

REVIEW

Berger, Carol. 2022. *The Child Soldiers of Africa's Red Army: The Role of Social Process and Routinised Violence in South Sudan's Military*. London: Routledge. 225 pp., index, bibliography. ISBN: 9780367742607 (hbk)

The Child Soldiers of Africa's Red Army by Dr Carol Berger addresses the militarisation of South-Sudanese society during its struggles of secession from the Republic of Sudan (1983-2005), the period of independence (2011) until the outbreak of an internal civil war (2013) and its fragile settlement. Her book deals with the creation, history, and organisation of the so-called Red Army (being 1/5th of the rebels' army as a whole), and the fate of its thousands of child soldiers over a period of more than thirty years. Berger distinguishes three "waves" of child soldiers trained and deployed by the guerrilla movement, Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The SPLA was created in 1983 after the Bor Mutiny marking the start of the second civil war between southern Sudan and "Arab Khartoum" in the North.

The first "wave" of child soldiers consisted of mainly Dinka and Nuer children, some of whom were not older than 3-4 years, who were recruited and forcibly conscripted soon after the creation of the SPLA, first from the Bor Dinka area and then from Greater Bahr el-Ghazal and other regions of Jonglei State. They were promised "education" by their SPLA recruiters and brought to camps in West Ethiopia. Those old enough to carry a gun were transferred to the nearby military training camp Bongo, and soon engaged in lethal battles. In the West these youths were called "the Lost Boys" – a misnomer, as they were engaged in battle, and when the SPLA was chased out of Ethiopia, they were abandoned and on their own found their way to the refugee camps near the Uganda border and in Kenya (Kukuma).¹

The second "wave" of child soldiers, recruited some twenty years later, were youngsters who – following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 – were integrated into the SPLA, then *de facto* the national army of South Sudan. Then, in 2011, when South Sudan had gained its formal independence and, after the death of President John Garang, was on the brink of an internal civil war, Dinka youngsters were again recruited from Bahr el Ghazal and formed the third "wave" of child soldiers of the

1 Werner et al. (2010) mention that these camps became Christian centres that focused on education, Bible study, and attracting foreign aid. Because the SPLA also recruited from these camps, the army was further christianised. The Red Army are the vanguard of this military evangelisation.

SPLA. Notwithstanding official denials, the forced recruitment of underaged boys had become – and perhaps still is – routine practice in the South Sudan Army.

As a journalist, Berger has followed and reported on the entire period of the civil war and its aftermath in newspapers and periodicals. She wrote her first academic account on the Red Army and submitted it as a master thesis in social anthropology, entitled *From Cattle Camp to Slaughterhouse* (2001). This was followed by a doctoral dissertation submitted in Oxford under the supervision of professor Wendy James, a specialist on Nilotic Sudan. The book under review here is based on her PhD thesis.

Studies on child soldiers in Africa are not exceptional (see Furley 1995; Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Project 1996; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2008; Wambugu 2019) but in her treatment of Sudanese child soldiers Berger has followed a unique, long-term, and conscientious approach. Being acquainted with the tense situation of the early 1980s in Sudan, she intensified her research during the 1990s, conducting the main part of her research on child soldiers between 2003 and 2018. During this period she resided regularly in South Sudan and her research also brought her to Kenya, Uganda, Egypt, and Canada where she engaged with Red Army survivors of the war. In 2006-07 she was a voluntary teacher at Rumbek in South Sudan's Lakes State where most students were Red Army veterans. She interviewed those students who in 1985-86 had been invited by President Fidel Castro to be educated in Cuba and become a "vanguard" of the new Sudan. During the 1980s Cuba hosted 15,000 youngsters from seventeen "revolutionary countries," 619 from Sudan. Of these, 61 were girls and most of them were children from politicians and military leaders. When the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991, Cuba's economy collapsed and the country could no longer support the sixty schools. Those South Sudanese who had remained in Cuba for thirteen years were finally admitted to Canada; 200 of them settled in Alberta where they found employment in the meat processing industry. Berger's *From Cattle Camp to Slaughterhouse* was a first account of the experiences and fate of these Red Army veterans. After having been cut off from Sudan they encountered multiple problems of acceptance and identity: first growing up in Nilotic Sudan, then in Cuba's Hispanic culture, and finally in a racialised environment in the western parts of Canada. The need to continuously adjust their life and partly ignore their Sudanese background and language complicated their relationships with those Sudanese refugees in Canada who had not been educated in Cuba. Of those who eventually returned to South Sudan 300 were sent to the front; 150 of them died in combat.

Berger faced various challenges in her research, particularly in conducting interviews with both the Red Army veterans and their erstwhile recruiters and commanders. The latter are still holding powerful political and military positions in contemporary South Sudan. Long after the hostilities had ended, political, social and military relations between factions of the SPLA, between the various ethnic groups to which the Red army veterans belong (mainly Dinka and Nuer), and between former commanders and one-time youth recruits continued to be strained. This resulted in a *culture of secrecy*, enshrouding those who had participated in the civil war and preventing them to speak openly and in detail about their horribly violent experiences. Therefore, in her research, the author was faced with the “piecemeal nature of data collection” which she tried to overcome by cultivating long-term contacts with her informants and by constantly checking information via triangulation with other persons and parties involved. The informants’ narratives and their way of phrasing their stories were coloured by their background, experience, re-interpretation, and rationalization of past events.² In this respect, Berger adopted from Appadurai (1981) the notion of *ethnohistory*, “its link to the present, to the cognitive and structural ways in which [structural and cultural] traces have become compacted in the meaning systems of actors in the present.”

Another challenge was the maintenance of security. An open discussion of the mobilisation of children and youths by the SPLA in warfare is impossible, not to say dangerous for informants as well as researchers in South Sudan. In this environment Berger acted carefully, drawing on anthropology, investigative journalism, diplomacy, and psychology.

The first and second chapters of her study are devoted to the organisational and military culture of the Red Army, its recruitment process, the training and indoctrination of thousands of young recruits, and the practices of coercion and brutality they had to suffer. The third chapter treats the Red Army members in Cuba, from 1985 till the end of the 1990s, followed by the vicissitudes of those who went to work in the Canadian meat processing industry. The last few chapters concern the post-war status of the Red Army veterans, and the most recent series of recruitment of Dinka youngsters in the wake of the internal South Sudanese civil war (2013).

2 The public at large became acquainted with the phenomenon of the Red Army in Dave Eggers’ *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng – A Novel* (2006) and Emmanuel Jal’s *Warchild – A Boy Soldier’s Story* (2009). Both Achak and Jal were Red Army and their testimonies seem credible in view of Berger’s academic analysis.

Important in her book are Berger's reflections on violence, in particular with respect to the harsh and often pitiless and arbitrary punishments of young boys so as to instil discipline, motivation, secrecy and fear. Such punishments were administered with impunity in the training camps by adult trainers. Berger challenges twentieth-century anthropologists such as Dinka expert Geoffrey Lienhardt whom she reproaches for having painted too rosy a picture of the supposedly "egalitarian" societies of Dinka and Nuer. Actually, "hierarchy" and social stratification were present there as well, demanding respect (Dinka: *athek*) from juniors towards seniors, junior age-groups towards elder age groups, recently married men towards in-laws, small families with few cattle towards larger and richer ones, smaller sections towards more numerous sections, etc. However, "hierarchy" and "equality" are structural features of social systems, not norms of social conduct within close kin groups. Among the Bor Dinka (where the present reviewer resided for six years during the 1980s), failure to show *athek* within kin groups may call for correction but not provoke the violent and even cruel treatment to which the Red Army youth have been exposed. In the pre-war, rural Bor Dinka context such harsh treatment would be judged irrational and be prevented by the mother and uncles of the offender. Seriously harming somebody physically or morally would be incompatible with the value of the person who, after all, will later contribute to the continuation of the lineage. Numerous are the descriptions by anthropologists of the mediating mechanisms administered in Nilotic societies to disturbers of the social order. As Edward Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt have written, extreme violence and cruelty are part of the conduct of war waged against "others." To apply, as culturally disoriented Red Army veterans have done, the social norm of *athek* when articulating the SPLA demands of "discipline" and "loyalty" – calling for harsh punishments of futile transgressions is culturally misplaced, caused by a misconception of the term's meaning. Violent punishments, such as lashings, torture, locking up in pits, moral degradation, and even executions which the children have suffered point towards the fact that in the SPLA army *the conventional Nilotic social order with its checks and balances was inoperative*. The practices testify to a lack of military professionalism among a rebel army whose soldiers were often illiterate and themselves traumatised, operating under harsh conditions. The boys are not to blame. According to Berger, "The Red Army veteran's use of *athek* to frame his punishment spoke to a universal need to use one's cultural knowledge to make sense of events that would otherwise appear to be irrational and even criminal" (p. 23).

The Child Soldiers of Africa's Red Army is an important book, especially for South Sudan's assimilation and for its coming to terms with the dark sides of its history. It may also contribute to the official recognition of what Red Army veterans have experienced (and what they passionately desire). The book bears witness of sound anthropological research under difficult circumstances. It is well-written, abstaining from unnecessary or exaggerated theoretical and abstract reasoning, and is illustrated with lively descriptions (as in the three page description of the production process in a slaughterhouse) revealing Berger's background as an excellent investigative journalist.

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