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19 September 2020

The Politics of War

A Deeper Understanding of Child Soldiers

"My squad is my family, my gun is my provider, and protector, and my rule is to kill or be killed." (Beah, 2007, p.126) Initially, this quote was hard for me to digest because I could never imagine my mind embarking to such a place stripped of all humanity. As I read this line over I immediately realized that it represented the mentality of child soldiers around the world. Ishmael Beah's experience in the Sierra Leone civil war had me blindly hoping that his experience was unique to him. However, I knew my ignorant optimism was only to protect myself from the harsh reality of child soldiers. Despite the gruesome details introduced to me in Beah's memoir, I decided to do more research about why children were exploited at such a young age, and how the trauma affected their mental health. As inspiring as the ending of "A Long Way Gone" was to read, many other children were not able to overcome their past and transcend their former life as Beah did. My research made it clear that most child soldiers who survived the war, were left socially isolated and their mental health irreparably damaged.

"A Long Way Gone" gave our class insight into Beah's decision, or lack thereof, to join the military. As I read his memoir, I thought of the children in Sierra Leone and Liberia and wondered how their stories may have differed. I refused to be naive enough to think every child's experience with the war was the same. What factors influenced children to join the war? Why were these civil wars seemingly fought between groups of children? Upon my research, I discovered that the exploitation of children, specifically in Liberia and Sierra Leone, began long

before the 1990s when these wars first broke out. Something not discussed in Beah's interview or book is the unemployed youth hired by elite government men to commit various illegal actions. Even before the war, these children were familiar with serving as bodyguards, rigging election ballots, and carrying out dangerous jobs. Adults took advantage of children's physical strength and stamina, desperation, and lack of mature morals. Without a sense of right and wrong, it makes sense to me how children were able to easily transition into the violence and anarchy of the wars.

I became aware that when the civil wars broke out, children joined the combat for numerous reasons. Many children were put in life or death situations, therefore they joined for mere protection and economic support. Some felt guilted into the military by societal pressure to protect their homeland. Others chose to rebel because they felt failed and abandoned by the government which left them poor and hungry. These reasons gave me more insight into their motives behind committing violent actions and why a cycle of revenge developed. Lastly, children joined for the social benefits and exciting lifestyle of the military. This factor shocked me because during my childhood "war" always had a dreadful connotation. This made me wonder if children truly knew the gravity of the war when they first joined. Similarly, many young girls were lured into the military by promises of luxury items. It's unfathomable to me that these girls knew about the sexual abuse in the military they would endure, and still chose to join. For me, this demonstrates how horrendous street life was in these nations even before the civil wars.

After a decade of these wars, the United Nations was able to resolve the conflicts through military intervention in the early 2000s by initiating DDD(R): Demobilization, Disarmament, Reintegration, and Rehabilitation processes. Though I knew about post-traumatic

stress disorder developing in soldiers post-combat, I never could have conjured up the challenges faced by the child soldiers of Sierra Leone and Liberia during their recovery. I was frustrated to learn most of the initial rehabilitation only focused on providing food, shelter, and physical therapy. These necessities certainly improved physical health, yet the rehabilitation centers underestimated the importance of mental health support. In anger, I immediately questioned the sanity of the workers sent to help these countries. It baffled me that after all the trauma these children endured, they were expected to reintegrate into society alone. Between the lack of caretakers and psychologists available, many children were left suffering in silence. They were overwhelmed by depression and some ultimately committed suicide. This was gut-wrenching to learn. Considering the brutality of these civil wars, I think that every child surviving is a miracle. Yet even in safe environments, these child survivors were tortured by memories of the war. This speaks volumes to the degree of pain held within these individuals.

However as I read on, I was confronted with the fact that treatment for these war survivors was not easy. In addition to the lack of psychologists, children resisted the little treatment programs offered to them. As Ishmael Beah explained, many children were abusive to their helpers and longed to be in the military again with friends, drugs, parties, and their illusion of power. The excerpts I read during my research completely altered my perspective on the wars and I realized that Beah was most likely withholding many graphic details. In Emilie Medeiros' research on mental health post-conflict, she learned of Kadhiatu's story. "Kadhiatu, 17, fought for the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone. As a civilian, she had been forced to put her baby into a mortar and pound it. She was then forced to eat it. As a result, she then soon joined the fighting forces as an active fighter." (Medeiros, p.501) Kadhiatu's experience as a civilian demonstrates why many people have a hard time disconnecting with the RUF when they

go into rehabilitation. Despite the mistreatment in the force, children came out of the war honoring the RUF for saving them from their life on the streets. For many of them, the alternative would have been death. This left me in shock considering how upset Beah's memoir had originally made me. Once again, I found myself emotionally torn on including certain details into this essay. Not only is it difficult to read, but it is disturbing for me to recount. This is probably the closest I will ever get to understanding what Beah must have gone through while sharing his story.

Rehabilitation centers dealt with boys and girls who had lost their sense of self, culture, and societal norms. Being engulfed in war from such a young age stripped these children of their humanity. U.S. ambassador Madeleine Albright put it best as she explained to the UN Security Council that these child soldiers "have no identity other than through the weapons they carry". The few rehabilitation efforts that focused on the social aspect of these youth dealt with the task of extinguishing children's superiority complexes and power cravings. The complexity of this situation is lost to many due to the unbelievably barbaric behavior of both the rebels and the military. Even I had to reread the accounts of these children because I doubted my understanding of the absurd rituals. Not only were the children accustomed to living in an anarchic world, but the rebels had appropriated cultural rituals creating a new supernatural world. This immediately made me think back to Beah. I remember being amazed by how quickly he adapted to the changing conditions in the war. His life turned into a living hell, yet after a few years as a boy soldier, he recalled thinking that his life seemed "normal".

Many of the rituals I read about during my research seemed unreal. It reminded me of an adventure game, like Cowboys and Indians, in which these children were able to create their own ghastly rules. Imagination clashed with reality as they lived out their fantasies of superpowers in

a much too real way. Just as some boys enjoy dissecting a runover squirrel in the road, these children nonchalantly dismantled human body parts. They stuck decapitated heads on the gates of the military camp to greet when they returned. Some collected human jaws to put in a bottle that would communicate with them and predict danger. The most stomach-churning rituals of all were the cannibalistic ones in which they would cook their victims or fallen fighters into their meal to eat. This was believed to create a connection with their ancestors and bestow them with supernatural powers of invincibility. These practices turned into a way of life for these child soldiers, and I can only somewhat rationalize their actions by reminding myself that it was a result of drugs, brainwashing, and a vindictive imagination. Due to the complexity of the war, many outsiders did not understand how to reconstruct the world in the mind of these children. Strategies for healing and treatment took years for researchers to develop. The way to unblur the lines between life and death for these children was beyond me. After reading these accounts, I was flooded with respect for both the caretakers and the children who overcame their past.

The atrocities committed to and by the child soldiers in Sierra Leone and Liberia are not known by many. The use of child soldiers in these wars were not highly broadcasted or taught in school systems, despite its magnitude. I believe the only way to prevent children from being exploited in this manner is for the public to have a deep understanding of what occurred in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Being shielded from the brutality does not spare one's heart, but rather perpetuates ignorance. Hearing the reality of Beah's life and the accounts of other child soldiers will stay with me. Ishmael Beah's voice is eloquent, unforgettable, and rare. These stories fuel me to get the word out and support more human rights causes. No nation should ever reach the inhumanity that occurred during these wars again.

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