



# Journal of Terrorism Research

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## Book Reviews

Myriam Denov. *Child Soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010. Paperback £16.99, pp. 246. ISBN-13: 9780521693219, Reviewed by Emma Leonard, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK

The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone fought a bitter and bloody civil war against the Sierra Leonean government throughout the 1990s. Often referred to as a terrorist organization, they were infamous for their attacks against civilians and for their use of child soldiers. However, as Denov demonstrates in this well written and informative book, much is still to be learnt about the realities of life as a child soldier within the RUF.

The general portrayal of children as victims in these situations rarely tells the whole story. Children are often rational actors – the fact that the RUF (and others) found it necessary to give the children alcohol and drugs in order to ensure they follow orders demonstrates that children of all ages were able to make value judgements on the orders that they were given and were capable of deciding whether or not to follow through with an order. Recognising this, the bulk of this book is based on interviews and focus group discussions with former child soldiers of the RUF and essentially provides a framework within which it is possible to understand how these children could be simultaneously both victims and perpetrators of terrible violence.

Denov begins the book with a comprehensive review of the current academic literature on child soldiers, making clear the complexities of even defining who qualifies as a child soldier and highlighting the debate between advocates of a structuralist understanding of the reasons why children become soldiers and those who argue that children have agency even in impossible situations. She then moves on to explore how the children became involved in the RUF, their experiences during the war and their lives since.

One of the reasons that this book stands out is the amount of primary data collected and recounted to reconstruct for the reader the processes that many of the children went through to become often very violent soldiers. The data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions conducted by both the author and a group of trained Sierra Leonean researchers, allowing the children both the opportunity to exchange their stories with others who had been through a similar process but also the privacy to speak in confidence with the interviewer. One of the strengths of this book is the frank acknowledgement of the difficulties that researchers often



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face when operating in an unfamiliar environment. Denov does not shy away from these issues and instead addresses them head on, acknowledging for example that many former child soldiers, in conflicts around the world, have recognized the benefits of presenting themselves as victims to ‘outsiders and humanitarian aid organizations, [as it] may be crucial to obtaining aid and assistance’ (p. 90) as a way out of the often dire poverty in which they have found themselves.

Nor does she shy away from the fact that many of the children did become accustomed to the violence and some have now come to remember their time in the RUF fondly – not necessarily because of the violence but because of the order and hierarchy within the organization. All of the children knew what their role was and they were offered some sort of protection within the group. Few of these children have been able to find a clear place for themselves within the chaos of post-conflict Sierra Leone and the transition has left them rootless and confused – a problem that must be recognized within disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes.

This book makes a very important contribution to the literature and will be of interest to academics and students in the fields of peace and conflict studies. Scholars of terrorism will be interested by the levels of detail about a group regularly described as one of sub-Saharan Africa’s terrorist groups, as well as the process of radicalization that some of the children go through, and practitioners working with children in post-conflict states will find few better books to give them a grounding in the academic debates surrounding child soldiers.

*This review was originally published on the 28/07/10 at [http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~cstpv/journal/bookreviews/files/denov\\_childsoldiers.html](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~cstpv/journal/bookreviews/files/denov_childsoldiers.html)*