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Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front
Myriam Denov
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Writing on child soldiers is a tricky task. On the one hand, children engaged in violence profoundly disturb adults because their behavior goes against the odds and upsets conventional social norms; on the other hand, one cannot avoid feeling moved by the phenomenon and looking for extenuating circumstances. For the analyst, the main challenge is to produce a discourse stripped enough of emotional components.

Denov's book is a welcome contribution to the field. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 notably provide very good insights on the processes of militarization and demilitarization of children drawn into the RUF, through very rich narratives highlighting quite gendered realities. The making of a child soldier is defined as a complex and multi-faceted process that occurs gradually, over an extended period of time, and that takes multiple forms (96). Boys' and girls' experiences of recruitment are examined in depth in chapter 4, as well as the myriad strategies used by the RUF to ensure children's conversion to a culture of violence and to foster some kind of social cohesion within the group (the severing of family ties, the recruiting of other children, the social function of tattooing, internal promotions, etc.).

Far from being passive recipients, children responded in very diverse ways to the culture of violence that surrounded them, and some of them demonstrated an unexpected resilience. Chapter 5 explores in detail what it meant to be RUF and draws particular attention to the drifting identities of these children, for they were both, alternately, victims and perpetrators of physical violence. Several strategies helped children to safeguard themselves: from carrying a gun to foster self-protection ("as long as you are armed, even the older commanders were more careful in their treatment of you" (131)), to disobeying orders (refusing to kill during battle, helping civilians to escape, refusing to be drugged), marrying 'powerful' recruits to resist sexual violence, and escape. Putting down the gun often meant losing away power and protection. Some children experienced it as a relief, others as a loss, and most had mixed feelings about it. The author lucidly shows that a fringe of the RUF children never completely

detached themselves from the armed group (150) and that returning to civilian realities often meant experiencing new battlefields (188), regardless of the paths taken. Criticisms on reinsertion programs echo the conclusions of most studies on DDR, stressing its general inadequateness.

Denov's theorization is less convincing. She extensively writes about the dialectical relationship of structure and agency (in Chapters 1 and 7) to basically argue that children' actions were shaped by the RUF and that reciprocally the RUF was influenced by these individual actions. The same point could have been made as convincingly in a much more concise way; after all, this is quite a common approach in the social sciences. Conversely, 'Identity', as theoretical concept, would have been worth exploring more in-depth and is only skimmed over by the author. The notion of 'suspended identity' - understood as a "conscious identity preservation tactic" (141) - is particularly interesting to contrast with other claims that express a genuine dedication to the movement. The book suggests a causal link between the fact of being affected by adverse structural conditions ("rural isolation", "youth marginalization") and the fact of being more prone to engage in contentious politics and violent actions (55-60). If such set of theories is very popular among scholars, it is also increasingly argued that enlistment into violent groups stems from highly circumstantial factors (see Kalyvas work); theories that emphasize political geography and mobilizing contexts in explaining mobilization processes are therefore also worth consideration.

It is a pity there is not much information on the recruitment of child soldiers in the context section, especially since it is mentioned that the RUF did not purposely recruit children in the beginning and has evolved a lot over the years, the later stages of the movement bearing little resemblance to the early ones (63). Was this confirmed by the data? It is unfortunate that the temporality does not appear well in this part. Chapter 2 would have gained a lot in being more succinct, less general and more focused on what eventually affected children processes of mobilization and demobilization. As it now stands, there is too much background information but not always the information needed.

Several interview fragments raise interesting questions that would be worth exploring in a follow-up work, in an attempt to go beyond the documentation of simple anecdotes: since children could command older recruits (p.113), what were their links with adult combatants? Were they treated differently in the RUF? What was the extent of 'family' recruitment? Were relatives of adult recruits systematically treated 'softer' (p. 122)? And with regard to the hardship they faced when re-endorsing a civilian hat, in what ways was it different from what non-militarized children were experiencing?

Overall, Denov's book shows well the contrastive identities of these children, who had to constantly adapt to extreme circumstances. They acted in solidarity at some moments and were openly in conflict at others, when their own survival was at stake (p. 137). The longitudinal follow-up of some of the respondents is a real strength of the approach and paves the way to quite interesting follow-up works.

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(870 words)