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Armies of the Young

Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism

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protected children and youth from the necessity of making impossible and terrible choices. Children ran away from parents who were facing certain death, chose between resistance and restraint when the lives of others were at stake, and faced down the moral authority of a frightened and oppressed adult society that labeled armed resistance dangerous and criminal. In the end these child soldiers made dignified and honorable choices, and their lives serve as a reminder of the remarkable capability of children and youth to shape their own destinies.

Chapter 3 Fighting for Diamonds

The Child Soldiers of Sierra Leone

WHEN HE WAS EIGHT, Tamba Fangeigh was kidnapped in Kono District in eastern Sierra Leone by soldiers of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the rebel army in the civil war (1991–2001), and was placed in the so-called Small Boys Unit of the rebel fighters. The joy he took in the killing of local militia and civilians is chilling: “We came, we surrounded them and cut some of them, killed them, put tires over them and burned them. . . I killed some, put tires on them, beat them, including the civilians who were with them. We took some of their properties and after that we went to Magburaka. We were shooting, advancing. We were shouting, we were happy, we were clapping.”¹

Abbas, a young student at Saint Francis Primary School in Freetown, describes his own contribution to the terror: “When we caught *kamajors* [pro-government militia], we would mutilate them by parts and display them in the streets. When villagers refused to clear out of an area, we would strip them naked and burn them to death. Sometimes we used plastic and sometimes a tire. . . . I saw a pregnant woman split open to see what the baby’s sex was. . . . Two officers, ‘05’ and ‘Savage,’ argued over it and made a bet. Savage’s boys opened the woman. It was a girl.”²

In the early 1970s, I lived in Kono District, the center of Sierra Leone’s diamond-mining industry. I was doing research as a graduate student in anthropology in Njaiama, the capital of Nimi Koro Chieftdom. During the war, this town was heavily attacked. Between 150 and 600 people were murdered or were reported massacred in and near Njaiama by the end of August 1995.

In writing this book, I made and renewed ties with many Sierra Leoneans. I still do not know what became of most of the people I knew in Njiamama. No doubt some were killed, many fled, and others have been able to return home to resume some semblance of their former lives.

I lived in Njiamama during a tense time in Sierra Leone history. Siaka Stevens, the president of Sierra Leone, striving to create a dictatorship, had declared a national state of emergency. Youth thugs of the president's All People's Congress roamed Kono District and the Mende chiefdoms to the south, harassing and murdering political opponents. Illegal diamond mining and banditry were endemic. People were fearful. Accusations of witchcraft against women, combined with rumors that "big men" (politically and economically powerful adults) were involved in ritual cannibalism, added to the general apprehension. My friends in Freetown sometimes asked how I could do fieldwork in a region renowned for political violence. But with one exception real violence passed me by. I had no idea that I was witnessing the prelude to a terrible civil war.

Today, the ten-year civil war in Sierra Leone is a symbol of the horrors of modern war. The bloody and notorious role of child soldiers in the rural and urban killing fields is emblematic of the brutal character of the war. Armed children and youth spread unspeakable fear throughout Sierra Leone. They were responsible for thousands of murders, mutilations, and rapes, and for torture, forced labor, and sexual slavery. The war has become the prime example of the "new barbarism," a terrifying kind of warfare predicted to be the signature style of modern conflict.³

Why were children and youth recruited into armed forces and armed groups in Sierra Leone? How did they become involved in the appalling atrocities committed during the war? The exploitation of children in this war, especially those in rebel ranks, was part of the wide-scale abuse and destruction of the population as a whole. The maltreatment of children and youth was only part of a sweeping pattern of misuse and cruelty that characterized the rebel movement throughout the war. To begin to understand, perspectives must shift from the old model—which assumes that war and peace are antitheses—to a new one that sees both peace and war as alternating expressions of the same social and political order. Put simply, the violence of peace spawns the violence of war.

The war in Sierra Leone illustrates the extraordinary difficulty of separating peacetime from wartime because the manner in which children and youth were drawn into warfare grew directly from Sierra Leone's particular history and culture. Far from being an aberration, the war in Sierra Leone demonstrated Karl von Clausewitz's celebrated dictum that war is politics by

other means. The seeds of civil war were sown in the prewar peacetime politics that mobilized large numbers of children and youth in the years following Sierra Leone's independence in 1961 and turned them into political thugs. Youth violence was encoded into the normative structure of everyday political competition in Sierra Leone. Its legitimization opened the door to unrestrained bloodshed.

Youth thuggery in peacetime Sierra Leone derived from Sierra Leone's patrimonial political system, in which adults, children, and youth depended for their livelihoods and social standing on the big men. In this system children and youth, like adults, provided services in exchange for economic support. Young men provided the big men with the physical strength, energy, and fearlessness needed to intimidate and murder political rivals.⁴ In the despoiled circumstances of Sierra Leone's economy, the ties of dependence and violence among big men, young men, children, and youth rippled through rural and urban communities, disrupting and distorting ties of family and kinship.

At a more fundamental level, the war recapitulated in modern form some of the worst excesses of precolonial and colonial slavery, which transformed Sierra Leonean men, women, children, and youth into forced laborers, sexual slaves, and slave soldiers. The history of slavery in Sierra Leone, with the exploitation of youth and youth labor as its primary objective, became a template for the brutality of wartime oppression. In wartime, the extreme forms of dependence and violent control of children and youth that existed in peacetime often devolved into this brutally modern form of slavery. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the RUF strongholds like the diamond fields of Tongo in southeastern Sierra Leone and in the Kono diamond-mining district of eastern Sierra Leone. Male captives, including children and youth, were enslaved as soldiers and diamond miners, and female captives were forced into sexual slavery and domestic service.

Orlando Patterson reminds us that the principal mark of the slave is not that he or she is treated as human property or is physically abused but rather the "social death" of the slave as a person.⁵ Every slave is torn out of his or her community and culture, and family ties are thus destroyed. In Sierra Leone, the kidnapping of children and youth, the permanent tattooing of child soldiers with the mark of the RUF, the reports of gruesome rites in which children were forced to publicly murder family and community members to ensure their alienation from them show the trademark violence of a slave regime. Even now, in the postwar period, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of children and youth who once served in rebel armies continue to work as slaves or near-slaves in the diamond fields of eastern Sierra Leone.

Paradoxically, the rebellion sometimes afforded children and youth a kind of terrifying freedom of action, with the RUF goading them into devastating the country and its peoples with little restraint. But the children and youth who entered this moral vacuum were free of the constraints of custom and law only as long as they complied with the dictates of the rebel forces, who punished or killed those who failed to conform. Many youth were little more than slave soldiers, abducted and forced into rebel ranks; they were abused, exploited, and murdered just as they abused, exploited, and murdered others. Sixteen-year-old Ibrahim Barry Junior, also known as General Share Blood, makes this point with absolute clarity in describing how he used terror to rule the Zebra Battalion of the Small Boys Unit of the RUF:

My men knew I had to drink human blood every morning. If we had a prisoner, I would kill him myself. I would cut off his head with a machete. Otherwise I would send my boys out to find a prisoner or capture a civilian. . . . I had a wife, named Sia Musi; her [other] name was Queen Cut Hands because her specialty was cutting the arms and hands off prisoners. She was our queen. . . . Queen Cut Hands died in battle last year[. . . that night I killed three of my boys to punish them. They should have died instead of Sia Musi. . . . [Also] if one of the boys committed a crime, if he refused to obey an order, I would put burning leaf on his eyes. It would blind him. And if one of my boys tried to escape and was caught, my fighters would murder him themselves, because they knew it would even worse if they brought him to me.⁶

The RUF became infamous for maiming and killing by chopping off the arms, breasts, hands, legs, tongues, and heads of their victims, and it was responsible for the deaths of untold thousands of innocent people. Initially a radical student movement, the RUF evolved into one of the worst agents of terror in contemporary Africa. The RUF has been especially reviled in international human rights circles for its forced recruitment of children as combatants, use of forced labor, and the sexual exploitation of children.⁷ Without doubt, the RUF and its allies were responsible for most of the human rights abuses during the war.

A shorthand key to the carnage can be found in the nicknames, or "bush names," the self-styled noms de guerre of the RUF fighters: Black Jesus, Captain Backblast, Body Naked, Blood, Colonel Bloodshed, Commando around the World, Commander Blood, General Share Blood, General Bloodshed, God Father, Commander Bullet, Captain Cut Hands, Queen Cut Hands, Captain Bonus, Dry Gin, Mohammed Killer Boy, Major Cut Throat, Mr. Die,

Nasty, Pepper, Rebel Baby, Sgt. Burn House, Superman. Members of other fighting groups such as the West Side Boys, usually regarded as a gang of criminals and bandits recruited from other armed forces, had names such as Colonel Cambodia, Brigadier Bomb Blast, and Mohammed Kill Man without No Law. RUF leaders dubbed the rebel invasion of Freetown in 1999 "Operation No Living Thing," and the systematic mining and looting of the diamond fields of eastern Sierra Leone, "Operation Pay Yourself." Like many perpetrators of terror, the RUF also photographed its atrocities, proudly displaying the severed heads and arms of its civilian victims for the camera.⁸ The names of the RUF fighters are more suggestive of bandits and pirates than of soldiers, and they reflect the fact that this was a war virtually without ideology. It was not separatist, reformist, radical, or even a warlord insurgency. In the end, it had the support neither of the peasantry nor even of the students among whom it originated.⁹

Once war broke out, the factors that drew children and youth into combat became even more complex. The violence seeped so deeply into society that the old anarchist antiwar adage—"You may not need war but war needs you"—certainly applied to Sierra Leone. Some children and youth were bored and attracted to violence. Others felt safer as fighters and armed soldiers than as defenseless civilians. Some came for economic reasons, others because they wanted to defend their homes and villages against rebel actions or to exact revenge for the killing of family members. Many joined local militias as volunteers and fought with the support of their kin and community. Some found freedom in the anarchy of war and the suspension of the rules of civilian life, while others were simply abducted and forced into armed service. No single common social denominator or personal motive links all the children who were in combat. The participation of child combatants cuts across the entire armed struggle in Sierra Leone and cannot, in itself, serve as a simple yardstick for distinguishing good from evil. What sets Sierra Leone apart from many other recent wars in Africa is, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development mission there, the difficulty of distinguishing perpetrators from victims.¹⁰

No reliable data exist on the numbers and ages of the child soldiers who fought in the civil war. Although very young soldiers are said to have served, many appear to have been teenagers between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Most estimates are that at any time during the war some five thousand children were serving as soldiers, fighting on all sides of the war. In February 2002 the Sierra Leone government reported that a total of 45,844 ex-combatants had been demobilized since July 1999, including 5,596 child

soldiers.¹¹ Some argue that there were more child soldiers in the rebel ranks than in government armies and militias.¹² By some estimates half of all RUF combatants were between eight and fourteen years of age.¹³

Why did all parties to the conflict make use of child soldiers in combat? First, in some respects, it would be far more surprising if child soldiers had not been widely involved in the war in Sierra Leone. Certainly, the presence of child combatants in the fifteen- to eighteen-year-old range represents no seismic shift in the involvement of children in warfare in Africa or elsewhere. Youthful soldiers or warriors were present in many precolonial African societies and were part of the military in virtually every anticolonial war of liberation on the African continent from the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya through the struggles of FRELIMO against the Portuguese in Mozambique.

Second, whereas Western countries have increasingly large numbers of the elderly, a large proportion of the African population is young, and they now constitute the majority of the population. Fully 55 percent of the total population are nineteen years old or younger. In the United States, this same age group constitutes only 28 percent of the population.¹⁴

Third, the social and cultural boundaries between childhood and adulthood are quite different in Sierra Leone than in contemporary Western society. In Sierra Leone's subsistence, market, and service economies, children constitute a large part of the labor force. Large numbers of children and youth live and work in ways that in the Western world are the exclusive domain of adults. Moreover, a great many of Sierra Leone's children reside in Freetown or in smaller urbanized cities and rural towns, where poverty, unemployment, and poor education have created massive discontent among children and youth. With children thus marginalized, the boundaries between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood have been systematically eroded.¹⁵ Although humanitarian groups often proclaim that the war "robbed" children of their childhood, the biggest thefts took place during peacetime. In any event, the allegedly purloined childhood of young Sierra Leoneans should not be confused with childhood as it is understood in middle-class London, Paris, or New York.

All these factors—demography, the culturally diverse configurations of childhood and adulthood, the erasure and redrawing of the social and cultural boundaries of childhood and adulthood during peacetime—help explain why children and youth throughout Africa have been thrust into the public space in ways that disturb and threaten panicked elites.¹⁶ But these general factors alone do not fully account for the specific ways in which children and youth were drawn into conflict. At least part of the explanation lies in the special circumstances of Sierra Leone, where for centuries children were ex-

ploited in the slave trade, which in its domestic version lasted until 1929. Additional understanding comes from examining the contemporary political processes that mobilized children and youth for political violence and military action.

Slavery and Premodern Warfare in Sierra Leone

Warfare and terror in Sierra Leone have deep historical roots. In her *Memoirs of the Slave Trade* Rosalind Shaw describes how premodern Sierra Leone was dominated by the terrors of the Atlantic slave trade. By the eighteenth century up to two hundred slaves a day were being dispatched from Sierra Leone. The provision of people for the slave trade was inseparable from warfare. The quest for slaves brought the small chiefdoms in the interior into a state of continuing warfare, as they sought to capture slaves for both the Atlantic and the domestic trade.¹⁷ Local peoples were both perpetrators and victims in a system that created anarchy and dislocation throughout Sierra Leone.¹⁸ Less well-remembered is the fact that although the British began to outlaw and suppress the Atlantic slave trade in the early part of the nineteenth century, slavery was permitted to continue within rural Sierra Leone until 1929. Thus slavery and the warfare associated with slavery are not simply a dim historical memory but a system of practices that endured well into the modern era. As Shaw puts it, in Sierra Leone, "terror had become a taken for granted aspect of the environment in which people's lives unfolded."¹⁹

While the Atlantic slave trade flourished, most of the slaves traded to the Americas were men. In contrast, women and children primarily fed the domestic slave trade. For women, slavery usually meant a life of agricultural labor as a wife who was also a slave. With the decline of the Atlantic slave trade, slaves were taken up as agricultural laborers and as fighters in trade wars in the Sierra Leone hinterland. If Shaw's account of slave wives and slave soldiers disturbingly resembles the exploitation of men, women, and children during the civil war in Sierra Leone, it is her intention. That a young Sierra Leonean soldier in 1992 was able to treat his wife in much the same manner as if she had been a nineteenth-century slave, kidnapped and stripped of virtually all the protections of community and kinship, drives home Shaw's point about the long-term continuity of the predatory economy and society.²⁰ For Shaw, the exploitation, kidnapping, and murder that underlay the slave trade became inscribed into the cultural patterns and practices of life in Sierra Leone.

Kenneth Little's classic ethnography, *The Mende of Sierra Leone*, also shows that children were routinely used in combat. The Mende, one of the most important ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, used a predatory style of war-

fare designed for plunder and slave taking rather than for territorial expansion. Mende towns were stockaded fortresses encircled by concentric rings of war fencing. Warfare was pervasive; fences were stormed, and fighting was usually hand-to-hand combat using swords and spears. Mende leaders gave strong palm wine to their leading warriors to bolster their courage. Captured women and young children became valuable slave labor, important in the expansion of the rice economy. No quarter was given to males; the victors—dancing around the town—led the male captives outside and stabbed them to death. The wholesale slaughter of male captives suggests the pattern of Mende warfare following the end of the Atlantic slave trade. At that time, women and children were still being taken into slavery, while male captives, who could no longer be sold off to the Americas, were of no value.²¹

Although Little does not provide specific information about chronological age, it is clear that men, youth, and boys physically able to fight constituted the Mende fighting forces. Mende boys made the simultaneous transition into both manhood and warrior status when, at puberty, they were initiated into the Mende male secret association, the Poro. Boys emerged from the Poro initiations as warriors. The youngest recruits, or “war sparrows,” served as bearers but also fought when called on. Although the Mende did not reckon age with precision, the youngest warriors were in their early teenage years. The West today regards such young people as boys or children, but the Mende saw them as young adults with the rights and duties of adulthood.

The organization of nineteenth-century Mende warfare was typical throughout much of the forested area of Sierra Leone. Similar patterns appeared among the Kono and other Mende neighbors.²² Few, if any, Western ideas about the rules of war applied. Women and young children were not direct combatants not because they had a protected status as civilians but because they were to be reduced to slavery. Adult male prisoners and captives were executed as a matter of course, and drugs—in this case alcohol—were used to bolster a warrior’s courage. Combatants were primarily male, from young boys to adults. Although the modern use of child soldiers in Sierra Leone is not merely a projection of nineteenth-century warfare into the present period, the historic link between warfare and human exploitation makes it clear that the involvement of children in war is not simply a modern-day abhorrence.

The Origins of Youth Violence

Children and youth have played an important but often hidden role in Sierra Leone’s political development over the last century with the rise of urban

youth culture, the role of youth in secret associations, and the eventual spread of urban youth culture to the diamond-mining areas of eastern Sierra Leone. All these developments contributed to increasing violence among youth.

URBAN YOUTH CULTURE

Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, was founded in 1792. Its earliest settlers were liberated Africans from England, Jamaica, and Nova Scotia, as well as Maroons who had taken part in the rebellion in Jamaica. This nonnative population formed the core of Freetown’s residents, but as the principal city of the Colony and Protectorate of Sierra Leone Freetown also attracted migrants from the hinterland. By the end of the nineteenth century, Freetown was a sharply stratified, multicultural city. A small number of British colonists controlled most of the significant positions in government and commerce; next were the Creoles, or Krio, largely the descendants of liberated Africans, whose unique culture and society encouraged the formation of a strong professional class of lawyers, physicians, and clergy that controlled most of the administrative positions in government. The elite of Freetown dubbed it the “Athens of Africa.” Like Athens of old, it was built on an underclass—in this case, one composed largely of poor and young African immigrants from the hinterland along with a significant number of the less successful descendants of early settlers.

The poorest and youngest segments of this society developed their own youth culture beginning in the early part of the twentieth century. Organized youth gangs such as Arms Akimbo, Foot-A Backers, and A-Burn-Am (led by a Generalissimo Yonkon) were present in Freetown by 1917.²³ A young working-class culture emerged with a pool of young people who worked alongside adults as domestic servants, drivers, dockworkers, hawkers, laborers, night watchmen, peddlers, petty criminals, pimps, and shoeshine boys, along with school dropouts and the unemployed. Alienated and hostile toward traditional and governmental authority, they were apolitical, antisocial, and violent, and they lived at the margins of society.²⁴ These youth, and the organizations they created, became a platform from which political violence was launched.

Freetown grew steadily in the early twentieth century. Like many cities in West Africa, it experienced exponential growth following the end of World War II as migrants came hoping for economic prosperity and anticipating political independence from Britain. The influx of migrants coupled with growing social-class stratification gradually turned youth into independent social actors who were less subordinate to adult authority than they had previously been. Youth and youth organizations, although not necessarily identified as such, were central to the social and political life of urban Freetown.

In the first systematic anthropological study of Freetown, conducted in the 1950s, Michael Banton noted the importance of youth associations among literate migrants from rural Sierra Leone who were excluded from urban Creole social institutions.²⁵ Banton's study shows that among the Temne (one of the main ethnic groups in Sierra Leone and the focus of Banton's study) youth groups such as Boys London and Ambas Geda provided a social venue for these migrants. These new groups created a crisis in political authority as young people, who regarded themselves as a modernizing force and whose levels of literacy set them apart from their elders, evaded or rejected the authority of the chiefs. These young people also came into conflict with colonial authority as they encountered the inequities of modern forms of stratification. Ethnically based, and hardly radical, these youth associations concerned themselves with policing the morality of their members; they gave financial help to those who had minor scrapes with the law but expelled those who had multiple offenses or a felony conviction. Banton saw Freetown as an ethnic mosaic of transformed tribal groups and religious associations. He paid scant attention to African organizational groupings that cut across ethnic groups and boundaries. Not surprisingly, in the wake of the strikes and riots in Freetown in 1955 he claimed "everyone's ignorance of the laboring classes in Freetown was revealed by the outbreak of rioting . . . which caught the government by surprise."²⁶

Even more surprising is his silence regarding Freetown's long history of labor strife and the militant organization of labor. In truth, prior to World War II, youth played a pivotal role in the West African Youth League, a Marxist organization with extensive support as a multiethnic, anticolonialist, nationalist movement. In the late 1930s, the Youth League held mass meetings, formed trade unions, published a newspaper, contested elections, and was open to all sections of the working class in Sierra Leone.²⁷

The Youth League was founded by I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, a Krio who was born in Sierra Leone but who emerged as a youth leader and critic of colonialism when he moved to Ghana (then the Gold Coast) and Nigeria. Wallace-Johnson was a Marxist trade unionist who had studied in Moscow.²⁸ He started a chapter of the Youth League in Nigeria, but in 1938 the colonial administration charged him with sedition and deported him to Sierra Leone. The Youth League attracted teachers, clerks, workers, the self-employed, and the unemployed with its message of socialism and its tactics of mass mobilization.²⁹ With a strong teenage following the League made rapid electoral gains in the Freetown city-council elections of 1938; this success put Wallace-Johnson on a collision course with the colonial government and the affluent ruling sectors of the Krio community.³⁰ The electoral victory of youth

representatives from the lower and working classes overwhelmed the Krio elite, led by Dr. Herbert Christian Bankole Bright (dubbed "Banky" in the street). The youth victors passed out mock obituary notices of Krio domination that proclaimed the victory of youth over the Krio "Uncle Toms" and that included the following poem, sung to the tune of "Pussy in the Well."

Ding Dung Dell
 Banky's in the well
 Who put him in?
 A little youth in teen
 Who'll put him out?
 No! never to be out.
 Oh what a jolly sight for Youth to see
 Big Banky in the Well.
 OKAY³¹

Wallace-Johnson's nationalist movement believed in and built on the power of youth. It wanted the radical leadership of youth to transform Sierra Leone. But the Youth League's electoral successes were short-lived. Wallace-Johnson was branded an "evil-doer" by the established press. The Krio community and the colonial government actively sought to suppress the Youth League and rid Sierra Leone of its leader via a deportation bill specifically directed at Wallace-Johnson. Fearing that no jury would ever convict Wallace-Johnson, they championed draconian legislative bills that curtailed freedom of the press and ended trial by jury in Sierra Leone. At first, Wallace-Johnson was detained under emergency wartime regulations, but in the end he was convicted of criminal libel (without a jury), imprisoned, freed, and later incarcerated again by the colonial government. The outbreak of World War II and the sense of emergency it created legitimized the suppression of the West African Youth League. But the despotic use of law to suppress democracy and dissent was astonishing even by colonial standards. As a result, Sierra Leone may be the only country in Africa where World War II effectively stalemated the development of African anticolonial nationalism.³²

The West African Youth League, effectively died with the internment of Wallace-Johnson. The League was the first major democratic challenge to colonial power. An entrenched elite that used law to criminalize political opposition crushed it. The dictatorial and suppressive manipulation of law and legislative processes by a colonial regime purportedly preparing Sierra Leoneans for democracy became a template for the use of law as a cudgel to bash all opposition to entrenched power. The emergence of the West African Youth League was part of a larger story of the mobilization of youth in Sierra

Leone. The suppression of the League made it plain to urban youth that democratic electoral politics was the exclusive province of the elite and that the political mobilization of youth would be suppressed.

YOUTH AND SECRET ASSOCIATIONS

Secret associations hold a prominent place in Sierra Leonean politics and youth culture. The political life of many societies in the forested areas of West Africa's Upper Guinea Coast was dominated by such associations, which usually serve as an adjunct to established power and lend a sacred dimension to political violence. But, at times, secret associations also served as a basis from which to challenge political power. The existence of secret associations and the violent history of the region are intimately linked. The Poro, which held a central place in the government of many rural and traditional societies of Sierra Leone, is widely credited with having organized armed resistance to the British from the late nineteenth century through much of the colonial period.³³ The Poro also played an important role in the political socialization of youth by fusing sacred and secular power and orchestrating the rites of passage through which boys were socially and culturally transformed into men. In more recent years, many urban youth organizations borrowed the symbolism and cultural trappings of secret associations. During the civil war, secret associations were a means of organizing youth for combat.

The Poro was part of a dual system of political power. Formal political power was centralized in the largely secular office of the chief (or the paramount chief, as some of them were called under colonial rule). The Poro, in contrast, was charged with maintaining the social order through control over the sacred. But because the chiefs and other secular leaders were usually high-ranking members of the Poro, it is wiser to think of the Poro as a sacred and secret dimension of political power than as a separate and discrete political institution. Although the exact role of the Poro has never been fully delineated, the sacred power exercised by the Poro often involved terror and violence.³⁴ The sacred power of the Poro (sometimes referred to as its "medicine") was symbolized by a spirit, a masked figure often termed the *Gbeni* among the Kono and Mende.³⁵ *Gbeni* is usually translated as "devil" in English or "debel" in the Krio language. These terms describe both the masked spirits and the power they embody.

Secret associations did not disappear from the political and social life in Sierra Leone with urbanization and modernization but flourished in an attenuated and modified form. A host of secret associations exist throughout Sierra Leone, each of which has its own "debel." In Freetown, for example, a secret society of civil servants called the Hunters Societies emerged among

the middle-class Krio and served to defend Krio status and privilege. By the 1970s, the function of the Hunters was fulfilled by various Masonic orders that took on a distinctively Sierra Leonean structure and tone.³⁶ These largely middle-class associations occupied a bounded and segregated cultural and social space that offered little room for poor and working class youth.

For these youngsters, the main secret associations were the *odelays*, sometimes known as "devil societies"; *odelay* refers to both the organized masquerading that these associations did as well as to the groups themselves. By the early 1960s there were more than sixty of these associations in Freetown, all founded by boys between the ages of ten and seventeen.³⁷ These associations were quite different from their rural or urban middle-class counterparts. First, they were competitive and aggressive, operating at times like inner-city gangs. Second, they were less segregated by gender than their rural counterparts, so girls could participate with boys in the same societies, sometimes as members and sometimes as followers.³⁸ Third, membership was flexible, and young people could belong to more than one society, a fact that apparently reduced fighting between societies. Finally, and perhaps most important, the youth secret associations were composed almost entirely of young people. Unlike the Poro and other secret associations of rural Sierra Leone, whose initiates were politically and ritually subordinate to adult authority, a hierarchy of peers governed the *odelays*.

Because these secret associations were composed mainly of youngsters, they had little political power. They generally functioned as gathering places where young people cooked, ate, drank beer and distilled palm wine, and prepared for special events in which each society's elaborately dressed "devil" paraded down the streets of Freetown accompanied by dancing and singing. Major parades were held on Christmas, Easter, and Whitsunide (the seventh Sunday after Easter, commemorating Pentecost). By the late 1970s parades were held during Eid Ul-Adha, the Islamic holiday celebrating the sacrifice of Ishmael by Ibrahim.³⁹ Parades promised excitement, which took the form of organized fighting among different youth groups that battled each other and sometimes the police with a variety of weapons, including bottles, knives, whips, battery acid, daggers, and swords. Once fighting erupted, the elaborately dressed devils often withdrew and were replaced by more utilitarian devils with simple dress and sharp axes.⁴⁰

Organized violence thus became a major factor in the lives of urban youth. Locally known as *rarray* boys, they prized skill and courage, and good fighters were highly esteemed. Indeed, a prime role of youth leaders was to organize fighting. The initiation ceremony for new members lasted two to three days and stressed endurance to pain. Boys were beaten, kicked, cut with

glass and razor blades, and sometimes hung from a tree or above a fire. Boys who were especially good fighters paid reduced membership dues.⁴¹

In the last decades of the twentieth century the *odelays* became even more violent and political. As the economy weakened, *odelays* became a magnet for alienated and displaced youth, including high school students, dropouts, and youngsters from the working class.⁴² Self-styled student revolutionaries from Fourah Bay College joined the mix, bringing about a confluence of violence and politics. The *odelays* became more deeply criminalized, internalized, and characterized by greater intergenerational authority and hierarchy.⁴³ *Odelay* masqueraders began to dress in military garb and carried real or carved guns. The members of one *odelay*, Education, carried knives in textbooks while masquerading.⁴⁴ More contemporary portraits of urban youth associations are strikingly Dickensian: highly authoritarian and Fagan-like big men (*agbahs*) in their later twenties and early thirties and somewhat younger big brothers (*bras*) control groups of young boys and provide them with food, money, protection, and shelter in exchange for stealing and pimping.⁴⁵ Their activities became so tied to prostitution and drug use that the basic relationship between boys and girls was often one of pimp to prostitute. But some *odelays* had important female officials called mammy queens, who during the civil war were some of the most violent and powerful female combatants. The tropes of secrecy and violence that knit together the lives of poor urban youth via these secret associations often became the basis from which they challenged power and authority.⁴⁶ Many joined illegal mining operations and became miners or soldiers or both.

It was not only the urban secret associations that expressed the discontent of youth. During the time I lived in the Kono diamond-mining district in the 1970s I found that Poro ceremonies inadvertently amplified the widespread sense of economic despair in the diamond areas. For Kono youth, the diamond resources that later allowed the rebel forces to underwrite their rebellion were a mixed blessing. The iron law of natural-resource expropriation in Sierra Leone meant that all Sierra Leonean governments (colonial and postcolonial) walked away with most of Kono's diamond wealth, leaving local people mired in poverty. Sentiments surrounding Poro initiation rites reflected the frustration of rural youth who faced an uncertain future. As in the past, Kono teenagers were initiated into the Poro in a highly orchestrated ceremonial rite of passage conducted in a sacred forest grove. Traditionally these ceremonies took place over a period of weeks or even months. By the early 1970s these rites were diluted and adjusted to meet school and work schedules, and the rites hardly provided (if they ever did) a seamless transition from

childhood to adulthood. Kono children, living in a world of diamond mining, smuggling, and broken dreams, faced a future with few real opportunities. If anything, the ceremonial transition from childhood to adulthood underscored the sense that the road to adulthood was a perilous journey filled with insecurity and disappointment.

A Kono schoolboy, Aiah Baiama, told me:

When I was young, before I went into the [Poro] association, everyone told me of all the beautiful buildings that were in the [initiation] grove. You know, I asked many questions when I was a child, and my brothers, they would lie to me about the Poro. I often asked them why it was that when they emerged from the Poro they looked so fat and manlike. They would tell me about all the beautiful buildings that were in the grove which were small in size so that they could not be seen from the outside. They told me of white women who feed people. They said there was a white woman in each of those buildings, and because she fed them white man's food they became fat. They said that those women would take out my heart and cook it and give me the heart of a man.⁴⁷

"But of course," said Aiah, "it wasn't like that at all." Aiah emerged from the Poro grove with the full realization that it was not a secret magical place where all the riches of the world could be found. No white woman transformed his life and turned him into a well-fed and courageous man. Instead, he emerged with a greater sense of the realities of life in the diamond region. Like all young men in the region, whether they graduated from school or dropped out early, he faced a life of grappling with joblessness and poverty.

By the early 1970s, a sense of economic despair had seeped into Kono society, soiling the most sacred precincts. The notion that a magical white woman would provide sustenance and ritually transform scrawny boys into healthy men reflected the extensive pessimism of youth about their fellow Sierra Leoneans. Aiah's story is a childhood story, but it was told at a time in which personal success and failure were attributed to malevolent forces, especially the powers of witchcraft. These stories often contrasted the supposed behavior of Europeans and whites with that of Africans and Sierra Leoneans. The material success of whites was attributed to the willingness of white witches to produce a material world of abundance for all, while the failures of Sierra Leone were attributed to the personal malevolence of Sierra Leoneans. Unlike the white witches, whose magic was said to serve the public good, the witches of Sierra Leone were deemed to have accumulated their wealth in secret and kept it hidden. They harmed and exploited one another

and ruined and destroyed their neighbors. "In the world of the witches," a youngster told me, "there is everything: airplanes, cars, cement houses, diamonds, and other riches. There is everything you white people have in your place. You see these witches here. They are just as powerful as your white witches are, and they can make anything by virtue of their power that can be made in your world. But they are selfish and evil and keep it all for themselves and hate others for their success."

The idea of secrecy and secret associations is so deeply embedded in Sierra Leone society that it became a template for action by all parties to the conflict. In response to RUF attacks on defenceless rural communities, the government encouraged the formation of "community vigilance units," some of which grew out of the secret associations such as the Poro and hunting societies. Poro authority was crucial because of the breakdown of other forms of civil authority and protection. Rashid Peters, a former Mende child soldier, reports that he was recruited at twelve to join the Mende Civilian Defense Forces, the Kamajors. Peters recalls, "We were in support of the government, the people, and the local community. The government recruited us to flush out the rebel enemies. We young local hunters were called *kamajors*. We became spies for our people and took the risk of getting secrets on the enemy side. Our leaders told us that we should fight for our land and freedom. They told us the secrets of the village during our conscription in the thicket of the bush. We were told that these secrets must be kept strictly if we wanted to avoid the enemy's bullets when they attacked."⁴⁸

The RUF also made use of Poro or Poro-like rituals. RUF recruits were often sworn to secrecy and took oaths of loyalty, the violation of which was said to result in the magical death of the violator. Some assert that during the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the role of the Poro was "bastardised."⁴⁹ The U.S. State Department cited unconfirmed reports that in March 2001 RUF fighters forcibly conscripted civilians into the Poro.⁵⁰ Similarly, a report of the European Commission claims that the RUF's use of the Poro was a way of manipulating the cultural "infrastructure" of rural life in Sierra Leone. Arguing that the Poro is the "main idiom of transition from childhood to adulthood in forest society," the report interprets the use of the Poro by the RUF as a way of abusing a traditional sacred rite to convert children to a radically new way of life.⁵¹ This perspective promotes a Pollyannaish view of the premodern Poro, mischaracterizing it as a benign institution of adolescent enculturation and socialization. In fact, it always was a political force that employed sacred terror. Not surprisingly, many fighting groups seized on these powerful symbols as a means to organize and control youth.

THE NATIONALIZATION OF YOUTH CULTURE

By the late 1960s and 1970s, youth discontent, inflamed by extreme economic inequality, was evident throughout Sierra Leone. The urbanization of the countryside was accompanied by the spread of youth violence, which fanned out from Freetown to the diamond-mining areas of eastern Sierra Leone. Here, only a decade after independence, a small and wealthy European, Lebanese, and Sierra Leonean elite had created an affluent enclave where young and ambitious bankers from the United Kingdom rubbed shoulders with European diamond-company managers, government officials, and Lebanese diamond dealers. The elite played tennis at courts on the grounds of the National Diamond Mining Company, which also ran a local medical clinic that was off-limits to Africans. Government officials and diamond dealers rode the streets in Mercedes Benzes. In well-guarded houses, they ate imported, thick-skinned oranges from Lebanon (not the thin-skinned, sweet oranges sold by local street hawkers) and dined on tenderloin beef from Europe. They proudly displayed photographs of their frequent tours of urban nightclub haunts in Belgium and France. Private gasoline-powered generators kept the lights on, the beer cold, and the steaks frozen.

Surrounding this tiny islet of public affluence was a sea of migrants who had poured into the diamond fields from all over Africa since the end of the World War II. Koidu, the central town of Kono District, boasted a vibrant local African economy. Near the bright pink central mosque sat dozens of market women, shielding themselves from the sun under hand-held umbrellas or makeshift awnings of bright fabric and selling rice scooped out of great enamel pans. Others sold beans, bread, boiled and mashed yams (*yusu*), dried fish (*bonga*), cassava, peas, potato leaves, peppers, tins of tomato puree, bottles of palm oil and peanut oil, and the ubiquitous tins of Carnation evaporated milk, snidely known as "white man's snot." Nearly stacked for sale were matches, soaps, kerosene, plastic buckets, medical charms, herbs and roots, and wicker baskets. Behind the street vendors, tin-roofed stores provided space for sellers of clothing and finished goods. Tailors with pedal-operated sewing machines worked under the eaves of the roofs. At the edge of town, Fula herdsmen marketed cattle they had driven from the tsetse-fly free north for slaughter in town. Koidu itself was awash with people from all over West Africa—from Mali, Senegal, Guinea, the Gambia, and Liberia.

Diamonds and the quest for wealth and prosperity were the driving force behind the emergence and growth of Koidu. Koidu has often been described as having the character of the Wild West with the diamond miners the equivalent of the miners of the California Gold Rush. But the analogy is superficial

and masks important differences. In reality, the situation in Koidu was more like the era of Prohibition in the United States. During the California Gold Rush, anyone could stake a claim. In Sierra Leone access to the principal resource—diamonds—was restricted by law to a select few. The rest of the population was indifferent or hostile to a legal and political system that siphoned off the riches for a national and international elite. As a result, large groups of men and boys devoted themselves to the illegal mining of diamonds. Some were successful, but for most the lure of diamonds was a hollow promise.

Large deposits of riverine diamonds were discovered in Sierra Leone in 1930. Mining diamonds in rivers and streams, unlike mining operations in other areas of Africa, can be carried out with shovels, pails, sifters, and other simple and rudimentary equipment.⁵² The most extensive deposits in Sierra Leone are found in Kono District and the forested areas of the Gola forest in Southern Province near the Liberian border. For twenty years after diamonds were discovered, the Sierra Leone Selection Trust (S.L.S.T.), a De Beers-controlled British mining company, had a monopoly over mining and prospecting. By 1952, however, news of the riches of the diamond fields had spread, and young migrants from all over West Africa came to Sierra Leone and threatened the S.L.S.T. franchise. All mining by individuals was illegal, and the diggers posed a powerful challenge both to the S.L.S.T. and to the stability of Sierra Leone. The Diamond Protection Force, a company-owned paramilitary, protected the diamond deposits and routinely faced off against the young miners. Despite the suppression, the productive output of the illegal diggers at that time was twice that of the S.L.S.T. and may have amounted to 20 percent of world production per annum.⁵³

Prompted by riots and bloodshed in northern Sierra Leone and faced with widespread lawlessness among young miners throughout the diamond fields, the colonial government promoted a plan to give Sierra Leoneans a limited stake in the mining. The government reduced the S.L.S.T. monopoly to an exclusive area of about 450 square miles of the richest deposits. The remaining reserves, largely undeveloped, were made available for limited mining by individual Sierra Leoneans under a licensing system that required the consent of local tribal authorities. The government believed that this plan would curtail illegal mining because local tribal authorities would be involved in the regulation of mining and individual Sierra Leoneans would be granted some access to legitimate mining.

To knit this scheme together, in 1956 the colonial government enacted the Alluvial Diamond Mining Ordinance and the Diamond Industry Protection Ordinance, which created a series of diamond protection areas and gave the government broad powers to arrest and expel “strangers” from these areas.

A *stranger* was basically any person who wasn't specifically exempted from the law. Strangers were subject to arrest, expulsion, a fine, and up to six months in prison, and if they were found in possession of a sieve, shovel, a shaker, pickaxe any other tool that could be used for prospecting or mining they could receive up to twelve months in prison with hard labor.⁵⁴ In 1956, with much fanfare, the government launched “Operation Parasite,” designed to drive all illegal miners out of the diamond areas.⁵⁵

But these measures were too little and too late. In many areas the migrants outnumbered the local people. In Kono District, the heart of the diamond fields, migrants overwhelmed the Kono, the local inhabitants of the region. In 1963, the Sierra Leone census reported that Kono District had a population of 167,915, with only 90,000 identified as Kono. The rest were migrants.⁵⁶ By 1970, the population of Kono District had expanded to about 249,000, and in the districts where diamonds were heavily concentrated the numbers of migrants often greatly exceeded those of the local Kono.⁵⁷ In addition, because tribal authorities granted so few individual licenses, and the system of granting of licenses was perceived to be so corrupt, the whole plan had little effect on illegal mining. Operation Parasite was thus a failure. Instead of clearing the mining areas of strangers, it generated a protracted, low-level war of attrition among government authorities, paramilitaries, and illicit miners. Long periods of hide and seek were followed by massive operations designed to move strangers out of the diamond protection areas.

Operation Parasite was followed in 1969 by Operation Exodus, and so-called stranger drives—the forced arrest and deportation of migrants—began to dominate the political landscape. By this time, the struggle over diamonds was generating chaos and violence throughout the region. A report from the Eastern Province Intelligence Committee to the Ministry of the Interior on the impact of Operation Exodus on the Kono diamond protection area tells the whole story. The committee noted widespread episodes of assault and extortion carried out by the Sierra Leone army. It cited massive popular resentment against the government that stemmed from the belief that the government condoned the atrocities carried out by the army. The committee recommended that the army be withdrawn immediately.⁵⁸ Military operations in Kono established a pattern of predation by the Sierra Leone army. This pattern was repeated over and over again during the civil war, when renegade troops called Sobels—Soldiers by Day and Rebels by Night—plundered the people and resources of the diamond areas. But even in 1969 the army was not the only problem. Illicit mining also created widespread banditry, with thieves raiding villages and mining offices in search of gems. By 1970, the Tama Forest Reserve, later an RUF haven, was nicknamed “Katanga Province”

after the lawless secessionist province of the Congo known for its thievery and violence.⁵⁹

Kono's pervasive economic and political problems led to numerous anti-colonial and antigovernment political movements, which were suppressed by the central government.⁶⁰ One major movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the Kono Progressive Movement, tried to forge political links with migrants, but on the whole, even within this movement, the Kono regarded themselves as victims of predatory governments and greedy migrants. In the end, Kono grassroots political movements subscribed to the formula that the diamonds of Kono District belonged to the Kono people and not to anyone else. This hostility soured the relationship between the rural Kono and the non-Kono migrant urban populations developing in their midst.

When rebel forces invaded Sierra Leone in 1991 and started their drive to seize Kono District, their goal was to control the diamond fields, the major single source of resources in the country. From the Kono perspective, the rebels were an extreme version of the kinds of migrants and bandits that had been part of life in the District for decades. The attitude of the RUF was equally hostile. It did little or nothing to try to organize the dissatisfied subsistence farmers, miners, and struggling schoolboys. The rebels came to Kono not to create a revolutionary force but to gain access to the same resources that had been drawing migrants and bandits since the 1950s. The Kono, if anything, were in the way and were useful only to the extent they could be exploited.

The Atrocities of Peace: Youth Violence and the Political System

The violence and corruption of the politics and economics of diamond mining deepened when Stevens was elected president of Sierra Leone in 1967. Stevens's election ended the rule of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), which had ruled Sierra Leone through the transition from British colonial rule and during the first few years of independence. Stevens and his political party, the All People's Congress (APC), created a one-party state in Sierra Leone by immediately destroying the power of the SLPP. Destroying the SLPP not only meant shutting down the national party but also controlling the rural elite. Especially targeted was the system of local rule by paramount chiefs, which had considerable importance in Sierra Leone. Next, Stevens sought to control the key resources of Sierra Leone, especially diamonds. Controlling diamond production not only allowed Stevens and his followers to amass personal fortunes but also provided the means for rewarding and punishing political supporters and opponents.

William Reno argues that Stevens created a "shadow state," which combined patronage and violence and became the effective system of political rule in Sierra Leone. During Stevens's rule and that of his successor, Joseph Momoh, the formal and public institutions of government devolved into an empty carapace, occasionally animated by private patronage networks. However, this empty shell of a government continued to serve as a symbol of international authority and legitimacy and was used to channel the funds of international institutions into private hands. Because so many state-level institutions had been gutted, control over the key resources of society was transferred to private strongmen and their followers. From the point of view of ordinary Sierra Leoneans, the government continued to be the main source of organized violence, although an increasingly weakened military began to be overshadowed by private paramilitaries.⁶¹

Early in his presidency, Stevens and the APC leadership realized that children and youth could play a major role in maintaining political control. Violence was spreading through the diamond areas and the network of small towns and villages that surrounded the region. In the larger towns such as Bo and Kenema, displaced and unemployed youth were concentrated in pockets of poverty and despair. Stevens himself had a background in trade unionism, and he and the APC deliberately began to organize youth, stressing the links between the APC and Wallace-Johnson's West African Youth League. But this connection was a sham; the APC was interested only in mobilizing youth for its own narrow political interests.

The SLPP had already provided Stevens with a model for political thugery. During the 1967 elections the SLPP made use of "action groups," bands of teenage males dressed in white bandannas and vests bearing the palm-tree symbol of the SLPP, to intimidate the voters. Aminatta Forna, in her autobiography, *The Devil That Danced on the Water*, describes the rampages of the SLPP youth when the military staged a coup to thwart the transition of power from the SLPP to the APC. Having been victorious in the elections, Stevens was being sworn into office at State House when he was arrested. That night, the army shot down a crowd in Freetown that was protesting the coup, and the wounded were taken to Conaught Hospital. The hospital was raided by SLPP youth bearing automatic weapons, who had come to finish off the victims, but they retreated when the physician in charge confronted them. Under the APC, youth violence multiplied. Stevens began using youth violence to create an atmosphere of anarchy and terror in order to bring about a one-party state. S. I. Koroma, nicknamed Agba Satani, Satan's chief disciple, who later became vice president of Sierra Leone, led this effort. The youth groups were his power base.⁶² Koroma's start in politics came when he was supported

by Rainbow, an *odelay* in central Freetown, for the 1962 city-council elections.⁶³ Koroma was explicit about his belief that violence was inseparable from politics.⁶⁴

Throughout Sierra Leone, members of the APC youth wing (APC Youth), wearing red berets and red tee shirts bearing the logo of the rising sun, became the political muscle whenever the APC wanted to display its power. In 1968, key members of APC Youth became the leaders of the two important *odelays*—Firestone and Eastern Paddle—symbolizing the fusion of politics and street violence.⁶⁵ Under the APC, citizens and soldiers who had served under previous governments, opposition politicians, and rivals within the party were subject to the ravages of the youth supporters. Youth set people on fire, burned down their houses, shot children, paraded citizens about naked and beat them, brought opponents before youth-run kangaroo courts, and hacked men and women to death with machetes. In Ginger Hill, a neighborhood in Freetown, APC Youth members threw sticks of dynamite into the houses and shops of Mende and Fula residents, killing people in their beds. Youth thugs controlled official public spaces, routinely menacing and abusing citizens. Forna describes them as “lupine youth in red T-shirts and bandannas[.] . . . cruel and confident as predators.”⁶⁶

The Kono District was one of the many places in Sierra Leone where APC Youth concentrated its attention. I had a dramatic encounter with APC Youth in 1973 in Nimi Koro Chiefdom, where the APC was making a concerted effort to depose the local paramount chief, Dudu Bona, an opposition-party member. At the time Sierra Leone was under a state of emergency that prohibited opposition-party activity, and Chief Bona was charged with calling secret meetings with opposition-party leaders. Charges began to pile up, some bordering on the fantastic. It was claimed that the chief was training subversives in the nearby Nimini mountains, confiscating property, misusing chiefdom revenue, mistreating elders, using forced labor, arbitrarily appointing village chiefs, and engaging in cannibalism.⁶⁷ An inquiry was held at the local court in the town of Njaiama. I had obtained permission from the local court president, an APC official, to attend and tape-record the hearings. But on the third day of Bona’s “trial,” several pick-up trucks carrying members of APC Youth roared up to the courthouse and surrounded it. The party was showing its muscle. A number of people were picked out, kicked out of the courtroom, and threatened. I was at the courthouse at the time, and I did not see anyone beaten up, although there were widespread reports of beatings and other abuses. I was pushed out of the courthouse by a member of the APC Youth who looked about sixteen or seventeen and who was screaming at me in Krio and in English: “Who are you? Fuck you! Fuck you! Give me the

tapes.” Two or three others surrounded me, my tape recorder was smashed, and I was detained.

The youth leader claimed I was a spy and threatened to kill me, but in the end they forced me into one of the trucks and drove me to the police station at Yengema near Koidu. An officer of the Criminal Investigation Division, who declared that this was a “police matter” and that he would deal with me, took me into custody. I was released, without charge, a few minutes after the youth left, with a warning from the officer to “be careful.” Soon after this episode I was told by the local court president that the government decided that the public trial of the chief had been a mistake and the entire matter was adjourned to the district officer’s office in Yengema, where it was settled outside the public eye. Chief Bona remained in power.

What I witnessed was a minor episode in the transformation of youth thugs into a government-sponsored paramilitary. The template for the contemporary child soldier in Sierra Leone was forged under the APC regime. Virtually every atrocity visited on the people of Sierra Leone during the civil war (save the amputation of limbs) was part of the peacetime repertoire of political violence. Prewar political violence was the training ground for warfare. Marauding bands of youth first learned in peacetime that they could kill and maim civilians with impunity and that the “rule of law” was a club for bludgeoning political enemies. Similarly, the sexual exploitation of young women and girls had peacetime roots. The destruction of the Sierra Leone economy pushed women and girls into prostitution. Many of the young girls who were sex slaves during the war had been actively working as sex workers prior to the war. The term *rarray girl* came to mean prostitute or sex worker.⁶⁸ Teenage girls, known as “fresh pick,” were especially prized by big men—in this case, government officials, APC party bosses, and anyone who had access to wealth via government- and party-controlled patronage networks.⁶⁹ The Sierra Leone government’s role as a decades’ long promoter of youth violence has not been subject to public inquiry. It has also not received much attention in the United Nations because the ideology and structure of the United Nations are not amenable to scrutiny of intrastate, government-sponsored violence.

But most Sierra Leone youth were not involved in thuggery. The young political thugs I observed were clearly not from Kono. They did not speak Kono to anyone. They were *rarray* boys in political drag. All the screaming and intimidation that I saw and heard was in Krio, the lingua franca of the region. APC Youth was clearly a hostile and alien presence in Nimi Koro Chiefdom even given the fact that the chiefdom was at the center of the illegal diamond-mining activities. Indeed, although I knew many Kono boys

and young men who were involved in illegal diamond mining, for most of them it was part-time or occasional work. Their lives were still partly rooted in both agriculture and in the possibility of achievement through education.

But it is a mistake to believe that the APC did not have local supporters. The system of local rule by paramount chiefs, known as the Native Administration, was built around favoritism and corruption. Chiefs were involved in the awarding of individual diamond-mining licenses and in contract mining schemes that allowed them to nominate persons to develop joint operations on the mining company's leasehold area using tribute labor. Money and the chance to work were political favors dispensed by the Native Administration.⁷⁰ These inequalities divided loyalties within Kono District and elsewhere in Sierra Leone, creating widespread discontent wherever local rulers monopolized employment and resources.⁷¹ This discontent was the reason, in part, why some Kono and Mende youth joined the RUF.⁷²

The Radicalization of Youth

Youth violence became a basic building block of political life in Sierra Leone. The widespread poverty, the personal enrichment of the elite, the failure to use the wealth of Sierra Leone to develop a robust market economy, and the lack of education and job opportunities ensured an endless supply of unemployed, unemployable, and alienated youth. Sierra Leone was, and still is, a country filled with unwanted youth. Some portion of this youth were always available to be recruited into any setting—legal or criminal—that offered a hint of economic opportunity. Yet these poor and alienated youth would most likely have remained at the margins of society had they not been drawn into a revolutionary setting developed by their more privileged counterparts, university and high school students.

Not long after the APC came to power, students from the elite high schools in Freetown and from the University of Sierra Leone began to dabble in revolutionary ideologies and politics. Much of their revolutionary ardor was centered on opposition to the APC and was grounded in the tenets of Pan-Africanism, socialism, and revolution. Students developed study groups and read the writings of Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, Karl Marx, V. I. Lenin, Fidel Castro, and, most important, newer works such as the *Green Book of Libya's Colonel Muammar al-Qadhafi*.⁷³ College students and unemployed high school graduates also began to drift into the pubs of Freetown, where they mixed with local toughs.

As Sierra Leone slid deeper into economic crisis, a volatile mixture of poor youth and radicalized students emerged. In 1977, student demonstra-

tions at Fourah Bay College against the authoritarian rule of the Stevens regime resulted in severe government repression of student and faculty leaders. But the demonstrations helped forge a connection between students and working-class and poor youth. Some radical students began to imagine themselves as a revolutionary vanguard, and their willingness to openly confront authority earned them support in Freetown and other cities. But student radicals were heavily sanctioned: student leaders were arrested or detained, students were locked out of the campus, and all student political activity was eventually curtailed. By the mid-1980s the crackdown on student radicalism pushed radicals off campus and into the cities of Freetown, Bo, Kenema, and Koidu. Joining with the violent youth of the *odelays* these students helped shape the development of a political culture that stressed the necessity of radical violence as the cure for all the ills of Sierra Leone. At the same time the ritual use of drugs became central to youth radicalism, and those who did not use drugs were excluded from radical politics.⁷⁴

The student revolutionary movement was transformed and subverted by events that drew student leaders into contact with Libya. In 1983, a delegation of faculty and students, including the student-union president, Abdul Gbla, and the anthropologist Moses Dumbuya, were invited to participate in the celebration of the Libyan revolution.⁷⁵ From that time on Libyan cultivation of student radicals grew with the continuing oppression in Sierra Leone. Between 1987 and 1988 between twenty-five and fifty Sierra Leoneans, including students led by Alie Kabbah, the leader of the 1977 student demonstrations, were in Libya training in the use of weapons with the idea of launching a rebellion in Sierra Leone.⁷⁶

Here the picture becomes murky. Foday Sankoh, the late leader of the RUF, was among those who received military training in Libya. Sankoh, a member of a revolutionary cell in Kono District, was a former army corporal and television cameraman. He had been imprisoned for several years for his involvement in an attempted coup against Stevens. He replaced Kabbah as the leader of the revolutionary movement. Most important, Sankoh was an ally of Charles Taylor, leader of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, who was leading his armies in a civil war in Liberia and seeking to extend his control into Sierra Leone. Sponsored by Taylor, Sankoh established the RUF. Only three of the initial student revolutionaries who went to Liberia joined the RUF, and a year after the RUF was formed only Sankoh was still alive.⁷⁷ Initially fueled by violent revolutionary rhetoric against the corruption of the Freetown elite, the movement rapidly degenerated into a bloody scramble for diamonds and power.

The oral history of the revolution portrays Kabbah as having betrayed the movement. Whatever the truth, Kabbah eventually abandoned revolutionary politics and left for the United States. Sankoh took over his role of recruiting new members for training in Libya, using both his own ties to urban youth and Kabbah's ties to student revolutionaries. Recruits even included students from St. Edward's High School in Freetown. Sankoh's leadership changed the movement. Its base shifted from students to the most dissatisfied and marginal adults and youth in the urban and peri-urban areas of Sierra Leone. The revolutionary documents of the RUF, originally drawn up by students, were doctored with quotes from Sankoh to make it appear that Sankoh played an important role in the ideology of the movement.⁷⁸

The Armed Forces of the Civil War

The civil war in Sierra Leone began in March 1991 and involved numerous armed forces and groups. The main parties to the conflict were the national government's Sierra Leone army and the RUF rebel forces. Various armed militias—the Civilian Defense Forces (CDF), a loose amalgam of independent ethnic militias and self-defense groups—were usually (but not always) aligned with the government against the rebels. The best-known CDF militias groups were the Kamajohs, or Kamajors (Mende), the Donsos (Kono), the Kapras (Temne), and the Tamboro (Koranko). These ethnic militias played a major role in defeating the RUF but were divided from one another by distinct local and national agendas.

Numerous other small armed factions, both political and criminal, emerged from the firestorm of civil war and the breakdown of civil government. These ranged from the Sierra Leone People's Army (an RUF faction) to a gang of ex-soldiers turned bandits known as the West Side Boys. In addition, a May 25, 1997, military coup overthrew the government of Sierra Leone and installed the Armed Forces Revolutionary Counsel (AFRC), which made common cause with the RUF rebels, inviting them to join the junta in Freetown. RUF leaders and fighters poured into the capital, creating the "People's Army" and controlling the joint RUF/AFRC junta that ruled until February 1998, when the junta was driven out by troops of the Economic Community of West African States Cease-Fire Monitoring Group.

THE SIERRA LEONE ARMY

The main armed groups had different social and political constituencies. The Sierra Leone army was and is the organized military force of the Sierra Leone state. It has a long and turbulent history, but, most important, in the decades

leading up to the war it was methodically weakened in size and strength under the presidencies of Stevens (1968–1985) and Momoh (1985–1992) and their political party, the APC, so that it could not threaten the Sierra Leone government. These prewar presidents and governments steadily looted and diverted revenues; ultimately, they destroyed the basic institutions of government. As we have seen, as part of this strategy they relied on and supported private paramilitaries, which were more easily controlled through patronage politics and, unlike an army, would be too weak to initiate a military coup. At the outbreak of the civil war, the debilitated Sierra Leone army could not defeat the rebels, secure the nation state, or ensure the safety of its citizens.

THE RUF

The RUF was rooted in the aspirations of alienated and homeless children and youth and soon grew into a rebel movement. Humanitarian and media accounts of the war show little interest in the RUF's origins as a political youth movement, which was a crucial factor in its emergence. Neither has the Sierra Leone government's own role as a decades' long promoter of youth violence been subject to public scrutiny. It has also not received attention in the United Nations because the ideology and structure of the United Nations are not amenable to scrutiny of intrastate, government-sponsored violence. Even before the war, significant components of Sierra Leone's young and adult population were experienced in the use of terror against other Sierra Leoneans and were prepared to engage in political violence. The actions of the RUF during the war fascinate and repulse observers. A murderous army cloaked in revolutionary ideology, the RUF was drenched in the blood of the people for whom it claimed to be fighting. It was also an army of children and youth. Indeed, with the exception of its leader, Sankoh, virtually the entire army, including its command and control structures, was under thirty.

There was a fluid hierarchy within the RUF. Those who volunteered to join had higher status than abductees, who often became virtual slaves. Men and boys had much more power than women and girls, although women and girls attached to higher-ranking officers could sometimes wield considerable power and influence. Most women and girls were in subordinate or slave-like roles. The youngest children in the Small Boys Unit were regarded as being particularly cruel. The experiences of a sixteen-year-old girl from Kono district bear this out:

I was hiding in the bush with my parents and two older women when the RUF found our hiding place. I was the only young woman and the RUF accused me of having an SLA [Sierra Leone Army]

husband. I was still a virgin. I had only just started my periods and recently gone through secret society. There were ten rebels, including four child soldiers, armed with two RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] and AK-47s. The rebels did not use their real names and wore ski masks so only their eyes were visible. The rebels said that they wanted to take me away. My mother pleaded with them, saying that I was her only child and to leave me with her. The rebels said that "if we do not take your daughter, we will either rape or kill her." The rebels ordered my parents and the two other women to move away. Then they told me to undress. I was raped by the ten rebels, one after the other. They lined up, waiting for their turn and watched while I was being raped vaginally and in my anus. One of the child combatants was about twelve years. The three other child soldiers were about fifteen. The rebels threatened to kill me if I cried.⁷⁹

The atrocities committed by the RUF belie its alleged revolutionary beginnings, which were the initial attraction for some. Popular accounts of the war rarely acknowledge the RUF's origins as a student movement or its original core group of relatively privileged college and high school students, mixed with boys and youth from the poorest urban slums of Sierra Leone. The RUF recruited dislocated and alienated youth from many segments and strata of Sierra Leone society into the political struggle for power and resources. The rebels simultaneously empowered and exploited children's youth and energy, while drawing them into the vortex of violent conflict. These youth started a war that, once underway, drew in young people from every segment of Sierra Leone society. By pitting nearly every major social segment of Sierra Leone society against the others, the war set immigrants against hosts, poor against rich, slum dwellers against subsistence farmers, and ethnic group against ethnic group. The goal: control of the Sierra Leone state and its substantial mineral wealth.

"War Is My Food": Mobilizing Children and Youth

The war polarized and militarized the economy so that the two main centers of economic activity—state revenues and diamonds—came under the control of opposing armed forces. The rebels controlled the diamond areas on or near the Liberian border. The political ties between the RUF rebels and the government of Liberia ensured that rebel mining and selling of diamonds delivered a steady supply of weapons. Rebel control of the diamond fields also disrupted the diverse patronage system that was the original means for attract-

ing young people to the APC strongmen.⁸⁰ The RUF stepped in to fill the vacuum. It used its control of the diamonds to lure young men away from the now-weakened patronage networks of the APC. Indeed, the RUF promised to help these young men avenge themselves and their families against the strongmen and politicians who had abandoned them.⁸¹ But in the end it merely substituted one set of brutal patrons for another.

State revenues—aside from those obtained from diamonds—were now dedicated to the country's growing militarization. By 1992, the Sierra Leone economy was in such shambles that joining the army was commonly seen as the only way a young man could earn a decent livelihood. Young soldiers achieved near-celebrity status. The situation was so grim that protest marches were held not against war but by young men who had been turned down when they tried to enlist.⁸² In response, the Sierra Leone army was expanded to include children and the unemployed.⁸³ By 1995 the army was consuming 75 percent of all state revenues.⁸⁴ The militarization of Sierra Leone deformed all other social institutions. In areas like Freetown, the army became the sole source of revenue, and men, women and children became dependent on the military for day-to-day survival. The thriving local trade markets, ordinarily dominated by women, were ruined; one of the few ways women could now guarantee their own economic security was by finding a soldier to be a husband or lover.⁸⁵ Military control over resources became the magnet that drew children and youth into armed forces. For many, being under arms was both safer and more economically secure than remaining in the unarmed, vulnerable, and economically ruined civilian sector. As one young soldier wrote on the stock of his rifle in red nail polish, "War is my food."⁸⁶

"We Want Peace": Terrorizing Children and Youth

As the war deepened, the actions of the RUF grew more and more predatory. It was essentially an army of young miners and captive schoolchildren.⁸⁷ In rural areas the rebels faced increasing defiance by local militias composed largely of youth. The vast majority of rural subsistence farmers living in eastern Sierra Leone were shaken by the depravity of the movement. Although this population, primarily Kono and Mende, had strong grievances against the central Sierra Leone government, they were unprepared to join the rebels. For the Kono and Mende, the RUF, like other outsiders, was an alien gang of avaricious predators. Moreover, Mende and Kono leaders, imagining a return to power of the SLPP, were eager to control the diamond fields in their own territories. Absent local support, the RUF quickly turned on rural peoples,

exploiting and terrorizing them with a frightening combination of murder, predation, and moral exhortation. The terror used against civilians and soldiers was both symbolic and pragmatic: it delivered a message that the central government was incapable of protecting the civilian population, and it pushed the population into submission or flight by showing that the rebels could kill with impunity.

A demobilized sixteen-year-old CDF fighter from Kono District spoke of the wide gap between RUF propaganda and RUF behavior. He claimed that most of the RUF combatants were students who proclaimed they were fighting for human rights, freedom of speech, education, and against the corruption and patrimonial political structures of rule and that the rebel forces made use of leaflets and other materials to explain their position. But the reality, he said, was quite different:

If the rebels had come peacefully, if they hadn't stolen our people, hadn't burnt our villages[,] . . . if they hadn't done anything that harmed us[,] . . . we sure [would] have been glad. Because, according to their view, they are fighting for their rights. . . . But during their fight for their rights they go to the villages. They go to [persons] who don't know anything about the government. They go and kill [them] and steal [their] property. . . . Because they went and [atracked] the poor, that's why I was against them. Because when you consider the rebels the way they think about [them] in the provinces, it is that they are just armed bandits. They are just thieves.⁸⁸

In urban areas as well there was a frightening disconnect between rebel slogans and rebel actions. Sixteen-year-old H.K. was abducted by troops allied to the rebels and forced to become a child soldier. She was at home in the Kissy area of Freetown in 1997 when AFRC troops came into her neighborhood, chanting the rebel anthem, "We Want Peace" while killing, shooting, and slaughtering people at random.⁸⁹

Understanding the war as an extension of peacetime political violence makes it plain why the rebel forces placed thousands of women, youth, and children in a slave system that included soldiers, laborers, miners, sex slaves, and forced marriages. The politics of peacetime was itself an amalgam of patronage and violence. As the ferocity of wartime expanded, the patronage system became shaped by its brutality. With violent behavior dominating the political system, the relationship between patrons and their dependants easily devolved into a relationship between master and slave. The rebel child soldiers were part of this system. Yet at the same time the system had its own internal hierarchy, and the rebel child soldiers were more privileged and more

powerful than sex slaves. Not every girl who joined the rebel ranks was a sex slave. Like boys, many joined because of the excitement, power, and material gain it offered. Some of the most powerful and violent girls, the mummy queens, were expected to play a major part in fighting and acts of terrorism. Former female combatants in child-soldier reintegration centers can still be seen saluting the one-time mummy queens.⁹⁰

H.K.'s story shows how the boundaries between child soldier and roler for the rebel forces were constantly shifting. Captured when her house in Kissy was set on fire with everyone else still inside, she saw AFRC soldiers cut her aunt's newborn baby in half, and then was taken to a camp and told that she would have to fight. After refusing to fight, she was placed in a "looting" contingent, was given a weapon and ammunition, and began to participate in AFRC operations. By 1999, she had become a direct combatant, and in January of that year she was part of the joint invasion of Freetown by AFRC and RUF forces and was ordered to kill people and cause as much havoc as possible. Under orders from the AFRC, she and other child combatants cut off people's arms, heads, and breasts.⁹¹

The story of Katmara B., a thirteen-year-old girl, is one of constant reversals. Katmara lived in a Freetown neighborhood invaded by the rebels. She and her family first tried to take refuge in a local mosque and then tried to flee the shooting. They were captured by the rebels, who then entered the mosque and killed fifteen people. Katmara also saw them hack off her uncle's hand. Within a matter of hours and days she was abducted, beaten, raped, and went from captive to combatant to being the "forced" wife of a rebel. Katmara described her "recruitment" this way: "They took us outside and told us to change our clothes and gave us combat clothes to wear. We were told that we had to do anything they told us to do. We were told that when they addressed us, we were to respond with 'Yes, sir.' At that point we were given guns and cutlasses, and told that we were to go and cut hands off." But almost as soon as she was recruited there was a reversal of fortune. "On our way to wherever they were taking us, we met up [with] another group called 'Born Naked.' The people in this group roamed the streets naked, the way they were born, and when they met people, they killed them. When the members of 'Born Naked' saw us, they told the others that they should kill us since they had been warned not to take any more hostages."⁹² Then immediately another reversal:

So, on our way to be killed, we were taken to a house with about 200 people held in it. My older cousin was sent to go and select 25 men and 25 women to have their hands chopped off. Then she was

told to cut off the first man's hand. She refused to do it, saying that she was afraid. I was then told to do it. I said I'd never done such a thing before and that I was also afraid. We were told to sit on the side and watch. . . . They chopped off two men's hands. . . . We left the two men whose hands had been cut off behind. We were then taken to a mosque in Kissy. They killed everyone in there! . . . they were snatching babies and infants from their mother's arms and tossing them in the air. The babies would free fall to their deaths. At other times they would also chop them from the back of their heads to kill them, you know, like you do when you slaughter chickens."⁹³

War's End

The civil war in Sierra Leone wound to an end in January 2001. The RUF was finally defeated with the aid of troops from the United Kingdom. Although the immediate horrors of the war are gone, in other respects the results are mixed. In some areas the patterns of exploitation and oppression and the issues that propelled people into violent conflict have not disappeared. The peoples of eastern Sierra Leone, and especially of Kono District, suffered horribly during the war. The major displacement of the population—many of whom fled into neighboring Guinea—not only was a sign of their wartime vulnerability but also signaled their real loss of political power during peacetime. A main fear among local Kono was that the region, depopulated of its ethnic base, would continue to be exploited as it was in the prewar period and that illegal immigrant miners would squeeze out the Kono. In response, militant and politically active Kono sought not only to fight off the RUF but also to leverage themselves into position to shape the postwar peace and the inevitable issue of who would control the Kono diamonds. Once again, Kono children and youth tried to insert the issue of Kono rights into the processes of both winning the war and the reconciliation and development that are now taking place.

During the war, especially during its later stages, the Kono ethnic militia, the Donsos, fought hard against the RUF. As in the Mende ethnic militia, the Kamajors, Donso ranks were filled with children and youth. Some Kono estimate that there may have been as many as six thousand Donsos ranging in age from teenagers to young adults. The Donsos were organized by the Kono chiefs to form a resistance; they launched their movement from across the border in Guinea and from forested areas in the south. Many believed that the Donsos deserved much of the credit for defeating the RUF in

eastern Sierra Leone despite the greater publicity given to the Mende ethnic militia.⁹⁴

One of the main goals of the Donsos and other militant Kono youth was to shut down illegal mining in Kono. As the war wound down, the victorious Donso and Kono youth militants harassed immigrant miners and their financiers in Kono District. These clashes are sometimes glossed in the media as violence between the former CDF and the former RUF.⁹⁵ But they are, in fact, the continuation of the persistent conflict between immigrants and ethnic Kono. As Sahr Lebbie, a youth and militia leader, put it, his group of youth militants "maintains law and order for the traditional people of Kono."⁹⁶ Some observers see Kono District as still "sitting on a time bomb."⁹⁷ Youth-led political violence remains endemic. On July 6, 2002, militant youth destroyed houses in Koidu, which they claimed were used in drug trafficking. In addition, another group, calling itself the Tankoro Youth Group, destroyed houses in Joe Bush Town, another area of Kono.⁹⁸

At first blush, the renewed struggles in Kono District appeared to replicate the prewar antagonism between immigrants and hosts that formed the background to the war. As in the past, the struggle over diamonds provided the context for political violence. As before, displaced youth clashed with local peoples over the control of resources. But there was a new twist: The war also created a class of infinitely exploitable slaves or slavlike persons. To be sure, the end of the war brought about the demobilization of child soldiers, and most former child combatants no longer bore arms. But the war must be seen as one of a series of episodes of terrible violence within the longer history of economic and political exploitation. The energy of children and youth remained a volatile resource to be exploited. In many respects some categories of children and youth were made more vulnerable by the war because the war created large numbers of children who were little more than armed slaves.

After the war, many of these children became disarmed and exploited laborers in the same diamond fields they worked in, protected, and fought over during the war. Today in Kono District, thousands of children and youth labor in the diamond fields, including many former child soldiers from the RUF's dreaded Small Boys Unit.⁹⁹ No longer extracted by rebel forces, these products of exploited child labor are no longer deemed "blood diamonds" and can be lawfully exported and placed in the stream of legitimate commerce. Large numbers of these children and youth, rejected by their family and kin because of the atrocities they committed during the war, are not able to return to their homes. Like slaves in the nineteenth century, torn from family and

community, they are now part of the mass of diamond miners, having inadvertently traded one form of exploitation for another.

Elsewhere in Sierra Leone, attempts have been made to reintegrate child soldiers into society, with varying degrees of acceptance. The official ideology of forgiveness, which now pervades the country, is tied to the purse strings of the international agencies that control the flow of funds for the rebuilding of Sierra Leone. The distribution of funding at the grassroots level is dependent on local communities' publicly accepting the idea that former combatants are somehow "innocent." On the legal front, child soldiers have been effectively immunized from prosecution for any crimes they may have committed during the war while below the age of eighteen. Chief Prosecutor David Crane, of the Special Court, which was established to try those most responsible for atrocities during the war, has made it clear that no child will be prosecuted. In his view, the people of Sierra Leone have greeted this decision with a "collective sigh of relief."¹⁰⁰ And children who have committed crimes seek to be forgiven. "We started killing," said one former child soldier, "but I know it is not my fault! . . . this is why I believe God won't blame me—it is not my fault."¹⁰¹ Abbas, whose tale of murder and mayhem opened this chapter, tells us: "We need a leader who could take care of this country. The rebellion started because of bad leadership. God must forgive boys like us. It was not our fault."¹⁰²

Conclusion

For more than a decade the war in Sierra Leone placed child soldiers in the forefront of world attention. The war is over, and world attention has turned to other conflicts in which children are involved. But Sierra Leone haunts us. The thousands of amputees, many already abandoned and discarded symbols of the conflict, stand as human testimony to the destruction and havoc wrought by armed children and youth. Wars are said to be the affairs of adults in which vulnerable children are abused and exploited for nefarious ends. But in this case the involvement of children in war was constructed on political foundations established during peacetime. Warfare was a cruel extension of prewar conflicts in which children and youth were already integrated into an exploitive and violent political system largely ignored by the world. Children and youth have not gone away. They make up the majority of Sierra Leone's population. How their interests and concerns will be integrated into Sierra Leone society remains to be seen.

Chapter 4 Fighting for the Apocalypse

Palestinian Child Soldiers

ON MARCH 29, 2002, Ayat al-Akhras, a Palestinian teenager, blew herself up outside an Israeli supermarket in Jerusalem, killing Rachel Levine, a seventeen-year-old student, and Haim Smadar, a fifty-five-year-old security guard. On the evening of March 28, Ayat videotaped her farewell address on behalf of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. She proclaimed: "I am the living martyr, Ayat Mohammed al-Akhras. I do this operation for the sake of God and fulfilling the cry of the martyrs and orphans, the mothers who have buried their children, and those who are weak on earth. I tell the Arab leaders, don't shirk from your duty. Shame on the Arab armies who are sitting and watching the girls of Palestine fighting while they are asleep. I say this as a cry, a plea. Oh, al-Aqsa Mosque, Oh, Palestine. It will be *intifada* until victory."¹ Just a few days later, in a Jerusalem cafeteria, Amneh, another Palestinian student, explained al-Akhras's act to me this way: "I think that a sixteen-year-old girl who goes out there . . . has a reason. She wouldn't just go and do that. I mean, do you know how much courage that would take?" She continued, "The thought of it. It takes so much courage to go out between people and then just blow yourself up. It takes a lot of courage." This act of suicide terrorism by a young girl was part of more than a century of conflict between Arabs and Jews over the Land of Israel. Since the closing days of the Ottoman Empire, Palestinian children and youth have been at the forefront of the conflict, often serving in the armed groups that have fought against the Jewish presence in Palestine. From the beginnings of the conflict, the conviction that young people have a duty to sacrifice themselves for the Palestinian cause has