, tens of thousands of child soldiers had been released from armies and armed forces (Human Rights Watch, 2008, p. 4).

When addressing the subject of child soldiers, there is a deeply enrooted instinct of imagining innocent, almost seraphic young boys or girls, armed with weapons against their will. The alleged innocence and naïvetés of child soldiers tend to be romanticized. A series of movies portray helpless victims, creating misleading perceptions of the child soldier phenomenon. The movie Voces Inocentes (e. Innocent voices) which tells the story of a child soldier in the Salvadorian armed conflict during the 1980s; and the movies Blood Diamond and Beasts of no Nation, both which portray a feared guerrilla commander (the antagonist), that takes an innocent child under his wing, who is then helplessly turned into a child soldier.

Representation of innocent child soldiers is not exclusive to the movie industry. The same concept is popular both in media, among activist groups, and in humanitarian the aid discourse. When mapping media regarding child soldiers it is common to find headlines such as Innocence lost as recruitment of children continues (Freeland, 2010) – from the Sidney Morning Herald, or Child soldiers: innocent and deadly (SAPA, 2015) – from the South African media IOL.

The image of innocence of child soldiers has been coined and exploited by activists and advocacy organizations, which work preventing the recruitment of child soldiers or
in their reintegration processes after leaving the armed group. One example is the article *From Cradle to Conflict: Child Soldiers’ Growing Role in Latin America’s Drug Wars* where the analogy of the cradle creates a direct illusion of innocence (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2012). This also happens with analysis done of the Colombian conflict, where one of the first reports on usage of children in warfare was titled *Como corderos entre lobos* (e. as lambs among wolves)(Springer, 2012).

Well-known humanitarian organizations such as The International Red Cross (ICRC) or the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) produce material characterized by the same correlations between child soldiers, innocence, and exploitation. ICR’s publication *From child soldier to child “terrorist”: safeguarding innocence from counter-terrorism* and UNHCR’s *The Story of Ahmad: An Innocent Victim of Child Recruitment* are good examples. Institutions such as these two, besides being two of the biggest humanitarian organizations, are also commonly a primary source on child soldiers for academia, practitioners, and governments.

I will shortly examine the discourse about child soldiers and how the discourse displays them as powerless, as individuals who do not have agency nor power. Subsequently, I aim to understand why this perspective nurtures a discourse where child soldiers are considered victims, both in the international law as well as in a case study presented from Colombia. For this purpose, the essay reviews not only recent references of child soldiers but seeks to understand the evolution of warfare in Colombia through the usage of minors and the roles they have had as well as the implications of their use in armed actions.

As long as wars have been waged children have been part of them, and more often than not – by choice. Throughout history, we see stories of child war-heroes; youngsters highly ranked and even made generals, both in regular and irregular armed forces. The goal of this paper is to take examine the stories of former child soldiers of *Las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* de Colombia (FARC). FARC has been the largest recruiter of child soldiers in the history of the Colombian conflict. By looking at the stories of the children I want to explore to what extent children are using their individual agency to decide to take up arms, and what factors may influence those decisions. By analyzing FARC in different decades, this essay aims to explore if some of the factors that lead children to
take arms or leave them, have varied during the last 60 years, or have been affected in any way by other elements such as the signing of peace agreements, the creation of international legislation, among others.

The essay begins with a presentation of international conventions and legislation of importance for children’s rights and their participation in wars. Then it looks at childhood studies, the concept of agency, research on child soldiers and their agency and the concept militarization. Next chapter uses the conflict in Colombia as a case study, its and children’s involvement in both armies and civilian armed groups through history to current times. Stories from former child soldiers are examined, including their conditions of life and reasons for becoming involved as child soldiers. Finally, the findings are discussed and conclusions drawn.
2 Children’s rights, agency and war

Figure 1 Admiral Giulio Graziani and X Flottiglia MAS. The boy on the picture is Franco Grechi. Italy, 1943. Source: History Collection https://historycollection.co/heartbreaking-photographs-child-soldiers-wwi-wwii/

2.1 International conventions and legislation

“Child” refers to any person less than 18 years of age in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. A child associated with an armed force or group refers to any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited
or used by an armed force or group in any capacity, including but not limited to children used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken an active part in hostilities. (UNHCR, n.d)

On November 20th 1989, the United Nations General Assembly gathered on a convention to establish principles on the rights of children. The convention was called The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC or UNCRC) and has played a critical role in lives of children all around the world (Higgs, 2020, p. 15). The UNCRC is a legally binding international agreement, made to ensure safety and rights to all children no matter their social, economic, or cultural situations. By ratifying the agreement, States recognize children as subject to individual rights, just as adults; and aim to ensure children’s well-being, growth, and protection. By the end of 2019, every country in the United Nations General Assembly, except the United States, Somalia, and South Sudan had ratified the agreement (United Nations, 2020).

The UNCRC states that all children are entitled to a protected childhood. It says: “Recalling that, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations has proclaimed that childhood is entitled to special care and assistance” (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, p. 1) Although the world celebrated the convention regarding children’s rights, the agreement was criticized. Social scientists and humanitarian activists, for example, criticized the lack of regard of children associated with non-state armed groups, and that the agreement is built around a homogenous idea of sacred childhood, that does not align with childhood experiences of millions of children. Rosen (2007) states that the board later admitted to knowing about the differences in childhood ideas, but ignored the topic (p. 302). The agreement was also criticized for vague guidelines, and not raising the age restrictions to 18 years for all parties. Article 38 lightly touched on the subject of child soldiers, but does not address preventive measures. Article 38 states:

2. States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities.

3. States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavor to give priority to those who are oldest (United Nations General Assembly, 1989; Article 38).
Due to the criticism, on May 25th 2000 a new Optional Protocol was put forth by the UN General Assembly to better address children in conflict (United Nations, 2000). The new protocol aimed to clarify international laws regarding children within armed groups, and to raise the age of children allowed to enter state and non-state forces. Unfortunately, the new Optional Protocol failed to increase the age restrictions. Again with vague vocabulary, the protocol ended up favoring States that legally can recruit “voluntary” children as soldiers by 15, while non-state groups may not legally recruit anyone under the age of 18 years (Rosen, 2007, p. 297).

### 2.2 Childhood studies

Up until the mid-twentieth century, the concept of childhood, or interests in children in general, had not been widely popular topics of social sciences. French philosopher Philippe Ariès first wrote about the concept of childhood in his book *Centuries of Childhood* in 1962. He studied medieval art and paintings and argues that until the beginning of the 13th century, childhood was not seen as a particular thematic. Ariès argues that the idea of the innocent child or holy childhood first appeared within the religious ideas of the child Jesus and his holy mother. Up until then, children in paintings and art exhibitions had mostly been portrayed as miniature adults, and the concept of a specific phase of childhood was not evident (p. 69).

Linda Pollock (1983) challenges Ariès’s theories in her book *The Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500-1900*, where she studied family letters and diaries from 1500 to 1900s. She states that amongst historians there is a general agreement that there certainly was a change in attitude towards children in the medieval times, but the time of that change is disagreed upon. She argues that within each period studied, there was always a new and better understanding of children, but that children were undoubtedly, always a steady part of reality that differed from adults (p. 12).

The prevailed and dominant ideas in the twentieth and twenty-first century of childhood in Western societies were that children were vulnerable and innocent and needed to be protected and guided (Higgs, 2020, p. 15; Rosen, 2005, p. 7; Oswell, 2013, p. 16; Punch, 2016, p. 355). Therefore, the notion of childhood is a process of growing up, as becoming adults rather than a state of ‘being’ a child (Oswell, 2013, p. 16). Oswell (2013) notes that many sociologists have argued that seeing children as progressing along
a defined line is a skewed and demeaning way of understanding children. He argues that this kind of evolutionistic view is prejudice-filled and takes away the core of children. With the rise of the new sociology of childhood (Tisdall & Punch, 2012), social constructionism (Hammersley, 2017) sees children and childhood as a social construction that is only made and explained in the time of being, within the social context (p. 40). Importantly, Oswell (2013) states that adults alone cannot construct the concept of childhood, and children need to be validated as social agents (p. 16). Social constructionism is widely used in different social sciences, but often with very different understandings (Hammersley, 2017, p. 117).

Today social scientists increasingly warn against this approach to see children and childhood solely as social constructs, constructed by adults in relation to adulthood. Hammersley (2017) points out that while remarking childhood as a social construction childhood studies ignore the biological differences between children and adults. The contradiction is that most science fields agree that biological difference is a fact, but childhood studies downplay differences for one argument, but emphasize them where it fits to support another. Hammersley argues, this same problem can also be found in other social sciences, such as gender and women studies (p. 117).

2.3 Agency

In the past decades, the concept of agency has been important within the social sciences. Understanding of agency is crucial when observing peoples behaviors and understanding decision-making. Agency, simply put, is when a person makes an informant decision and can be held responsible for that decision. Agency can be conducted singularly as well as in groups (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2008, p. 242).

According to Hammersley (2017), “[t]he idea that children have agency – that they play an ‘active’ role in social life or can exercise autonomy – has long been a central theme in Childhood Studies” (p. 119). He argues that agency, for children and adults alike is dependent on many factors, including biology, social context, and culture. Likewise, Bluebond-Langner and Korbin (2007) underline that decisions and actions are affected by structural constraints. Whatever decision is to be made is affected by emotional, social and political pressure. Agency of a child, or an adult, therefore needs to be viewed within the social context/situation that it takes place.
According to Abebe (2019), there is a difference between being an actor or being an agent – make action or having agency. An actor is someone who does something to accomplish something, acts to accomplish, whereas an agent does something in relation to other people or in relation to circumstances – be they social, economic, environmental, and so on. Therefore, it is important to view actors as “thinkers” and/or “doers”. When thinking about circumstances, repercussions, reasons, and outcomes, one is making decisions and taking action as an agent.

On the other end, Abebe (2019) argues, a lack of agency is sometimes viewed as negative. Lack of agency can be confused with a lack of authority or lack of independence, but exercising agency still happens in circumstances of interdependency. This is visible as adults and children live everyday lives in the context of social structures, relationships, and institutions, such as family, society, and under laws. Within these structures, you can exercise your agency in relation to other people or rules. Abebe maintains that there is danger in seeing agency solely as something good, and to see a lack of agency therefore as something bad (p. 6). Agency does not equal good or right decisions, it just gives the individual power to make and take responsibility for their decisions.

2.4 Child soldiers

“One of the biggest myths [about child soldiers] is that they are all forced to join an armed force, or even, that they are all abducted,” - José Luis Hernández, (South Sudan-based child protection officer with Unicef, the UN children’s fund (Burke & Hatcher-Moore, 2017)).

Throughout history, children have taken part in wars and conflicts in one way or another. Kalyvas (2001) shows that following the end of the Cold War there was a decline in interstate wars and a rise of civil wars. Following that turn, the dominant discourse has waged after the Cold War as “new” wars, and those before as “old” wars. The “old” wars are colored as noble, justice-seeking wars that were political and ideological, and waged with regular armies. In contrast, the “new” wars are painted as criminal, depoliticized, private, and predatory, that often use abducted, drugged child soldiers (pp. 99-100).
In the “old” wars many child soldiers were seen as heroes. Both those who joined opposition groups and rebelled against oppression as well as those who fought for their countries (Rosen, 2005, p. 6; Kalyvas, 2001). Nevertheless, with the coming of the International Humanitarian Law and the Human Rights Law, the perception of children in conflict drastically changed. The Western ideologies that these humanitarian laws, such as UNCRC, are based upon, paint the picture of a fragile, innocent child, in need of a sacred childhood, that needs protection from danger and conflict – until the child has reached 18 years of age. These ideologies have created the rules and protocols that serve as the normative infrastructure for the protection and laws of children in armed conflict (Kononenko, 2016, p. 90; Rosen, 2007, p. 298).

When giving children this predetermined image of fragility and innocence, the idea of children involved in conflict causes a clash (Rosen, 2005). Good involved in evil must, therefore, have been by the forces of the evil. The innocent children must have been forced into the evil circumstances, either by manipulation, abduction or trafficking, etc. This image of an innocent child involved in conflict, that has been manipulated, forcefully taken from its home and forced to become a soldier against its will, is a fairly new concept.
Rosen (2005) warns that taking this view of children that are in any way involved in conflict, whether bearing arms or not, directly places them all solely as victims.

Social scientists have criticized the humanitarian approach to children in war, as they argue that it does not take into account the social and cultural differences in the understanding of the idea of childhood and on children’s involvement in war (Higgs, 2020, p. 17). Some have argued that there is no one correct image of children’s involvement in war and conflict, and every case needs to be viewed in the context of where it takes place.

As José Luis Hernández states in the beginning of this chapter, the biggest myth is that all child soldiers are victims – forced into the situations of war. Seeing children that are involved in conflicts only as victims of deviant adult abuse, takes away their power of agency and means they cannot be responsible for war crimes they commit (Higgs, 2020, p. 17). Rosen (2007) points to another problem that when child soldiers are seen as victims that are not responsible for their actions, that can take away local understandings of blame and justice, and victims of war crimes committed by children cannot seek legal justice against the perpetrators. This can cause grave problems in peace processes when the international laws override local legal policies. Victims might therefore not be able to seek justice in a way that is considered fair within the understanding of the community (p. 297).

2.5 Child soldier agency

Rosen (2017) points out a problem with underestimating the agency of child soldiers. He says that the discourse is that children are under social pressure and “volunteer” to join armed-groups or militaries, while adults express free will, have a choice, and decide to join. And by taking away their agency in this way they are painted to be irrational and emotional in their decision making - only acting out of emotions or peer pressure, instead of being capable to judge situations and make informed decisions. That way children are perceived to be incapable of rational judgment, at least until they are 18 years old. Rosen argues that no credit is given to the children, when the decision to join armed-forces might be the safest and most rational choice for survival (p. 299).

When looking at agency and the decisions made by child soldiers, Abebe (2019) suggests that agency may be experienced in some areas of their life and not in others. This can be seen in the way children decide to take on different roles to cope with their
reality of violence and war and to maximize their circumstances. He says that when needed, this tactical agency applies to their everyday livelihood strategies where they make decisions that help them create opportunities (p. 8). Rosen (2007) argues in a similar vein and states that this exercise of agency to join armed forces can sometimes be a safer choice for children than to be an unarmed civilian. For where there is a total breakdown of societies, deciding to join armed forces can sometimes be a necessary and a positive choice for children’s survival (p. 298).

Peters (2004) highlights what many other social scientists have also stated, that for the most part child soldiers are knowledgeable young people who take rational decisions to maximize their situations (p. 30). After interviewing many child soldiers in Sierra Leone, he states that many actively made the decision to fight, and they defended their choice. Peters argues that military activity can help young people make their way in the world, as it offers training in different ways and chances to learn new skills. When there are no opportunities for education, children will search for other educational opportunities. He maintains that bearing arms, and being a combatant, is a skill that needs to be learned. In conflict-affected areas where the lifeworld is one of violence, deciding to join an armed force to learn new skills and attain economic stability and safety, does not seem to be a very irrational decision. Peters believes that children that join armed forces are far from being brainwashed individuals who cannot be accountable for their choices or actions. Indeed, Peters says that they are “active agents who take rational and active actions to maximize their situation under difficult circumstances” (p. 30).

2.6 Militarization and lifeworlds
When looking at wars and conflict, it is important to approach the concept of militarization. Higgs (2020) describes militarization as a process that is structured by the socio-historical context of where it takes place. Generally, this is a process of changing one’s identity; the becoming of a soldier. A person goes from being a civilian into attaining the identity of a soldier. With this new identity comes a new role, where different rules apply, and different behavior is expected. According to Higgs, the identities they take upon and the attachments and loyalty they form to the armed groups is a key component of militarization (p. 4). The militarization process can also happen to societies and States as a whole. When militarism seeps into societies, the social structures change, which can
affect the operation of the State. Military ideas can take over societies and deeply affect people’s daily lives (Rutherford, 2019, p. 1). These understandings are fundamental when children are brought back out of war, and to help with their reintegration into society (Higgs, 2020, p. 5).

Another important variable that highly influences children’s decisions to join armed groups is to understand the social situations of where they come from. Higgs (2020) refers to this as the children’s lifeworlds. She states that lifeworld is within the “social spheres that influence our understandings of the world and the ways in which we see ourselves” (p. 73). Within this sphere, we learn about morals and values, as well as acceptable behaviors. By living in these lifeworlds, we learn what is important about life, and how it is lived. Lifeworlds also influence our decisions.

Higgs (2020) argues that militarism may begin within the lifeworld of children, in societies where violence is the norm and their perception does not include a world without it (p. 78). This applies in the case of the Colombian children, when militarism is so deeply rooted into the lifeworld, the process of militarism, for them, has already started outside of the armed groups. Higgs draws her argument from many of the children she interviewed, that come from violence-affected and poor areas, where education is often not an option. The casual way the children spoke about violence, about the history of the violence, showed how deeply it is tangled into their daily lives. Their lifeworld is one within conflict, and a world without violence, simply does not exist (p. 108).

3 Minors in Colombia’s warfare

The Colombian conflict of today is one of the longest on-going conflicts in the modern world. There is no consensus on the date that marks the beginning of the conflict in Colombia but historians such as Rafael Pardo in La Historia de las Guerras (2004) openly state that Colombia has been in a permanent state of confrontation among warring factions ever since their first independence efforts in 1810 (Pardo Rueda, 2004).
3.1 Historical context

Minors have taken part in Colombian conflict and wars since the birth of Colombia as a nation. One of the best-known cases in the early years of the Republic was Pedro Pascasio Martínez, who, at the age of 12 was a member of the First Rifle Battalion and became famous for capturing Spanish general José María Barreiro after the Boyacá Battle in 1819. At only the age of 12, he was promoted to Sergeant (Centro de Estudios históricos del Ejército Nacional, 2016).

After Viceroyalty of New Granada obtained its independence in 1819 and changed its name to Gran Colombia, the Colombian 19th century was full of internal disputes, territorial divisions, and political turmoil. Gonzalo España in El país que se hizo a tiros (2013) states that there is no unanimity regarding the exact number of civil wars waged in the 19th century in Colombia. In his masterpiece, España (2013) compiles findings on 10 civil wars fought in Colombia during the 19th century, but he also states that other historians such as Lucas Caballero talks of 23 civil wars including regional wars. The wars were fought over political disputes between central/urban and rural elites, in order to impose the government system that suited them best. Religion and political ideologies played an important role as catalysts of conflict, although they have not been the main motive for the confrontation in the country.

Reina Rodríguez (2012) states in his research on recruitment of children in the 19th century, that parents used to authorize the enrollment of their sons and would see the army as a substitute for the family or of the church. However, there were also numerous cases where the parents took their children into war with them. This was especially evident in the cases of armed groups made by civilians, and that operated against or parallel to the country’s army (Jaramillo, 1987).

As shown in the research of Pardo (2008), Jaramillo (1987), and Reina Rodríguez (2012), the 19th century ended being a time where the different wars that took place in Colombia as an emerging nation, paved the way from schools directly to the barracks. Students and peasants became soldiers and “[t]here the children disappeared and the warriors appeared” (Reina Rodríguez, 2012, p. 67).

For many historians such as España (2013), Pardo (2008) or Caballero (1982), the 19th century in Colombia ends in 1903 with the end of La Guerra de Los Mil Días (e.
Thousand Day War), a war also well known for the usage of children in the armies of both liberal and conservative armies. As shown in the research of Jaramillo (1991), children were most often involved in the conflict through their family political affiliation with the conservatives or the liberals:

Forcibly imprisoned by the whirlwind of war, many had to change, without any training, their hoe and their books for gigantic rifles to march to the battlefields, some in the company of their parents, the others as conscripts brought to force, and some induced by political fervor, together with the idealized image of war and of the men who waged it (Jaramillo, 1987, p. 225).¹

As seen in Jaramillo (1987) and Reina (2012), child soldiers had specific roles in both liberal and conservative armies and were valued for their agility, discipline, and capacity to face the intensity of war situations. Not all of the tasks of the children were directly involved in confrontation, some of them served as spies and messengers. For some of these tasks, commanders would use children from as young as 7 years of age. By the age of 11, as shown in Reina (2012), children were already having opinions regarding the conflict and politics, some of them even declaring themselves revolutionaries. Due to the exacerbated levels of violence of the Thousand Day War, child soldiers and other minors involved in the confrontations suffered the same punishments as adults during wartime.

No difference was done regarding physical punishment in prison regarding child soldiers in the Tolima region in Colombia. They had to undergo the same conditions as to any other detainee, for example, beatings and overcrowding. There are also some vague records on the effects on mental health for child soldiers who underwent imprisonment:

It saddens the spirit to see among the prisoners of all conditions, a great number of children between 10 and 14 years old, receiving not only the physical asfixia but also moral, which will slaughter their illusions and kill the germ of good feelings (Pérez, 1904, p. 236).²

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¹ Aprisionados a la fuerza por el torbellino de la guerra muchos debieron cambiar, sin que mediara entrenamiento alguno, su azadón y sus libros por gigantescos fusiles para marchar a los campos de batalla, los unos en compañía de sus padres, los otros como conscriptos llevados a la fuerza, y algunos inducidos por el fervor político, unido a la imagen idealizada de la guerra y de los hombres que la hacían (Jaramillo, 1987, p. 225).

² Contrista el ánimo ver entre los presos de todas las condiciones un gran número de niños de 10 a 14 años, recibiendo no sólo la asfixia física sino también moral, que aniquila sus ilusiones y mata el germen de los buenos sentimientos (Pérez, 1904, p. 236).
Unfortunately, there is very little information kept and analyzed of child soldiers in the 19th century as well as data about their sacrifices and war-related effects in their return to civilian life or continuation of life in war (Pachón, 2016, pp. 3-4). What can be concluded of these times is that the Thousand Day War brought to an end years of exacerbated practices of culture of war and violence (Adams, 2014). However, it did not solve structural problems of the country such as poverty, inequality and lack of political participation (LeGrand, 2009). Additionally, leaving unsolved issues of wartimes and open wounds that eventually lead to new confrontations.

### 3.2 The 20th century

Despite the many wars during the 19th century, the Colombian state was not able to consolidate a hegemony and control over all the territory. Local elites had become local ruling powers, mainly rural, that cooperated with the central government at their own interest, and in that way prolonging the model of government during the Spanish Colony (González, 2014; LeGrand, 2009). This has been a very important variable along the history of the Colombian conflict. The limitations of the centralized State and the constant struggle with local/regional elites and powers made it even more difficult for the investments from the central government to reach the rural areas. The relationship between the State and citizens living outside of the main cities also grew weaker, as for many of them; the State has not been present in their territories for decades.

Without a strong government that controlled the whole territory by force, and without substantial investments coming from the centralized government to the regions and control the country through economy, the only element that united and controlled all the elites - both central and rural - was politics, more specifically political parties (Palacios & Safford, 2012; González, 2014). Colombia, as a divided nation since its origins, evolved as a weak and fractured State that had, nevertheless, very strong political parties (Wills, 2015).

The disputes of the 19th century between Liberal and Conservative parties created “inherited-hatred” that continued in the narrative of the different factions in dispute during the 20th and 21st centuries in Colombia. Although there was relative calm during the Conservative Hegemony that followed the Thousand Day War, the end of that era
and the world economic crisis of 1929 forced an end to the conservative rule in 1930. Social uprisings in rural and urban areas were becoming more frequent and the repression had scaled up to alleged massacres. The liberal party then governed from 1930-1946, taking selective revenge on conservatives who were received “with massacre, assassination, destruction of property and burning of churches” (Karl, 2017, p. 34). The inherited hatreds and local political idiosyncrasy led to what for many, has been the direct origin of the contemporary armed conflict in Colombia, *La Violencia* (e. The Violence). *La Violencia* was a time of political dispute “when Liberal and Conservative peasants seemingly returned to the nineteenth century, hacking each other to death with machetes” (Karl, 2017, p. 1).

Early reports on *La Violencia* such as *La Violencia en Colombia* by Fals Borda, Guzmán, and Umaña (1964) calculate that near 200,000 deaths have occurred between 1949 and 1958. However, the effects were not only measurable by the number of deaths; *La Violencia* in general affected the population directly or indirectly in many other ways, such as displacement, mutilation, sexual abuse, and violence, among others. As seen on Bailey (1967): “if we include the populations of cities which experienced mass violence during the same period, that at least twenty percent of the total Colombian population was directly affected by *La Violencia* between 1946 and 1966” (p. 562).

Despite the amnesty offered by General Rojas Pinilla in 1953 when arriving to power and the subsequent decrees and measures to foster a unilateral disarmament of the liberal guerrillas, were not effective to prevent the restart of confrontation. There were no official peace agreements for the demobilizations and therefore, nothing real to enforce (Alape, 1985, p. 161; Medina & Sánchez, 2003; Fonseca Galán, 1987).

The uncertainty of what came after demobilizing, as well as the slow fulfillment of agreements and poor security measures for those who left weapons, both the army and the conservative party members took vengeance to their own hands (Alape, 1985, p. 210; Medina & Sánchez, 2003, p. 111). The slaughter of demobilized liberal combatants as well as liberal peasants and their families, forced new children into the rogue liberal groups and new communist guerrillas, both for their survival as well as for defending their families (Pachón, p. 17). Several child soldiers from *La Violencia* would then become the

In the sub fund of the process, the child is seen as an active element in the tragedy. Little soldiers and future chiefs; assassins and criminals of tomorrow: clients of prisons and courtrooms will be the scourge of a society that frustrated them (p. 5).¹

3.3 FARC and other armed groups

The 1960s and ‘70s in Colombia were decades of territorial expansion (Pardo Rueda, 2004). Guerrilla armed groups such as the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), National Liberation Army (ELN), Popular Liberation Army (EPL), Armed Movement Quintin Lame (MAQL) and the M-19, just to mention the main groups, appeared (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2013).

In the midst of the Cold War, the Colombian government’s response to social protests and unhappy former combatants of La Violencia was focused on chasing its own population, on what was called “the internal enemy” approach (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2013). Meanwhile the Soviet, Cuban and Chinese communist experiences nurtured the Colombian armed groups (p. 123), catalyzing the fronts of warfare and increasing the number of combatants and the competition among groups to recruit members, especially in the rural areas, some of them minors (p. 31).

For the guerrilla-armed groups, the social base is a fundamental element for the confrontation. That is not only regarding warfare or armed confrontation, but also with other tasks such as supply provision, intelligence, health care, resources etc. The territorial expansion of the guerrilla-armed groups in the ‘70s and their plans to gain power by force, created stronger clashes with the government forces. Thanks to the legal umbrella provided by the Security Statute, the government forces had a green light to coerce the population or anyone suspected of being supportive of guerrilla-armed groups, students and young population being one of its targets (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2013, p. 133). Additionally, the territorial expansion created another clash that

¹ En el subfondo del proceso se ve pasar al niño como elemento activo de la tragedia. Pequeños soldados y futuros jefes; asesinos y criminales del mañana: clientelas de cárceles y estrados judiciales, serán el azote de una sociedad que los frustro (Pachón, 2016, p. 5).
was inevitable with the emerging drug lords that would consolidate their business and dispute of power in the coming years. The dispute of power with drug lords added to some rural economic sectors that were affected by the guerrilla expansion, created the ideal scenario for the appearance of a new-armed actor in the conflict, the self-defense forces. The raise of the self-defense forces (paramilitary-armed groups) created a dispute for territorial control that had direct effects on the local population, which was trapped in the middle of violence coming from all armed actors (p. 50). Romero (2003) outlines the situation as follows:

Paramilitary forces, or self-defense groups, have been associated in Colombia with drug trafficking and its conflict resolution techniques, with the counterinsurgency strategies of the armed forces and the tactics of the “dirty war” against the revolutionary guerrillas, with para-institutional forms of controlling social protest on the part of “mafia” capitalists, or with the growth of the large cattle ranches and the violent eviction of peasants from the land by large landowners (Romero, 2003, p. 178).

The ‘80s was a decade of conflict escalation, especially by the growth of the paramilitary forces and the retaliation of guerrilla groups against the State offensives. However, the beginning of the decade started with the first amnesty provided by the government since the ‘50s, and the first ceasefire between the State and the guerrillas, in an agreement that was signed in La Uribe (Medina & Sánchez, 2003). Although the agreement of La Uribe created the opportunity for a political way out of the Colombian conflict, by recognizing a political nature of guerrillas and by condemning kidnaps, extortion, and terrorism. No reference was made to reducing the recruitment or usage of minors in the conflict. When reviewing the compilation of treaties made by Medina & Sánchez (2003) from 1902-1994, neither La Uribe nor the treaties of the early ‘90s made any specific reference to minors in their ranks.

The end of the Cold War and the establishment of the new Colombian Constitution in 1991 (replacing the one of 1886), became the ideal scenario for the first set of demobilization of guerrilla groups such as M-19, EPL, and MAQL, followed shortly after by other minor groups. Nevertheless, the armed groups that did not undergo the peace agreements incremented their military actions both on the guerrilla side, FARC and ELN, and on the paramilitary side. The different groups created a confederation called United Self Defense Forces of Colombia – AUC for its Spanish acronym; the country was divided
under paramilitary control, with a stronghold in the north of the country, and guerrilla control with a stronghold in the south of the country. Meanwhile the State forces faced military defeats and political turmoil due to corruption cases and accusations of relations between drug cartels and economic and political leaders (Higgs, 2020; Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2013).

The numbers of the usage of minors in armed conflicts have always been under registered in Colombia, especially after Colombia ratified the Statute of Rome in 2002, which makes recruiting children a war crime. Although being a war crime, the end of the ‘90s and the early years of the 21st century were the peak of recruitment of combatants in Colombia, same goes for recruitment of minors (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2017, 2013). Of the 16.879 cases of recruitment of minors that were reported between 1960 and 2016, 54% of the cases were attributed to FARC, 27% to AUC, 10% to ELN, 7% to rogue groups created after demobilization, and 2% to other groups and criminal networks (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2017, p. 54).

The AUC demobilized between 2003 and 2006 and were the first group to officially have their leaders imprisoned for war crimes including the usage of minors in the armed conflict. Nonetheless, the minors were not a part of the demobilization process and in fact, the AUC was accused of hiding the children, sending them back to their regions of origin without the proper assistance by the State. Only with a promise of future aid if they remained quiet (El Tiempo, 2008). According to the Centro of Historical Memory Database, the AUC only demobilized 913 minors.

In 2016, FARC signed its peace agreement with the Colombian State. Several months before the final signature, both FARC and the government agreed upon a protocol for the demobilization of the combatants that were below 15 years of age. According to a report sent by the High Presidential Council Office for Human Rights to the United Nations, by December 31st of 2017, FARC only demobilized 135 minors (El Tiempo, 2018).

3.4 The children of FARC
When approaching the subject of the children of FARC, it is important to highlight that this does not only refer to young men and women in the ranks who were minors in
November 2016 when the Peace Accord was signed, but also all those who passed through FARC ranks as minors at any moment in the long history of FARC. Acknowledging that the Colombian conflict spanned more than 60 years, several generations of men and women have passed through the ranks, joining in every state of life or even been born inside the armed group, giving therefore, a peculiar complexity when addressing a theme such as the children of FARC (Romero & Chávez, 2008, pp. 200-201).

As mentioned before, FARC has been pointed the biggest recruiter of child soldiers in the Colombian armed conflict, having nearly 54% of the cases between 1958 and 2016 (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2017, p. 54). According to Romero & Chávez (2008) and ICBF and PGN (2004), three different categories of recruitment of children by FARC are used to understand their involvement: (I) voluntary, (II) forced, or (III) by birth (Romero & Chávez, 2008, pp. 200-201).

As FARC grew stronger in rural areas after its creation in 1964, and given the absence of the State in such regions, the guerilla was seen as the main authority in those territories. From the initial recruitment among “FARC families” where the uncle or parent in the
guerrilla was followed by younger generations of their kin, the armed group passed to gain the admiration of local rural youth, who saw their recruitment in FARC as the equivalent of a military service (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2017, pp. 71-72).

As seen in Figure 3, in the early stages of FARC, families traveled alongside the guerrilleros, not only for solidarity with their cause, but also for security reasons. The Colombian State had ordered bombings of territories such as Marquetalia, Rio Chiquito, El Pato, and Guayabero, where the rebels had initially settled (Marulanda Vélez, 1973, p. 24). Therefore, children, through “FARC families”, have been around the rebel activity since the early beginnings in the ’60s serving different types of roles, including combat.

With the signing of the peace agreement in late 2016 came the much needed but difficult task of reintegration. After demobilizing, many former soldiers, including children, started the reintegration processes. In her book Militarized youth, the children of the FARC, Johanna Higgs (2020) interviewed several former child soldiers in the Special Attention Center (CEA) in Medellín, which is an integration center for former child soldiers. The following stories are from a few of these former child soldiers of FARC, as well as civilians affected by the conflict. These stories give an insight into the children’s lives before and within the guerilla group and the reasons they ended up within its ranks. Worth noting
there was no story in which the former child soldier expresses regrets for having joined FARC.

Buenaventura, is one of Colombia’s most important cities, as it is the biggest port of the country. It is an important part of the drug traffic routes and one of the poorest regions in Colombia. Therefore, there is a high presence of crime organizations in the city. A priest called Adriel, who worked with disadvantaged youth in a paramilitary controlled neighborhood, explained that at least half of the population in the city were victims of the conflict:

They are displaced, they have been forced to join an armed group, they have had someone killed, they have been sexually abused, they have had someone disappeared and they have been threatened. Whatever type of violence you can imagine, most of the population have been affected directly by this. (Higgs, 2020, p. 117)

With the strong presence of organized armed groups, children lives were deeply affected. Adriel told a story of a woman who lost her teenage son. He worked for the guerilla groups but was captured by the police. The police then decided to use him as an informant. The priest feared for the boy’s life and sent him to Bogotá. The boy missed his mother so much that he returned a few days later and was killed by the paramilitaries in front of his mother. He was 14 years old (p. 117).

A young boy named Marlon used to be a soldier for FARC. He believed that children joined FARC to feel powerful and be feared. They carry guns as a symbol of power and masculinity. Within the guerilla group they gained power and attention, and they wanted to be famous for being bad. He said you attain a new identity inside the group, and a new social status. Higgs (2020) notes that by joining FARC, Marlon escaped in some way, the poverty he and many other children in Colombia are stuck in (p. 130).

José, a young man living within a guerilla controlled department, told Higgs that a lot of the endless fighting was over resources. Colombia is a land with flowing resources that both the guerilla groups and rogue members inside the military wanted to control. And with endless lack of State presence, violence escalated and more deaths happened. He maintained that the war was not because of the guerilla groups, but because of social inequality. When people did not have food on their tables and there were no educational opportunities, thus, it was not surprising that people joined the armed forces (p. 126).
An unidentified former child soldier told Higgs that he believes that many children that came from broken homes joined the groups. The psychological strain that the constant conflict between guerilla groups and the military or paramilitary groups made living conditions very hard for many. The former soldier said that when your world is filled with constant violence, such as rape and murder, and no opportunities for education, many decide to take up arms (p. 95).

Between 1960 and 2016, girls made up for 32% of registered cases of recruitment of minors in FARC (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2017, p. 55). As mentioned in chapter 3.2, the cases registered were 16.879 and therefore 5401 of them were girls. A teacher, age 44, in San Jose del Guaviare told Higgs she believed that one reason for women to join the ranks was that they were treated as sexual objects and were not taught self-respect. There were no educational opportunities to pursue in many rural areas, and therefore girls were taught that they had to find a partner and get married. And due to lack of opportunities that was all they believed they could do with their lives (p. 131). A few young girls in the CEA center told Higgs that before joining FARC they had dreams to study in universities. Unfortunately, coming from a poor, rural area, they did not have the necessary resources. They believed they were from a different social class than other students and did not have the correct social status, nor resources, to be allowed to study (p. 127).

Beyond lack of educational opportunities the girls had various reasons to join and some of them were personal. Silvia, a 34-year-old young woman from San José del Guaviare municipality had been a part of the FARC since she was 17 years old. She grew up on a farm in a department that had strong guerilla presence where violence was a daily threat. She had joined the reintegration process after being captured by the police. She told Higgs that she decided to join FARC for revenge, after the paramilitaries murdered many of her family members (p. 116).

Katerine, a young girl from the department of Caqueta, joined FARC at the age of 13 after having problems with her boyfriend. She was living with her grandmother but after having personal problems with her paramour she ran away and said she wanted to feel powerful. She joined the group where she was given a gun and told to go around the towns of the department and extort business owners for money. The presence of guerilla
was very high in the department and Katerine explained that they were very visible in the streets and civilians often interacted with them. She said that when entering the group she was given gun powder to eat, to get over fear, and made to drink blood of another girl that she had killed (p. 106).

Figure 5. Yeisi Alexandra Mendoza joined the FARC at 8 years old. Source: Los Tiempos. https://www.lostiempos.com/oh/actualidad/20160522/ninos-soldado-colombia

What can be seen from these stories is that often the children join the forces for their own personal reasons. In the departments mentioned, the guerilla and other armed groups were always present. Violence seemed to be a part of reality and their lifeworlds and no opportunities for education. None of the stories mention children being kidnapped or forced into the groups, and none talk of themselves as victims.

4 Discussion
The purpose of this essay is to examine how the social studies addressed this issue, especially regarding children’s individual expression of choice. There is no doubt that there are children forced into armed violence, however that is not always applicable.
Children’s realities differ largely, and therefore the idea of a one homogenous model to insure every child’s best interest is questionable for the wellbeing of many children of the world. It is evident that the western ideology that has shaped the international legislation regarding children is both filled with prejudice and tainted with skewed ideas on what childhood looks like. The regulations put forward, and especially the Optional Protocol (United Nations, 2000) also disrespect children’s agencies as they allow for children under 18 to “volunteer” for State militaries, but they cannot “volunteer” for a guerilla or non-state group. The paradox is that the “innocent” children under 18 years of age are seen as capable of exercising agency, as long as it benefits the State. This again reflects stigma regarding children, which is emphasized in contradictions in childhood studies (Abebe, 2019). Sometimes children are seen as independent, with their own voice and capable of agency, however in other cases they are regarded as unable to make choices for them own benefit and may therefore not allowed to make decisions regarding specific situations.

International policies and laws also create a problem that is worth considering. When recruitment of children is made a war crime (United Nations, 2000), they may have become a perverse incentive to make child soldiers invisible to avoid war crime convictions. As seen in many of the demobilization processes of the 1990s, child soldiers were not an element of special attention. But by the time of the paramilitary demobilization between 2003-2006, recruiting child soldiers was considered a war crime. In both cases, numbers of child soldiers handed in, was staggeringly low (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2017).

Agency is a factor that is widely missing in the discourse of child soldiers. Undoubtedly, there are children who are abducted or forced into those situations against their will, but for the majority of child soldiers, it seems not to be the case (Burke & Hatcher-Moore, 2017). Looking into the stories of the children of FARC, poverty seems to be a common factor, which sometimes is a deciding factor when children join the armed forces. Revenge, troubled homes, and a life filled with violence also seem to be common denominators of reasons used in the decision-making. However, what can be taken away from the stories is that the children made their decisions in relation to their life and their lifeworld. They all exercised agency, taking into account their situations and trying to
improve their conditions. It is also important to note that, when reading the stories, there was not a single story expressing regrets (Higgs, 2020). That is not to say they did not regret their decision to join. I find it important here to remind what Abebe (2019) states, that exercising agency does not equal a good or the best decision. It is solely a decision.

The concept militarization is of relevance (Higgs, 2020). In communities, such as many rural departments in Colombia, where everything in the environment is affected by violence, making a decision to step out of poverty or to take up arms to attain dignity and respect, does not seem a farfetched idea. Additionally, when a conflict has lasted as long as in Colombian, violence becomes embedded into stories and narratives of the world told by parents and grandparents to the children. When all you know is a militarized world, your perception of reality exists inside that world, and you therefore make decision within and in relation to that world.

In the unique case of Colombia, the militarized world spans decades (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2013). Generations of former child soldiers become parents, who then later have their children join armed forces, who then also have children of their own. The family history can be intertwined with the history of conflict, and militarization becoming a factor that might make them lean towards deciding joining the groups. And when the family history is within the history of conflict, revenge is a factor that can motivate enlisting.

The constant absence of the State, evident throughout the history of Colombia, has left scars on the country (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2013). This creates deep distrust between the population and the government institutions that can be hard to repair. Adriel, the priest in Buenaventura, said that when captured by the police, the young boy, who was underage, was turned into an informant for the police. Knowing that making him work for the police put his life in increased danger, the State still “uses” the boys. According to the UNCRC (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) and the Optional Protocol, that boy legally was not allowed to be a part of the guerilla group, although he was allowed to be part of the State’s armed forces (this case the police). The State, being the one that should “save” the children from danger and violence, is then the one putting him in danger for their own benefit. Therefore, all trust in the State is lost.
The stories outlined in the previous chapter align with other research conducted in Colombia, which note variations of motivations for children to join armies based (Romero & Chávez, 2008, p. 200-201; Ombudsman Office, 2014, p. 22). The main motivations to join can be summarized as following:

- Gaining social recognition and power
- Leave behind poverty conditions
- Vengeance
- Protection from another armed group or army
- Following friends, family or paramour
- Job opportunity of providing goods, taking care of crops, among others

Again it is important to note that a considerable number of minors joined FARC ranks by force with physical force or through psychological pressure. Family played a role in some of those cases, where parents giving some of their children to the guerrilla. The reasons varied, sometimes for protection for the family, as a way to pay the armed group or avoid the burning of their crops and slaughter of cattle. In certain regions, it was also made mandatory that a member of each family served in the armed group (Romero & Chávez, 2008, pp. 200-201).

5 Conclusion
This essay has examined the truthfulness of the dominant discourse on child soldiers. Humanitarian groups, activists, and movies have painted a picture of a fragile child, forcefully placed in an armed group against their will. By looking into history of warfare and stories of former child soldiers in Colombia, I argue that children have always been parts of war, and more often than not, by choice. They have exercised their individual agency and made informative decisions to join and leave armed ranks. Looking at the stories told by former child soldiers, and people affected by the conflict in Colombia, we see that violence is a part of everyday life in many people’s lives. Poverty, no educational
options and personal reasons are among the factors that make joining armed forces a rational idea to improve people’s conditions in life.

This essay has avoided the trend commonly found in academic discussions representing the child soldiers. In line with a legal or a judicial approach, child soldiers are often either seen as guilty or not guilty of actions committed in war or, in line with the social sciences approach, they are seen as either victims or perpetrators. This last approach is often fueled by the *a priori* perception of child soldiers as innocent and being without agency. Instead of searching for policies that can fit all conflicts in which child soldiers are involved, it appears to be crucial to take notice of the child soldiers’ circumstances and the environment in which they live.

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References


