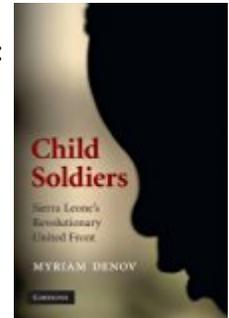


Myriam Denov. *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xi + 234 pp. \$28.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-69321-9.



Reviewed by Robert Tynes

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Commissioned by Rebecca K. Root (Ramapo College of New Jersey)

It is not so simple. When children are pulled into war, transmogrified, forced to become soldiers, they are not merely passive innocents. Nor are they only flat out ruthless killers, nor purely glorifiable heroes. In fact, they very well might be all three of these personas. And that is part of the point that Myriam Denov so deftly makes in her book, *Child Soldiers*. She digs deep into the complexities of the phenomenon of child soldiers, tracing how youth combatants were “made” and then “unmade” during the war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002). Her single case study of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) explores how children became fighters, i.e., “the ways in which the militarization and reconfiguration of their identities as soldiers and warriors was achieved” (p. 15). The process of becoming and being a child soldier is shown to be a multifaceted and multilayered affair. The RUF “always did wicked things,” said one boy soldier who witnessed numerous heinous acts, including “the beating of people,... the starvation, the systematic raping of young girls against their will” (p. 123). Another girl soldier said, “I

burned houses, captured people, I carried looted properties. I was responsible for tying people, and killing” (p. 111). One boy fighter explained how he resisted the world of violence: “One day, another boy and I were asked to attack a woman, but [instead of attacking her] I helped the woman escape. My friend reported me and I was severely punished” (p. 136).

Denov approaches the problem of child soldiers from both structure and agency. Borrowing from Anthony Giddens, she pulls the history of Sierra Leone and the insights of former child soldiers through the analytical lens of structuration. [1] The point is to demonstrate how the constraints of structure shaped young combatants, and, at the same time, how the agency of these child soldiers constituted the social structure in which they were participating. Through a historical analysis of Sierra Leone before the war, we see how structural factors, such as the legacy of a patrimonial order, a system of predatory economics, a politics of corruption, the rural isolation and marginalization of youth, and the encouragement

of the “militarization of young,” created a medium in which child soldiers could become. Then, Foday Sankoh’s RUF entered the scene to capitalize on the failing state and its normalization of brutal politics. As the rebels rolled through the country, they created an extreme, self-perpetuating culture of violence. And it is in this brutal social realm that child soldiers realized their being. Practically no other study on child soldiers dares to venture into the ontological realm the way that Denov’s does. And justifiably so. One could easily become mired in the socio-philosophical realm. Denov, however, pulls up well before the over-theorizing muck, and puts forth an impressive, well-presented body of evidence.

Even Denov’s research methods align with her analytical framework of structure, agency, and the duality of structure. She utilizes a participatory approach wherein twelve adolescent researchers who were once with the RUF during the war helped design and conduct the open-ended interviews with sixty-six former child soldiers. The project includes focus groups as well. The result of Denov’s approach is that we are all led into a sociopolitical phenomenon—the militarization of the young—by those who helped manifest the phenomenon. From the ground level, we are shown that the pathway for children into RUF violence almost always involved abduction and oftentimes included drugs. Physical and ideological training were also essential for the conversion of boys and girls into fighters. Children were taught war songs designed to make them feel that they were on a noble mission: “Commandos are brave, Commandos are intelligent, You don’t fuck with us, Commandos hardly die” (p. 101).

The actions of the RUF transcended military order, though. It was about creating a new, self-contained social structure, “a world of torture based on inhumanity, rigid hierarchies, detachment and cruelty” (p. 183). Within this new violent realm, boys and girls bonded with rebels, bonded with one another, resisted the RUF, and

fought on the frontlines. Gang and individual rape by adults was common against girls. “I was a mere sex machine,” said one young girl. Even though children were treated brutally, Denov states, they were “vital to the ongoing functioning and continued existence” of the RUF (p. 109). The mixture of violence and acceptance by the RUF evoked a multiplicity of experiences and responses. Children stepped into the role of perpetrator, fell back into the world of victim, and inched forward with acts of resistance. Girls would institute secret social networks to help protect one another from rape. Boys would plan and execute escapes from rebel forces, even though they risked being maimed, tortured, and/or killed. Ultimately, there was no one mode of being for child soldiers in the RUF. There were, rather, multiple identities, “false” and “true” identities, identities of acquiescence, and suspended identities. As one boy said, “I was always pretending” (p. 142).

The war in Sierra Leone eventually ended, and boys and girls could, theoretically, stop pretending. But the “unmaking” of a child soldier was not easy. The shift back to civil life was fraught with contradictions. Children moved “from a world of inhumanity, rigid hierarchies, detachment and cruelty, to one based on principles of humanity, civic associations, empathy and caring” (p. 149). The disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process encouraged children to return to their communities and families. But for many of the children, the RUF was their family, and a number of communities did not want them back, still viewing them as unpredictable and dangerous. Girls who endured sexual abuse during the war did not regain personal security after the conflict either.[2] Many times they were further stigmatized or “rendered invisible” (p. 163). There was some hope in the “unmaking” process. Some former child soldiers, now young adults, were able to find work, or a place in school, despite extremely high unemployment rates and a deteriorated educational system.[3] Denov discusses how many motorbike taxi driv-

ers were former child combatants. These riders earn money shuttling people to and fro in Freetown and Makeni. So far, they are examples of being remade into civilians. Nevertheless, it is still not simple.

Denov does a fine job of laying out the pathway from child, to child soldier, to potential civilian. The introduction discusses the one-dimensional portrayals of child soldiers in the global community. Mass media and policy discourse have created heuristics for child soldiers, such as the dangerous and disorderly, the hapless victim, the hero, and the invisible girls. Denov's project attempts to peel away these flat images and reveal multiplicities. Chapter 1 lays down Denov's analytical framework, describing and defining Giddens's theory of structuration and its application to child soldier research. Chapter 2 looks at the historical and political background of the war in Sierra Leone and how the RUF rose to power and to pillage. Chapter 3 discusses methodology, beginning with the ethical component of doing child soldier research and then explaining who was involved, what her sample consisted of, and how she gathered and analyzed data. Denov presents her evidence in chapters 4-6. Chapter 4 narrates the making of a child soldier. Chapter 5 explores what it was like to be a child soldier for the RUF, and chapter 6 concludes the journey of a child soldier by describing the "unmaking" process. The text ends with chapter 7, in which Denov explains that the "unmaking" of child soldiers in Sierra Leone continues and that the country remains constrained by many of the same structural problems that existed before the war. It is a condition that policymakers certainly need to pay greater attention to if they want to end child soldiering.

Overall, Denov has provided an extremely valuable, detailed look at the process of the militarization of children during armed conflict. As she states, the RUF case is too specific to make grand generalizations about child soldiering globally. Her research does, however, add much-needed

flesh and blood to the popular images of child soldiers that currently circulate in the international community. The only weakness in Denov's project worth mentioning (and it is quite minor) is her use of the term "unmaking." This term implies some sort of return to what the child once was. Because the process of becoming and being a child soldier is so complex, it is doubtful, and unrealistic, to even consider a return to some former identity, or way of being. At best, child soldiers can only be situated anew. Hopefully it will be in a society that refuses to tap back into the violence that the RUF so readily generated.

Notes

[1]. For more on the theory of structuration and the "duality of structure," see Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (London: Macmillan, 1976); and Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[2]. In 2010, Sierra Leone ranked 125th out of 138 states on the United Nations Development Programmes's (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index. See UNDP, "Gender Inequality Index," *Human Development Report 2010* (2011), 156, http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2010_EN_Table4_reprint.pdf.

[3]. In 2010, Sierra Leone ranked 158th out of 169 states on the Human Development Index. The Gross National Income (GNI) per capita was \$809. The mean for years of schooling was 2.9 and the expected years of schooling was 7.2. See UNDP, "Human Development Index and Its Components," *Human Development Report 2010* (2011), 145, http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR_2010_EN_Table1.pdf.

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