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Abstract

A review of:

Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front. By Myriam Denov. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2010. 234 pp.

Keywords

Human rights, Children's rights, Child soldiers, Sierra Leone, War

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Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front. By Myriam Denov. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2010. 234 pp.

This book makes important contributions to the study of child soldiers and modern war by undermining the stereotypical treatment of child soldiers and shining light on the overlooked experiences of girl soldiers. It also guides scholars with its thoughtful discussion of the perils and merits of fieldwork among such vulnerable subjects and its model for applying Anthony Giddens' structuration theory to studies of war. In order to analyze the 'making' and 'unmaking' of child soldiers, Myriam Denov conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in 2003 and 2004 with seventy six Sierra Leonean children who were associated with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) during Sierra Leone's civil war. The author mines this rich data set to provide vivid pictures of child soldiers' complex and various wartime and post-war challenges and responses. Rejecting the common imagery of child soldiers as criminals, victims, heroes, or, in the case of girls, invisible, she concludes that "child soldiers existed in a hazy realm where they suffered horrible abuses, were engaged in brutal acts of violence and, nonetheless, heroically resisted the violence that surrounded them" (144).

As Denov examines the processes through which her subjects first became and later ceased to be soldiers, she employs Giddens' theoretical concepts of 'structure', 'agency' and the 'duality of structure.' The experiences of the child soldiers are interpreted as products of the dynamic relationship between socio-economic structures that shaped the war and personal agency of youth as they responded to challenges and opportunities. The author draws attention to the structural forces of "violence, historical and cultural realities, patronage, gendered oppression, state failure and small arms proliferation" (47). More important, however, is the picture of the wide variety of actions her subjects took while with the rebel forces: participating in horrific violence; subverting the authority of RUF leaders; negotiating means of achieving security and resistance; and even identifying with the RUF. The author provides extensive interview material, giving child soldiers themselves a powerful voice.

The voices of girl soldiers are particularly novel. Denov specifically sought out the experiences of girls and made them half of her sample population. As a result, this book highlights the horrors of sexual violence perpetrated on girl soldiers, the survival strategies they employed (from 'marriage' to 'using weapons'), the ways in which girls' experiences, options and responses differed from those of boys, the ways in which girls have been poorly served by demobilization and reintegration programs in Sierra Leone, and the problematic legacy of sexual violence after the war's end.

Denov devotes an entire chapter to a useful discussion of her research methods. This reviewer was particularly satisfied with the author's attention to the ethical challenges of interviewing such vulnerable individuals. She discusses the power imbalance between her research team and subjects and the reasons why she included former combatants in her research team. Also, she analyzes the different strengths and weaknesses of personal and focus group interviews. Finally, Denov addresses the question of whether her subjects are credible. She notes, "[i]t is possible that children altered or exaggerated aspects of their stories, particularly their status as victims" (90). Indeed every one of her subjects said that he or she was abducted into the RUF (97). In the

end, she concludes that “most respondents were surprisingly forthcoming in also discussing aspects of their own accountability, their wartime commitment to and identification with the RUF, and sharing their active participation in brutal acts of RUF violence” (91).

The book does have two shortcomings. First, the RUF remains a monolith. Even though some youth spoke of bonds they forged with leaders, there is no effort to disaggregate the RUF and give pictures of individual commanders. Second, the book neither summarizes nor responds to the conclusions concerning child soldiers’ experiences reached by Sierra Leone’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which devoted an entire chapter in its report to child soldiers, or the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Denov does note, however, that the court has issued the historic first convictions for child recruitment. Therefore, Denov’s data are not interpreted in the context of other substantial findings.

Nevertheless, the book’s unique data will make it of interest to scholars of child soldiers. It could also be used in undergraduate classes on subjects such as war, political violence, sociology, and field research. It assumes that its readers have no expert knowledge of the phenomenon of child soldiers, the war in Sierra Leone, or Giddens’ theory of structuration, so it introduces all three.

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