

Reseña / Review

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A Child's Journey into Terrorism and Back Again

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The exploitation of children as soldiers is a global phenomenon and has been visible over the past several decades in Latin American countries such as Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, and Guatemala, among others. Although the literature on child soldiers has expanded and matured significantly over the past several decades, relatively little has been published in English about child soldiers who were involved with the terrorist group Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) in Peru.

This important if sparsely written book helps to fill this gap. It tells the author's extraordinary story of how he decided to join the Shining Path when he was 12 years old in order to find and be with his older brother and also to become part of a wider struggle for justice. Inside the Shining Path, he developed a special relationship with a 19-year-old woman, Rosaura, who became something of a big sister and with whom he sang revolutionary songs calling for the downfall of imperialism. Captured by the Peruvian army two years later, he subsequently became a soldier in the Peruvian army that fought against the Shining Path. He stayed for seven years with the Peruvian army,

during which time he was helped by a lieutenant who not only spared his life upon capture, but who also enrolled him in a primary school for boys. His transformation away from soldiering was sparked by a religious Sister who suggested that he could train to be a priest. Wanting “to be able to do something for those who had nothing, for my countrymen we had so brutally mistreated, stealing from them and raping their women” (64), he became a Franciscan priest, and went on to also become an anthropologist.

If this remarkable journey is a case study in human resilience and people’s capacity for personal transformation, it is equally a story of struggle amidst social injustice and an invitation to explore how a young person’s lived experiences can lead him or her to join a terrorist group. In these respects, the story is deeply humanizing and has implications for understanding how young people become involved with terrorist groups in other contexts.

Lurgio Gavilán relates how he decided in 1983 to join the Shining Path when he was 12 years old and living with his peasant farmer family in a Quechua speaking region. Family relations and ideology figured prominently in his decision to join, as he sought to find his brother and join him as part of the armed group. Led by Abimael Guzmán, the Sendero Luminoso was the military arm of the Peruvian Communist Party and espoused a Maoist revolutionary orientation that included Marxist-Leninist elements. By Gavilán’s account, the Shining Path came to his community bringing hope of social justice for a people who had long suffered poverty, marginalization, and deprivations. The guerillas understood they were expected to follow orders, on pain of death. In regard to one order, Gavilán wrote, “Word came down from the Central Committee in 1985 we would take the city of Ayacucho, the Yankee capitalists would leave our country, man’s exploitation of man would be a thing of the past, and we would live in a land free of humiliation with food enough for everyone. No longer would there be rich and poor. The peasants would lead our nation’s destiny” (22). Gavilán’s unit participated in attacks on civilian communities and executions of people who were suspected of spying.

This example, of how a young boy who had shown no inclination toward violence became part of a terrorist group, infamous for committing atrocities against civilians illustrates the potent lure of ideology. The potential appeal of ideology is highly visible today in the recruitment of children by the Islamic State (IS). However, as Gavilán shows, ideology does not exert a powerful grip by itself. It gains power in contexts of oppression and social injustice, which leads people to seek liberation and to become sympathetic to movements to achieve liberation and equality. In this context,

a child terrorist is best seen as a human being who is moved by a combination of deprivation, marginalization, and difficult life circumstances to participate in what is seen as a grand struggle for liberation, justice, and equality. This view, which fits with emerging global evidence (Betancourt et al., 2010; Denov & Akesson, 2017; Wessells, 2006) challenges portrayals of child soldiers and child terrorists as bad seeds who are bloodthirsty perpetrators of violence. It also suggests that at least some terrorist violence, far from being senseless, may be grounded, in part, in people's search for meaning. These insights invite timely reflection on what could be done globally to inoculate young people against the lure of violent ideologies and help them find meaning in nonviolent pursuits such as those Gavilán himself eventually pursued. They suggest that terrorism prevention programs should focus not only on helping young people to resist the messages of violent ideologies but also on addressing the problems of social injustice that can make those messages appealing in the first place.

The theme of children's agency, including moral agency, is prominent throughout this work. If Gavilán's decision to join included his desire to help liberate his people, so too, was his motivation to become a Franciscan priest. As Gavilán witnessed the senseless slaughter of unarmed civilians, and as civilian support for the Shining Path gave way to armed local resistance against it, he saw the contradictions inherent in the group's ideology and activities and reassessed the views which led him to become a guerrilla. More than most books written by former child soldiers, this work shows that although children involved with armed groups operate within a context that rewards and demands violence, the children are not robots, and many retain aspects of their moral agency under difficult circumstances. Along the way, Gavilán's account provides an in-depth account of how the Shining Path operated. Such accounts are badly needed if terrorist groups and activities are to be contained and prevented.

The book also serves as a corrective for views casting children as passive victims who are forced into violence. Such literature has sometimes been swayed by sensationalist images of traumatized child victims and of armed groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda abducting children. The result has been an excessive focus on brutal abduction and the forced recruitment of children. Although such forced recruitment is horrendous and warrants significant attention and action, it would be a mistake to see it as the norm. Each conflict is different, and whereas forced recruitment is widespread in some conflicts, other conflicts feature children who decide to join an armed group due to a mixture of push and pull factors. The push factors may include bad family relations, deprivation, an inability to meet basic needs, and economic

and political oppression, among others. Pull factors frequently include things such as the desire for money, power, vengeance, or prestige, family influences, desire for a surrogate family, or the desire to find meaning or glory through the participation in what is perceived to be an historic struggle for liberation. These push and pull factors are remarkably similar to those factors that influence children to join gangs, including gangs that have committed high levels of violence and created social upheaval in countries in Central America (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2012). Furthermore, the U.S. Children's decisions to join armed groups are an expression of their agency, which should not be underestimated. Of course, such decisions are often grounded in the harsh realities of lives lived in deprivation, insecurity, and hopelessness where there is a paucity of nonviolent alternatives.

The book also resonates with the global literature on child soldiers in numerous ways. For one thing, it shows how children who are recruited and who then leave the armed group may be re-recruited. This has been a common occurrence in conflicts in armed conflicts in countries such as Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, among others. Indeed, children who become child soldiers may become so accustomed to military life and so reluctant about their chances of reintegrating into civilian life that they become perpetual soldiers, in some cases becoming mercenaries who are willing to fight wars in other countries. Also, as in Gavilán's case, the army that one was fighting against may recruit children who have escaped or been captured from the opposing armed group. Either way, this recruitment of children is a flagrant violation of children's rights, and this dynamic of re-recruitment that contributes to ongoing cycles of violence.

Yet another point of resonance between the book and the wider literature on former child soldiers relates to the likelihood of reintegration. Following armed conflict, governments and UN agencies frequently establish programs of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. Frequently used reintegration supports for former child soldiers include family tracing and reunification, family mediation of conflicts, formal or non-formal education, psychosocial and mental health support, and livelihood support (Wessells, 2006). Typically, these supports are organized by international NGOs, local governments and groups, or a combination thereof. While exact figures are not available, the majority of former child soldiers do manage to reintegrate into civilian life (or integrate into civilian life, if the former soldier had grown up inside an armed group). It should be noted, however, that reintegration is often difficult, and years following the conflict, some former child soldiers may continue to

have mental health issues and difficulties functioning in civilian life (Boothby, Crawford, & Halperin, 2006; Betancourt et al., 2010).

However, in many conflict-affected countries, significant numbers of former child soldiers find their way into civilian life without help from reintegration programs, and the evidence is mixed on whether reintegration supports help all former child soldiers. In some situations, for example, where former child soldiers are badly stigmatized, former child soldiers may avoid reintegration programs. In post-conflict Angola, where large numbers of girls had been recruited by the opposition group, UNITA, the girls hid their identity as former soldiers and avoided reintegration programs lest they be identified as 'rebel girls' and subjected to extreme social isolation. This example highlights the fact that former girl soldiers often face a level of stigma that is much greater than that faced by former boy soldiers (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). With respect to Gavilán's book, it reminds us of the need for a systematic gender perspective on child soldiers in the Shining Path and other armed groups.

Gavilán himself is an example of a former child soldier and member of a 'terrorist' group who reintegrated without the aid of explicit reintegration programs. Although many former child soldiers do not exhibit the same level of resilience that Gavilán showed, his story offers hope that children who were formerly involved in groups that performed terrorist acts can make their way into civilian life and become productive citizens. To be sure, we have much to learn in the coming years about how to rehabilitate and reintegrate former child recruits of IS and other terrorist groups. Gavilán's experience reminds us that we should never give up on formerly recruited children, and we should resist stereotypes of them as ideologically tainted, or as Satanic killers who can never be trusted again. The struggle against terror is also a struggle to retain our own humanity and not give in to impulses to meet violent extremism with extreme and inhumane steps such as the use of torture to combat terrorism as the U.S. government did during the recent Bush administration. As Gavilán's moving and humane book shows, it must also be a struggle for social transformation, for oppression and social injustice will continue to invite young people into the arms of terrorist groups.

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