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## ISHMAEL BEAH: A LONG WAY GONE: MEMOIRS OF A CHILD SOLDIER

Magyarország a NATO, ENSZ és EBESZ tagságnak köszönhetően egyre több misszióban vállal szerepet. Katonáink több országban is jelen vannak, ahol eltérő kultúrákkal és hadikultúrákkal találkozhatnak. Így később talán a gyerekkatonasággal is. A kiküldetésekre való hazai felkészülés szerteágazó területeinek, így egy kiegészítője lehet Ismael Beah „*Gyerekkatona voltam Afrikában*” című életrajzi könyvének recenzió jellegű bemutatása, és ennek vonalán a gyermekkatonák helyzetének szociálpszichológiai elemzése.

Hungary as a member of NATO, UN and OSCE takes part in more and more international missions. Our soldiers are presented in several countries where they can meet different cultures and military traditions: this might include meeting boy soldiers later on as well. The review of Ishmael Beah's book „*A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Child Soldier*”, accompanied by an introduction and short social- and psychological analysis of the situation of boy soldiers in Africa might supplement the preparations before going to missions.

### INTRODUCTION

Ishmael Beah was born in a South African republic, Sierra Leon. His childhood was over when the civil war plunged him with itself. He was enlisted by the government, however he was still being an infant. By the military training he learnt how to fight and kill without having a bad conscience. Later UNICEF managed to integrate him successfully back to society.



1. Picture: Sierra Leon

in: [http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sierra\\_Leone](http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sierra_Leone), Downloaded: 15. 09. 2008

However, his life story is not unique if we have a look at the European history. In 1212 children were forced to conquer the Holy Land as crusaders. In World War II the Hitlerjugend got into fights just like the scouts in Hungary and we should not forget about those youngsters who were involved in the revolution of 1956. The historical aspect gives us different views of considering boy soldiers. The reasons have to be known how they got to the army or a militant or guerrilla group. It is an extremely important question how a Hungarian soldier being abroad should behave with them, because it is a boy, who is a soldier at the same time.

## THE VIEWS OF UNITED NATION ABOUT BOY SOLDIERS

Before reviewing the book, I would like to quote the United Nations' attitude towards boy soldiers. The 38th Article of the „Convention on the Rights of the Child” deals with the issue of boy soldiers.

- „2. States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities.
3. States Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into their armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of fifteen years but who have not attained the age of eighteen years, States Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest.”<sup>1</sup>

We might conclude that we call „boy soldiers’ those who take weapon before their maturity. This age falls under different considerations in different countries and cultures. In Hungary this age is 18. The U.N.’s Convention on the Rights of the Child puts it to 15. As we all know in many places they do not comply with this Convention because of various reasons. Young soldiers nearly without exception are boys.

## INITIATION, ROLE MODEL-ATTITUDES TO FOLLOW

Children’s socialisation primarily happens in the family. In normal cases children are brought up by their parents, grandparents and older relatives. In this home environment they acquire the main rules of the social contract and cohabitation and the given culture’s behavioural norms. For a healthy mind’s development it is essential — both for acquiring men and women gender roles — to have a model to imitate, as especially in early childhood this is the most important way of learning.

War, opposed to the normal state of the society, can be considered — according to Weber — a pathological setting. It is a factor which affects the individual’s development: it reshapes the individual’s life and environment. War can easily make children to be soldiers by the disintegration of families and children becoming orphans. Man as a social being particularly in early childhood can only live on in a community. The background which provides physical safety, care, and an affectionate atmosphere ceases to exist by the disintegration of the family. The various groupings may serve as the substitution of this. Children who have lost their family may think of the army as a quasi family which substitutes the original. For boy soldiers after a certain time the army takes up the family’s role. As Beah says: „I stood there holding my gun and felt special because I was part of something that took me seriously and I was not running from anyone anymore.”<sup>2</sup> The values and norms which are created and accepted by the community are extremely strong. Leaving the community is almost impossible as neither the fear of the community’s anger, neither the assimilation with the newly acquired values let it happen. „My squad was my family, my gun was my provider and protector, and my rule was to kill or be killed.”<sup>3</sup>

## STIGMATIZATION

Towards the children who have lost their parents and form gangs those who live in the neighbourhood are hostile as — based on their former experiences — they presume that these children are boy soldiers too. Stigmatization and denunciation in most cases might be very effective. „Our stereotypes might make us to behave with the denounced people in a way that might fulfil our expectations.”<sup>4</sup> In the book this explicitly appears. As the author writes: „People were terrified of boys of our age. Some had heard rumours about young boys being forced by rebels to kill their families and burn their villages. These children now patrolled in special units, killing and maiming civilians.”<sup>5</sup> Due to such refusing self-defensive behaviour the stigmatized will start to behave in a way that is „expected” from them.

## RECRUITMENT

In the case of boy soldiers, the reasons behind joining the armed forces might be various. We can originally distinguish two reasons: the voluntary and the forced joining. The reasons applying as a volunteer are

- chance of a career (free looting);

- food ( food supply);
- substitution of the family;
- safety;
- ideology;
- wish for revenge.

That is, why we can also mention the quasi voluntary application for membership, because in most cases children do not have other chances for survival. The commissar in the book says „Some of you are here because they have killed your parents or families, others because this is a safe place to be. Well, it is not that safe anymore. That is why we need strong men and boys to help us fight the rebels.”<sup>6</sup>

Forced enlisting occurs very often. The deformation — the military training — of the enlisted person’s mind is obviously harder and more difficult than the voluntary applicant’s. The lack of motivation, the strong antipathy and the wish for escape are all have to be defeated.

### MILITARY TRAINING

Becoming a soldier means an extremely big physical and mental alteration. To quote Sándor Vizi: „In my view becoming a soldier means a change in the way of living which puts a heavy burden on the person.”<sup>7</sup> We can track the methods of the military training which are used in the training of boy soldiers through Beah’s book. Improving stamina and movements and acts used in battle are primarily is the basis of the training. „Corporal Gadafi would hold his fist up, and when he brought it down, we fell into the bushes and crawled quickly, without producing much sound, until we reached a designated tree.”<sup>8</sup>



2. Picture: A boy soldier in Sierra Leon

in: <http://www.daylife.com/photo/092AfQO7wJbSB>, Downloaded: 06. 10. 2008

The training of discipline and swiftness is important. „The Corporal gave us one minute to get the food and eat it. Whatever we hadn’t eaten was taken away at the end of sixty seconds.”<sup>9</sup> Acquiring the basic strategies of survival in practice is also part in the training. „Ignore the safety pin, they said, it will only slow you down.”<sup>10</sup> The most basic knowledge of carrying arms is also thought. „That evening, we learned to fire our guns, aiming at ply-wood boards mounted in the branches of tiny trees at the edge of the forest.”<sup>11</sup>

### ANGER, HATE AND AGGRESSION

By the training the commissars succeed to make the novices shoot on the enemy without thinking and to let the inner aggression of the child released. The feeling of pity is defeated through awakening the feelings of anger, hate and aggression. Revenge as a motivation can be a very powerful one. For instance, „Visualize the enemy,

the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you.”<sup>12</sup> – says the commissar in the book. Legitimizing and supporting the fury of the natural feelings of aggression is an effective mind-forming method.

Children gradually get used to the sight of blood and death and after some time they will be natural for them. In various cases the novices are forced to watch or to do others’ or their closer relatives’ execution. „We are going to initiate all of you by killing these people in front of you. We have to do this to show you blood and make you strong.”<sup>13</sup>

Inducing the feeling of aggression is conscious, just like its training. It makes aggression a daily habit which, if missing, causes the feeling of absence. „Various researches proved that children express their aggressive answer when they get a positive feedback or when they observe an aggressive model who is confirmed.”<sup>14</sup> An example from the book for positive feedback given for aggression: „The five men were lined up in front of us on the training ground with their hands tied. We were supposed to slice their throats on the corporal’s command.”<sup>15</sup> „The boys and the other soldiers who were the audience clapped as if I had just fulfilled one of life’s greatest achievements.”<sup>16</sup>

#### IDEOLOGY: THEY ARE NOT HUMANS; THE GOOD AND THE BAD ONE

Most living creatures do not want to destroy those, who are similar to them. Killing is fundamentally hard for humans too, especially when neither the wish for revenge, neither anything else inspires them to do it. However, in case of seeing and thinking that the enemy is someone *different* or a *negative person*, it is much easier to stand against him. Therefore in this case the enemy is named „dog” or something inhuman, or a negative religious element like „devil” during the training. As these creatures are no longer human, their destruction is a lot easier. „They have lost everything that makes them human. They do not deserve to live. That is, why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil. It is the highest service you can perform for your country.”<sup>17</sup> – says the commissar in the book.

Contrasting „good” and „bad” has a similar effect with a difference that a warm feeling of doing good accompanies it. In addition, killing leads to a catharsis, as the thought that „*destroying the bad is a good*” is definitely a positive and almost a noble one. „We are not like the rebels, those riffraff’s who kill people for no reason. We kill them for the good and betterment of this country.”<sup>18</sup> Ideology is always a soothing thing to lean on when it comes to doing things which we — otherwise — would not do.

#### DRUG

During wars soldiers used and still using different mind-altering chemical substances. Of course, these are forbidden in professional armies, but we all know, that we have a very small number of official and professional armies in the World.

Besides alcohol, various types of drugs are becoming more and more widespread, particularly in Africa, where the story of this book also takes place. Amphetamines — like extasy and speed — cause a feeling of power and quickness. Heroin and psycho actives — like cannabis and marijuana — have a calming effect just like alcohol and give a feeling of floating. Thanks to amphetamines soldiers are able to march for days without the slightest signs of exhaustion. They can suppress their physical pains by taking heroin or cocaine. Drugs of course cause physical and mental addiction and as a consequence soldiers are up to anything to get more drugs. As Beah writes: „The combination of these drugs gave us a lot of energy and made us fierce.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the alterations of their mental state and observation of reality make soldiers do, what they would not do normally. To sum up, boy soldiers do not feel the pang of conscience, are up to anything and their memories from the past mingle then slowly fade away.

## INITIATION

The first meeting with the enemy is always a crucial moment for the soldiers. „I raised my gun and pulled the trigger, and I killed a man. Suddenly, as if someone was shooting them inside my brain, all the massacres I had seen since the day I was touched by war began flashing in my head.”<sup>20</sup> Although his conscience appeared right after the shot, it was suppressed by the commissar’s many times repeated — thus, successful — aggression and hate. „Every time I stopped shooting to change magazines and saw my two lifeless friends, I angrily pointed my gun into the swamp and killed more people.”<sup>21</sup>

## FEELING MENTALLY EMPTY

In the constant fights the souls of the children gets tough and transforms into something that is not child-like anymore. Aggression becomes a daily activity. „Every time people come at us with the intention of killing us, I close my eyes and wait for death. Even though I am still alive, I feel like each time I accept death, part of me dies.”<sup>22</sup>

## FIGHTS

The children get new name during the training and this changes their whole life. The new name also means a new identity, for which they try to identify. „I’m was really happy thanks for my new name, and in every action I tried to fight honouring it.”<sup>23</sup>



3. Picture: A boy soldier in Sierra Leon

in: <http://tulipanoselefant.spaces.live.com/blog/cns!226297FF1F664D46!656.entry>, Downloaded: 20. 09. 2008

Their childish spirit slowly disappears as fights fill out their days. Many of them are tormented by bad dreams not only because of the constant stress, but also because of the drugs and their consciousness. Killing becomes an ordinary activity: „We went out two more times that week and I had no problem shooting my gun.”<sup>24</sup> With their guns in their hands, their fear also switches off. „I was not afraid of these lifeless bodies. I despised them and kicked them to flip them.”<sup>25</sup> Their moves and actions become monotonous. „The idea of death didn’t cross my mind at all and killing had become as easy as drinking water. My mind had not only snapped during the first killing, it had also stopped making remorseful records, or so it seemed.”<sup>26</sup> The early ideology, according to the thought of which they are the good ones and the enemy is the bad, slowly fade away and the orders bear with no importance at all, they just obey it. „We also attacked civilian villages to capture recruits and whatever else we could find.”<sup>27</sup>

Modern armies are endeavouring to protect civilians and keep the civilian victims’ number down on a minimum. The constant development of the precision firearms serves the same purposes. Those militant groups and armed forces which take up arms because of the so-called chances of free looting and robbery, however, represent a fundamentally different notion. Cruelty during and after the fights is not unusual, they happen either to be de-

terrent, or because of the slackening of discipline. In those states, where boy soldiers are used, it can be said that the military culture does not stand on the high standard of the professional military culture. Intentionally cruel actions against the enemy's soldiers are frequent as they are neglecting the U.N.'s conventions, both those which are related to adults and those which concern children. As a good example in Beah's book says, „The lieutenant's words still echoed in my head: 'From now on, we kill any rebel we see, no prisoners'.”<sup>28</sup> Boy soldiers permanently practice killing on captives which makes their aggression level higher, the execution of the enemy turns into a children's game. „So we gave them shovels and demanded, at gunpoint, that they dig their own graves.”<sup>29</sup>

#### AN ORDINARY DAY

Boy soldiers live separately from civilians and develop their own norms and social conventions. „The soldiers set up their garrison in another unfinished brick house, and there they socialized separate from the civilians. In the evenings they watched movies, played music, and smoked marijuana.”<sup>30</sup> This physical separation gives them the knowledge of distinction, which they fill with a specific meaning. „In the daytime, instead of playing soccer in the village square, I took turns at the guarding posts around the village, smoking marijuana and sniffing brown brown, cocaine mixed with gunpowder, which was always spread out on the table, and of course taking more of the white capsules, as I had become addicted to them.”<sup>31</sup> Detachment from civilian life and practicing different exercises from the ordinary results in having self - confidence and call. „We had been fighting for over two years, and killing had become a daily activity. I felt no pity for anyone. My childhood had gone without my knowing and it seemed as if my heart had frozen.”<sup>32</sup> It is in the nature of the things that a professional tries to perform his duties to the best of his abilities. This also includes training himself. „We watched movies at night. War movies, Rambo: First Blood, Rambo II., Commando, and so on, with the aid of a generator or sometimes a car battery. We all wanted to be like Rambo; we couldn't wait to implement his techniques.”<sup>33</sup>

#### REINTEGRATION

Reintegrating boy soldiers back to society is a difficult task. The most important problem is that these children do not choose and do not want reintegration and so they are forced to it. Since formerly, they had rank and prestige and many of them had smaller units to lead, they are unable to understand why they have to give up that life. „We thought that we were part of the war until the end. The squad had been our family. Now we were being taken away, just like that, without any explanation.”<sup>34</sup> As armed people, they ruled over life and death with important and difficult tasks and this obviously ends in their civilian life. Adults once again start to handle them as children. „They had no idea, I thought, what was really happening in the bushes in the entire county.”<sup>35</sup> Boy soldiers look down on those who are trying to reintegrate them because of their weakness. And as those are not soldiers, they despise and disobey them. „People like the lieutenant, whom I had obeyed and trusted, had made me question trusting anyone, especially adults.”<sup>36</sup> Boy soldiers do not change just because they get separated from their former squad. The knowledge which they acquired lives on. „It hadn't crossed their minds that a change of environment wouldn't immediately make us normal boys. We are dangerous, and brainwashed to kill.”<sup>37</sup> Many children escape back to their squad at the first opportunity. The reason behind this is the miss of the „family', the lack of respect and the opportunity of looting, and the knowledge which can only be useful on the battleground.

Those who are working on the reintegration of boy soldiers have to face the following problems:

- boy soldiers want to go home to their „family”;
- boy soldiers look down on them because of their weakness;
- as they are not military personnel, they disobey them;
- boy soldiers are potentially dangerous.

Further difficulties in the process of reintegrating boy soldiers:

- boy soldiers miss their „family”, i.e. their squad;

- they miss respect and prestige;
- they are handled as children;
- they are not allowed to behave as adults;
- they miss aggression;
- they do not have their guns;
- they have nightmares;
- they might have physical injuries, like gun-shot wounds;
- their consciousness might awake;
- drug withdrawal symptoms (like blazes of anger; fainting, etc.);
- they got unused to learning, as a consequence, it is hard to make them learn and they might not get a profession.

Reintegration is an extremely slow process. „The traumas of the battleground live on much further than the war itself, they are like delay-action bombs. The inadequately handled traumas continue to exist and destroy the lives of many, even though living in peaceful environment.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, as boy soldiers during their training had learned that they must not trust anyone who does not belong to their squad, it is hard to inspire confidence in them. Inspiring confidence thus should be based on interest. „Also, attending class became the requirement for the weekend trips to the city. Because of these things, we began going to class.”<sup>39</sup> In this acquitted relationship children can be motivated.

A vast majority of children have serious drug problems which also contribute to raise their degree of aggression. When giving up drugs they have huge physical pains mentioned above, but this state does not last longer than a month. „It had been more than a month and some of us had almost gone through the withdrawal stage, even though there were still instances of vomiting and collapsing at unexpected moments.”<sup>40</sup> The rehabilitation itself can only be started after this month has passed. As long as the withdrawal symptoms exist, it is impossible for an addict to concentrate on anything else. „We had bread and tea for breakfast, rice and soup for both lunch and dinner. The assortment of soups consisted of cassava leaves, potato leaves, okra, and so forth. We were unhappy because we needed our guns and drugs.”<sup>41</sup>

When reintegrating boy soldiers, we have to take into consideration on which side had they fought in order to prevent conflicts within the institution. What is more, the children’s age might vary although they might be on the same level of education. In a group where there are children with different ages, it is evident that different educational methods are to be used, which is an additional difficulty.

In the case of the reintegration was successful UNICEF accompanied with CAW (Children Affected by War) and ICRC and other governmental organisations — if existing at the spot — tries to find children’s real families. In most of the cases however, this is impossible as they are dead. In a few cases though they manage to find a more distant relative or a family member who went missing a long time ago. The question is how this long not seen relative would react when he get acquainted with the fact that the children had been a boy soldier. „... Mambu went back to the frontlines, because his family refused to take him in.”<sup>42</sup>

Abraham Maslow’s „hierarchy of human needs’ makes it perspicuous and easy to understand which things were the children curtailed of and which methods and techniques were required to transform their mind during their training and finally how reintegration affected them. Boy soldiers, resulting from their age, are not able to reach the top of the hierarchy.

In the hierarchy, the most basic needs are at the bottom: hunger, thirst, etc. Without the fulfilment of these needs, no-one is able to survive. For many children, army becomes appealing because it can provide a solution to these needs. The army is the orphans’ last hope for survival.

The second stage, the *wish for safety, security, safety of the family* can also be found in the army. A boy soldier who belongs to the army is in a much more secure position than his contemporaries (naturally, this is true in a given place where there is war.) The squad thus fulfils his psychological need of belonging somewhere, which is an extremely strong motivation.



4. Picture: Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs

in: <http://www.simplypsychology.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/Hierarchyofneeds.jpg>, Downloaded: 22. 10. 2008

After some time through the army boy soldiers are able to feel the warming feelings of *respect*, *honour*, *acknowledgement* and all the others which result from his *competency*. No doubt that a boy soldier is respected by his comrades. He has competent military skills and is able to win the admiration of his principal by a fight which he carries out nicely. In addition, he wins respect from the civilians by his weapon, although this is clearly not „respect’ in the classical sense, we should rather call it „fear’ if we wanted to be precise. Still, the boy soldier’s feeling is positive without question. We might call this level the level of military competence above which the boy soldiers- as a result of their environment and the lack of surrounding opportunities- are not able to rise.

*Aesthetical beauties* such as order, symmetry, and beauty might appear in a boy soldier’s life: in a nicely and precisely done action, but this again is not the traditionally accepted form of these terms. Finally, *self-actualization* is completely missing from the boy soldiers’ life. They do not think about moral questions, need no creativity and do not care about prejudices. In case they reach adulthood, they might be able to reach this level, but their chances for this are mostly very small.

#### SUMMARY

Not only in Hungary, but in most parts of the world as well children are the symbols of innocence. „When, on the basis of our schemes or theories we would expect two things to go hand in hand together, we overestimate their correlation and even perceive a non-existent correlation between them.”<sup>43</sup> Hungarian soldiers who are on missions might have a family and children as well, thus, when facing boy soldiers, might see this symbol in them, and not the soldier. This fake perception might prevent them from acting immediately and adequately and, obviously, also mean a direct danger. It is vital to know that boy *soldiers* are primarily soldiers and just after that, *boys*. Ismael Beah’s brilliant book, the *Memoirs of a Child Soldier* perfectly fits the aim to represent this, thus, I recommend it for every soldier going on a mission.



*Kulcsszavak: gyerekkatonaság, társadalomba való visszaillesztés, misszió, Ishmael Beah, Sierra Leone*

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<sup>1</sup> UN: 'Convention on the Rights of the Child'

<sup>2</sup> Beah, p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> Beah, p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> Atkinson p. 501.

<sup>5</sup> Beah, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Beah, p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> Vizi

<sup>8</sup> Beah, p. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Beah, p. 111.

<sup>10</sup> Beah, p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Beah, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Atkinson, p. 341.

<sup>15</sup> Beah, p. 124.

<sup>16</sup> Beah, p. 125.

<sup>17</sup> Beah, p. 108.

<sup>18</sup> Beah, p. 123.

<sup>19</sup> Beah, p. 122.

<sup>20</sup> Beah, p. 119.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Beah, p. 80.

<sup>23</sup> Beah, p. 141.

<sup>24</sup> Beah, p. 120.

<sup>25</sup> Beah, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> Beah, p. 122.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Beah, p. 137.

<sup>29</sup> Beah, p. 151.

<sup>30</sup> Beah, p. 101.

<sup>31</sup> Beah, p. 121.

<sup>32</sup> Beah, p. 126.

<sup>33</sup> Beah, p. 121.

<sup>34</sup> Beah, p.130.

<sup>35</sup> Beah, p.131.

<sup>36</sup> Beah, p. 153.

<sup>37</sup> Beah, p. 135.

<sup>38</sup> Lippai

<sup>39</sup> Beah, p. 148.

<sup>40</sup> Beah, p. 145.

<sup>41</sup> Beah, p. 138.

<sup>42</sup> Beah, p. 180.

<sup>43</sup> Atkinson, p. 500.