

BOOK REVIEW

Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front

By Myriam Denov

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Reviewed by Christine Cubitt*

Sierra Leone's civil war was infamous for the brutal nature of the violence committed by armed groups against local civilians, and for the role played by children recruited or abducted as 'child soldiers' among the fighting factions. Detail of the atrocities perpetrated by and upon children has led to sensational images of 'child soldiers' across all genres of media. These images have represented children interchangeably as hapless and vulnerable victims, dangerous and psychotic criminals, or heroes, yet this powerful iconography has done little to improve our understandings of the profound circumstantial complexities which led children into militarised environments, the decisions and choices they made to survive, or the challenges and trauma they faced when the fighting ended.

Myriam Denov has set out to correct this dereliction and to challenge the orthodox conceptualisation of the 'child soldier' by undertaking participatory research among seventy six young Sierra Leoneans formally involved with the activities of the RUF as children. Her study speaks to the misrepresentation of children caught up in the activities of war and the widespread misconception of the realities of their world amongst the fighters. The results of her work are the subject of this most accessible, intriguing and well structured book.

The author, an experienced academic on the role of children in violent conflict, has structured the book around the concepts of 'making' and 'unmaking' the child soldier, and utilises two established discourses to frame her analysis - structure (socio-economic conditions) and agency (rational choice). She supplements these discourses with Anthony

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Giddens's alternative theoretical framework of 'structuration' which, she argues, is more plausible for the analysis of the choices made by child soldiers within the changing structural realities of the war.¹ By conceptualising the evidence within such a framework, Denov immediately sets up her argument - that the victimisation of children involved in war activities necessarily ignores their ingenuity, resourcefulness and resistance when confronted with extreme and violent environments. Denov uses the voices of the children themselves to support her argument, citing their conversations widely throughout the text.

The book opens with a useful history of the war in Sierra Leone and the use of children in warfare throughout world history. There follows a detailed explanation of Denov's research methodology and the participatory approach she used for collecting data, an approach which gives her work legitimacy and authority. She defends her ethical stance by explaining the way she invited participants to act as researchers themselves, a strategy which provided feelings of empowerment on many levels for the young people concerned (p.84). The inductive approach of the research allowed the voices of the participants to construct the central themes for analysis - a refreshing change from 'normalised' themes to be found in the general discourse which rely on unfounded assumptions about the realities of child soldiering.

The three substantive chapters all include direct quotations from the young people interviewed. The first describes the pathways which led them into the militarised world; the second their experiences of 'being RUF', and the third explains their 'unmaking', the reshaping of their realities and identities, and the traumas of 'becoming civilian'.

Chronicling the pathways of children into armed conflict, Denov produces a fascinating explanation of the techniques used by the RUF to normalise children into a violent and militarised world involving physical, technical and ideological training. Their civilian identities were gradually broken down by a culture of profound violence, and systematic desensitisation eventually made the 'reprehensible acceptable' (p.127); yet the voices of the children interviewed revealed great diversity among their experiences and individual roles among the fighters.

In Chapter 5, '*Being RUF*', Denov explains the victimisation, participation and resistance of children militarised by the RUF and their use of diverse strategies to cope with the distressing and frightening environment in which they found themselves where the RUF's tactical social modelling normalised abhorrent behaviour. Weapons, for example, played a vital role in their empowerment, giving some control over the violence which was perpetrated against them. This was especially so for girls whose roles were exceptional due to their provision of daily and abusive sexual services. The general literature has victimised girls in their role as 'bush wives', but being 'married' to a commanding officer meant that girls were no longer 'every man's wife' (p.133); many girls stayed with their bush husbands for protection and support after the war. In ways such as these, children had the capacity to reframe their victimisation. Attitudes and experiences differed greatly, however. Whilst some children capitulated with the rebels, others resisted and preserved their real identities through

¹ Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

what Denov describes as the 'bifurcation of self'. Attempts to escape and solidarity with peers were additional modes of resistance (p.141).

Probably the most interesting chapter is the 'unmaking' of child soldiers (Chapter 6). Here the children reveal the harsh realities of life after war, where their rational choices appeared to be more constrained by civilian norms in peacetime. Demobilisation, for example, meant the loss of significant friendships and the socio-economic support of a militarised unit, and giving up their weapon had profound meaning for both boys and girls as they went through the transformation to normal civilian life. Most children chose not to engage in the DDR which threatened reprisals; nearly all girls decided that the risks far outweighed the benefits. The stigma attached to being a child soldier with the RUF, especially for girls and the implications for future marriage, meant that anonymity was the wiser choice. Denov describes the deeply personal and painful struggles to reconstruct identities after war where legacies such as branding blighted prospects of meaningful integration to their communities. It is within this chapter that Denov's theoretical argument weakens slightly; having convincingly argued that actors are never completely helpless (Giddens, 1984), chapter six evidences that the nature of the structures themselves greatly influence individual action - a point to which Denov refers when she notes that 'the long term process of unmaking is... substantially dependent on the *outright transformation* of existing structures that have historically perpetuated inequalities' [original emphasis] (p.197). Any weaknesses with the theoretical framework, however, are far outweighed by the richness of the data and the gendered nature of the study which highlights the different experiences, challenges and choices of girls in the RUF. This is a most useful contribution to a discourse which has previously rendered girls almost invisible.

By conducting an empirical study which sought out personal stories and narratives Denov has achieved her objective of giving voice to the voiceless and exposing the multifaceted and paradoxical realities of the lives of militarised children. In doing so she has indeed shifted the boundaries of our understandings of the realities of these young people. The book is highly recommended to the general public, to scholars, practitioners and policy makers. The arguments in the book offer some guidance on more sensitive policy in post-war programming. Policy which includes formerly abducted children in the decision making process about their futures would go some way to avoiding their 'secondary victimisation' when the fighting ends.