

2020

## The Process of Becoming a Child Soldier: The Case of Ishmael Beah

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### Recommended Citation

Mirza, Nicoleta (2020) "The Process of Becoming a Child Soldier: The Case of Ishmael Beah," *International Journal of Security Studies*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/ijoss/vol2/iss1/5>

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## The Process of Becoming a Child Soldier: The Case of Ishmael Beah

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank professor Maartje Weerdesteijn for her incredible course titled "ATROCITY ACTORS: Perpetrators, Bystanders and Victims" (Vrije University Amsterdam). Her insight and knowledge have acted as an inspiration for the proposed article.

## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of child soldiers is a painful truth that cannot be denied. Children of war are exposed to unthinkable environments, pain, and choices. While it can be universally accepted that every child deserves a happy childhood, the truth is that not every child receives one. Children witnessing war are already affected by the horrors of it. Yet, what about the children that are active combatants in war? They are stripped of their innocent, childhood, and sometimes their future. Still, children are viewed as pure and good. Therefore, the question arises: how can they become perpetrators? This article aims to answer this question by trying to identify the process that facilitates an ordinary person to become a perpetrator.

In order to do that, the study investigates an individual perpetrator, and particularly, Ishmael Beah, by employing his book entitled “A Long Way Gone”. The book can be described as an autobiography and follows the account of a child soldier who fought in the war in Sierra Leone. The role of Ishmael as a perpetrator in “A Long Way Gone” is intriguing and complicated. Authors A. Smeulers and F. Grünfeld claim that perpetrators are “ordinary people within extra-ordinary circumstances”.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the paper aims to establish if the statement is relevant in the case of the protagonist and tries to identify the process that facilitated Ishmael to become a perpetrator. The preparation phase, initiation phase, first killing as well as habituation phase will be analysed in order to describe the process that pushed him to commit atrocities.

## 2. Background

The armed conflict in Sierra Leone began in 1991 and was officially ended in 2002.<sup>2</sup> The conflict was characterized by the abduction, coercion, and recruitment of tens of thousands of children as fighters by the armed groups such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the Armed Forces

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<sup>1</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 295.

<sup>2</sup> See Child Soldiers International, *Child Soldiers Global Report 2004 - Sierra Leone*, 2004, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4988062e28.html> [accessed 17 January 2021].

Revolutionary Council (AFRC).<sup>3</sup> The conflict resulted in thousands of men, women and children being killed, raped, wounded, and mutilated.<sup>4</sup> It is estimated that 20,000 to 75,000 people were killed as a result of the conflict.<sup>5</sup> The civil war displaced more than a half of Sierra Leone's population, including children, and destroyed many aspects of society.<sup>6</sup>

Child Soldiers played a significant role in the Sierra Leone civil war. It is estimated that there are around 15,000 child soldiers that participated in the Sierra Leone conflict.<sup>7</sup> Children, even as young as 7 years old, comprise 40-50% of the insurgent's force.<sup>8</sup>

The phenomenon of child soldiers has been documented in other conflicts besides the Sierra Leone civil war. Child soldiers have also fought in such countries as Angola,<sup>9</sup> Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, the Sudan, Congo, and Uganda.<sup>10</sup> It is estimated that there are around 300,000 child soldiers worldwide.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the number of child soldiers has more than doubled since 2012 with a 159% increase.<sup>12</sup>

The United Nations Report "Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children"<sup>13</sup> and UNICEF<sup>14</sup> further explains how and why children are recruited as soldiers in armed conflicts. Accordingly, children are recruited within the armed forces because they are easily intimidated, obedient, and they are less likely to quit if they are not financially remunerated. Moreover, the army can also be a way of survival for a recruited child. Or, as any other adult, a child can "choose" to fight for a

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<sup>3</sup> Oosterveld V. (2019). *The construction of gender in child soldiering in the Special Court for Sierra Leone*, p.74. in Drumbl, M. A., & Barrett, J. C. (Eds.). (2019). *Research Handbook on Child Soldiers*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing. doi: <https://doi-org.uow.idm.oclc.org/10.4337/9781788114486>.

<sup>4</sup> Child Soldiers International, Child Soldiers Global Report 2001 - Sierra Leone, 2001, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/498805d15.html> [accessed 17 January 2021].

<sup>5</sup> Ramgoolie, M. (2001). Prosecution of sierra leone's child soldiers: what message is the U.N. trying to send? *Journal of Public and International Affairs -Princeton-*, 12, 145–162., page 147.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Goodwin J. (1999, February 14). Sierra Leone Is No Place To Be Young. *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/14/magazine/sierra-leone-is-no-place-to-be-young.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Also see Human Rights Watch, Angola: Forgotten fighters: Child Soldiers in Angola , 29 April 2003, A1510, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3f4f594e7.html> [accessed 23 January 2021].

<sup>10</sup> Goodwin J. (1999, February 14). Sierra Leone Is No Place To Be Young. *The New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/14/magazine/sierra-leone-is-no-place-to-be-young.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> See Child Soldiers International. (2019). Child soldier levels doubled since 2012 and girls' exploitation is rising. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/child-soldier-levels-doubled-2012-and-girls-exploitation-rising>.

<sup>13</sup> UN General Assembly, Impact of armed conflict on children: note / by the Secretary-General, 26 August 1996, A/51/306, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f2d30.html> [accessed 17 January 2021].

<sup>14</sup> See UNICEF. (1996). *The State of the World's Children 1996*. Oxford Press University. Oxford.

cause-ideology, religious belief, or cultural identity. Their decision of fighting can also follow a revenge purpose as some children might want to avenge their loved ones.<sup>15</sup>

The United Nations Report states that child soldiers are recruited by conscription, “persuasion”, and kidnaping. Children living in poor regions are especially vulnerable to be targeted for recruitment.<sup>16</sup> In some instances a child can be obliged to become a soldier for its own “protection”.<sup>17</sup> The possibility of escaping from poverty is a way to entice children to join the military; the “vulnerability of children in refugee/IDP camps” further explains their recruitment.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. The Phenomenon of Child Soldier in Literature

Ishmael Beah’s story “A Long Way Gone” has become internationally famous. His memoir has attracted the attention of such newspapers as *The New York Times*<sup>19</sup> and the *Washington Post*.<sup>20</sup> William Boyd has called the autobiography “almost unique, [...]— perhaps the first time that a child soldier has been able to give literary voice to one of the most distressing phenomena of the late 20th century: the rise of the pubescent (or even prepubescent) warrior-killer.”<sup>21</sup> Sebastian Junger describes the book as “the most important war stories of our generation”.<sup>22</sup> However, the success of the book was not always met with standing ovations. The criticism state that the account of events described in the book is flawed and thus irrelevant.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note that “A long Way Gone” is not the only narrative describing the life of a child soldier. “Little Soldier” (1999) by Bernard Ashley is another novel that touches upon the

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<sup>15</sup> See Idem., p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> See UN General Assembly, Impact of armed conflict on children: note / by the Secretary-General, 26 August 1996, A/51/306, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f2d30.html> [accessed 17 January 2021]. Page 16.

<sup>17</sup> Idem., p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Achvarina V. & Reich S. No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons, and Child Soldier Recruits, p. 57. In Gates S. and Reich S. (2010). *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

<sup>19</sup> See Beah I. (2007, January 14). The Making, and Unmaking, of a Child Soldier. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/14/magazine/14soldier.t.html>. See also Boyd W. (2007, February 25). *Babes in Arms*. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/25/books/review/Boyd.t.html>.

<sup>20</sup> See C. (2007, February 23). Circumstances Beyond His Control. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2007/02/23/circumstances-beyond-his-control/6887b9c6-9872-4f18-9666-9a48d3cbccdb/>.

<sup>21</sup> Boyd W. (2007, February 25). *Babes in Arms*. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/25/books/review/Boyd.t.html>.

<sup>22</sup> See Sebastian Junger in Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher. Review page.

<sup>23</sup> See Van Zyl G. (2011). A LONG WAY GONE – MEMOIRS OF A BOY SOLDIER/ISHMAEL BEAH. *Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies*, Vol 38, Nr 1, 2010. doi: 10.5787/38-1-85, p. 142.

topic of the child soldiers. Irina Kyulanova states that, just as in the case of the of “A Long Way Gone”, “Little Soldiers” “represent[s] war as a devious rite of passage, one that denies the protagonists their childhood status but fails to either grant them maturity or to incorporate them as adults in a stable social structure.”<sup>24</sup> Other books depicting the life of a child soldier are “Beast of No Nation” by Uzodinma Iweala (2005),<sup>25</sup> and “Song for Night” by Chris Abani, (2007).<sup>26</sup>

War is one of the worst forms of human behavior. War can drive people beyond unimaginable boundaries. The effects of war are detrimental to any society and can traumatize people in various ways. If war is so destructive, what happens to children exposed to such an environment? Would children always be victims in wars? While I would argue that the answer is “YES”, we cannot deny our violent instinct as war can corrupt the most innocent: children. Therefore, this article further discusses the transformation of a child into a child soldier. The article will try to understand how a child can become a “perpetrator” by studying Ishmael’s case. Therefore, the next chapter illustrates the first phase of this process-“preparation”.

#### 4. Preparation phase

The preparation phase requires people to submit to an “organizational structure and culture or a collective identity”.<sup>27</sup> Even if in this phase, individuals usually did not commit any crime, they are intensely prepared for violence, to be violent, obey authority and self-sacrifice.<sup>28</sup> This phase requires the glorification of their goal: “protect national security, restore order and peace, create a better world”.<sup>29</sup> People are trained to believe that violence is legitimate and necessary and that a particular group of people is the target.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kyulanova, I. (2010). From Soldiers to Children: Undoing the Rite of Passage in Ishmael Beah's "A Long Way Gone" and Bernard Ashley's "Little Soldier". *Studies in the Novel*, 42(1-2), 28–47. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2010.0012>, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> See Iweala, U. 2005. *Beasts of No Nation*. New York: Harper.

<sup>26</sup> See Abani, C. 2007. *Song for Night*. Brooklyn, NY: Akashic Books.

<sup>27</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, p. 303.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Idem.* p. 304.

### 3.1 Isolation

According to A. Smeulers and F. Grünfeld, isolation includes limited access to the outside world<sup>31</sup>. The deprivation of everything that reminds soldiers of their identities is a distinct element of isolation.<sup>32</sup> Ishmael, similarly, was deprived of the last thing that connected him with his identity and past. The cassettes that he owned and were thrown in the fire were the last items that reminded him of his individual self and his identity.<sup>33</sup> For Ishmael, disconnection from families and friends was already a factor that determined him to join the army. While this factor furthered the isolation, it also fuelled his rage towards the enemy.

Isolation intends to create the desire to “identify with the new norms and values and bond with fellow recruits.”<sup>34</sup> The main character was able to perceive himself “as part of something that took [him] seriously”.<sup>35</sup> He viewed his squad as his family, his gun as his provider and protector;<sup>36</sup> therefore creating a bond with his fellow soldiers that was similar to a family unit. The creation of *esprit de corps* is also visible in protagonist’s experience. The belief of the special and superior status of the soldier<sup>37</sup> is embedded within his actions as one. The reference to anyone outside the army as “civilians” shows Ishmael’s belief in the superiority of the soldier.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.2 Military Training

The military training in the case of Ishmael is somehow distinct from an ordinary one. Lesser amount of verbal aggression towards the soldiers is a distinction. The verbal remarks of the lieutenant being reduced to commands and the destruction of the enemy instead of insults/psychological harassment. This distinction, in my opinion, facilitated the creation of the bond not only between the soldiers but also towards the lieutenant, in this way him acting as a

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<sup>31</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 270.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> See Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 110.

<sup>34</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 270.

<sup>35</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 124.

<sup>36</sup> Idem, p. 126.

<sup>37</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 270.

<sup>38</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 140.

father figure. Different approaches of the Corporal are encouraging recruits to laugh and using less words during training such as “not bad” and “faster” aim to impose a positive reinforcement. These different tactics taken for this particular situation might be due to the fact that the soldiers are children. While obedience is a factor to be considered, this methodology was chosen for the elimination of fear and the build-up of trust in authority.

After the process of isolation described above, physical, and psychological training begin. A. Smeulers and F. Grünfeld claim that training is not about the technical skills but about “transforming recruits into obedient soldiers”.<sup>39</sup> Yet, the training of Ishmael and his unit appears to have other purposes as well. Because of the age of the recruits, from seven to thirteen years old,<sup>40</sup> training was also about learning any technical skills, including holding a gun without dropping it. While training does transform individuals into obedient soldiers, learning technical skills, in my point of view, is also a part of it.

The harsh physical preparation is a significant element of the military training mostly because it teaches discipline, unquestioned obedience, and sense of collectivity.<sup>41</sup> This is also relevant in the training of Ishmael and his unit. The training enabled the main character to perceive his fellow soldiers as family members as well as to build a strong sense of obedience towards the authority as he fulfilled all the commands without questioning them. The discipline is visible in the way the soldiers are trained to eat, only allocating them a minute to finish their meal.<sup>42</sup>

Harsh physical training also represents the masculinity.<sup>43</sup> The role of a “tough man” is embodied within the notion of a soldier. This is visible in the way the corporal called the children “soldiers”, and by implying that they are “men” like the rest of the older soldiers.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 275.

<sup>40</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 109.

<sup>41</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 275-276.

<sup>42</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 111.

<sup>43</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 275-276.

<sup>44</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 115.

However, Ishmael's military training is somewhat distinct from the regular one described by A. Smeulers and F. Grünfeld, as the soldiers were not completely isolated from the civilian world, it did not involve collective punishment, soldiers were not insulted by referencing to women, and the consequences of desertion is unclear.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.3 Train to Kill

Jonathan L. Maynard identifies six recurring justificatory mechanisms: dehumanisation, guilt-attribution, threat-construction, deagentification, virtuetalk, and future-bias.<sup>46</sup> I believe that dehumanisation, guilt-attribution, and threat-construction mechanisms are used in the killing training to justify violence. Therefore, I try to explain how these mechanisms work within the military training.

J. Leader Maynard describes dehumanization as the representation of the "enemy"/victim as inhuman, or inferior to perpetrators.<sup>47</sup> Constructing the rebels as the enemy and dehumanizing them make soldiers believe in the need and duty to kill. The lieutenant's statement that the rebels "have lost everything that makes them human"<sup>48</sup> serves as an example of dehumanization during the process of training and recruitment.

Guilt-attribution is a mechanism of accusing victims of "past and present crimes" therefore creating the "desire for vengeance".<sup>49</sup> In a similar way Ishmael and other recruits were made to believe that the "[rebels] are responsible for everything that has happened to [them]" including the death of their loved ones.<sup>50</sup>

Threat-construction is the mechanism of perceiving the victim as threatening.<sup>51</sup> It is also detectable in the perpetrator book. The lieutenant's speech and staff sergeant's claims clearly depict this mechanism by stating that "there are men waiting to destroy all [their] lives [...] they won't give

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<sup>45</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 274-279.

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Leader Maynard (2014), *Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 26:5, 821-841, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2013.796934, page. 830.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 108.

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Leader Maynard (2014), *Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 26:5, 821-841, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2013.796934, page. 830.

<sup>50</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 112.

<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Leader Maynard (2014), *Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 26:5, 821-841, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2013.796934, page 381.

up until they capture this village. They want [their] food and ammunition. [...] The rebels will kill anyone from this village because they will consider [them] their enemy, spies, or that [they] have sided with the other side of the war.”<sup>52</sup> This threat-construction established a clear reason to kill the rebels, describing them as valid targets and reframing Ishmael and other recruits as “acting in self-defense”.<sup>53</sup>

These techniques succeeded to make Ishmael perceive the rebels as the sole enemy who needs to be destroyed. Consequently, the duty to kill arose, mentally giving him no option but to avenge his family and friends, “defend” himself and make his country a safer place by killing the enemy.

## 2 Initiation

According to Elliot Aronson and Judson Mills people who go through a “severe initiation to gain admission to a club or organization [...] tend to think more highly of that organization”.<sup>54</sup> This is due to the fact that individuals who go through an unpleasant experience to become a member of a certain unit/group are inclined to reduce their discomfort by over-estimating the appeal of the group.<sup>55</sup> Besides special rituals, the training period can also be considered an initiation, as the intense difficulties represent the value of the membership.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Ishmael’s intense training and first mission can be classified as an initiation. His appeal towards the group can be observed in the description of his feelings of being special as a part of something that took him seriously.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, as the military became such an important part of Ishmael’s life, the re-formation of his attitude and behaviour is inevitable. The enforcement of a specific behaviour as a result of

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<sup>52</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 106-107.

<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Leader Maynard (2014), *Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities*, Terrorism and Political Violence, 26:5, 821-841, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2013.796934, page 381. As cited in Chirot and McCauley, *Why Not Kill Them All?*, 31–36 and 61–65; Jackson, “The Ideology of Total Revolution” 56–57; Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy* 136, 162–163 and 400; Semelin, *Purify and Destroy*, 145; Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, 262; Bellamy, “Mass Killing and the Politics of Legitimacy”, 169.

<sup>54</sup> Aronson, E., and J. Mills (1958). *The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group*, Journal of abnormal and social psychology (59), p. 177-181., page 177.

[http://faculty.uncfsu.edu/tvancantfort/Syllabi/Gresearch/Readings/A\\_Aronson.pdf](http://faculty.uncfsu.edu/tvancantfort/Syllabi/Gresearch/Readings/A_Aronson.pdf)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 271.

<sup>57</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 124.

initiation<sup>58</sup> is seen through his consumption of drugs such as marijuana, *brown brown*, cocaine mixed with gun powder<sup>59</sup> and the superior attitude towards civilians.<sup>60</sup> Through this process, the standard societal norms are being replaced by the norms of the group,<sup>61</sup> once again highlighting the perceived group's superiority.

### 3 First Killing

The immediate reaction after the first killing usually involves revolution with the realization that the individual has committed an atrocity and crossed the line of what is morally acceptable.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the reaction and actions after the killing are more important as it decides whether the individual will decide to stop or continue his killing, rationalizing his behaviour.<sup>63</sup>

The performance of Ishmael's first act of killing was highly influenced by the obedience factor. The unwillingness to go against authority, the agentic state, and perhaps even the desire to stay alive, determined the push of the trigger. Milgram describes the notion of agentic state as "the condition a person is in when he sees himself as an agent for carrying out another person's wishes".<sup>64</sup> Therefore, Ishmael's retreat into agentic state may be perceived as a reason for his actions. This claim can be proven by the fact that Ishmael pulled the trigger at corporal's command.<sup>65</sup>

Yet, his reaction to his first killing may be viewed as unusual. The absence of the feelings of guilt, rationalization, revolution, and the presence of fear was fast replaced by anger. This can be

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<sup>58</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 272.

<sup>59</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 121.

<sup>60</sup> Idem, p. 140.

<sup>61</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 273.

<sup>62</sup> Idem, p. 304-305. As cited in Smeulers, A. (1996). Auschwitz and the Holocaust through the eyes of the perpetrators, *Driemaandelijks Tijdschrift van de Stichting Auschwitz* 50, 23–55. —. (2004). And Alvarez, A. (1997). Adjusting to genocide – the techniques of neutralization and the Holocaust, *Social Science History* 21(2), 139–178. —. (2001). *Governments, citizens, and genocide: a comparative and interdisciplinary approach*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, page 23.

<sup>63</sup> Idem, p. 304-307.

<sup>64</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 218. As cited in Milgram, S. (1974). *Obedience to authority*, New York: Harper and Row, p. 133.

<sup>65</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 118.

explained by the processes of dehumanization, guilt-attribution, and threat-construction discussed above. Moreover, obedience to authority is another explanation for his attitude, as Ishmael might feel responsible to authority but feels no accountability for his actions.<sup>66</sup> Ishmael's description of his feeling: "I felt nothing. [...] Nothing happened in my head. It was void [...]"<sup>67</sup> also suggests that he was in a state of denial unable to understand and evaluate his actions. However, the feeling of nothingness can also be attributed to the habituation phase which will be further discussed.

## 5. Habituation Phase and Routinization

Habituation or adaptation is described by customization to what frequently occurs or the perception of usual as normal.<sup>68</sup> Individuals habituate or adapt when violence is extensively practiced.<sup>69</sup> This phase entails the individuals getting used to their actions to the point that they eventually feel nothing towards those actions.<sup>70</sup>

The idea that Ishmael entered the phase of habituation and routinization after his first killing can be detected in the following statements: "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."<sup>71</sup>

The justification of his deeds and obedience to authority, "I didn't feel a thing [...] I just waited for corporal's order."<sup>72</sup> are so prominent that this proves that Ishmael had entered the habituation phase. In this way killing became the right thing to do. Through justification, individuals see themselves fighting for a right cause, preserving peace, saving humanity, or serving one's

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<sup>66</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 219.

<sup>67</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 120.

<sup>68</sup> Staub, E. (2011). *Overcoming Evil: Genocide, Violent Conflict and Terrorism*, Chapter 6: Learning by Doing in Individuals and Groups, page 7. DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195382044.001.0001.

<sup>69</sup> Idem. As cited in Helson, H. (1964). *Adaptation Level Theory: An experimental and systematic approach to behavior* New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>70</sup> Smeulers, A., & Grünfeld, F. (2011). *International crimes and other gross human rights violations: A multi- and interdisciplinary textbook* (International and comparative criminal law series, v. 32). Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff. doi:10.1163/ej.9789004208049.i-530, page 313.

<sup>71</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 122.

<sup>72</sup> Idem, p. 124.

country.<sup>73</sup> Ishmael had shifted his attention from morality to operationality and job efficiency.<sup>74</sup> Blaming one's opponents is a convenience that serves for self-exoneration.<sup>75</sup> This was also the case for Ishmael as he viewed any rebel responsible for the death of his family.<sup>76</sup>

As the moral boundaries have been lifted, orders obeyed and the guilty punished, there was not much that could stop Ishmael from killing.

## 6. Conclusion

Ishmael's past experiences of losing his family, propaganda and military training were factors that contributed to him becoming a perpetrator. The construction of an inhumane enemy responsible of all the evil, fuelled Ishmael's killing acts. Drugs and the habituation phase acted as an escape from the normal moral norms, therefore functioning as a defence mechanism. It is certain that these circumstances conditioned his behaviour. However, whether the surrounding violence, loss of his family and military recruitment can excuse his actions as a perpetrator, is unclear. Yet, it is undeniable that these factors, nevertheless, contributed to his transformation into a "perpetrator".

The transformation of a child into a child soldier aims to mostly disregard the age of the recruits completely. While, in the case of Ishmael, the lieutenant was aware that he was training children and imposed a somewhat more lenient attitude towards them; he did not hesitate to erase the idea that they are children from the minds of the recruits by calling them men and soldiers. While this paper discussed the transformation of children into perpetrators, it should not be neglected the fact that regardless of their actions, a child soldier is first and foremost a victim, a child in extraordinary circumstances.

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<sup>73</sup> Bandura, A. (1999). *Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities*. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3(3), 193-209. page. 195.

<sup>74</sup> *Idem*, p. 198.

<sup>75</sup> *Idem*, p. 203.

<sup>76</sup> Beah I. (2008). *A Long Way Gone*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher, page 124.

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