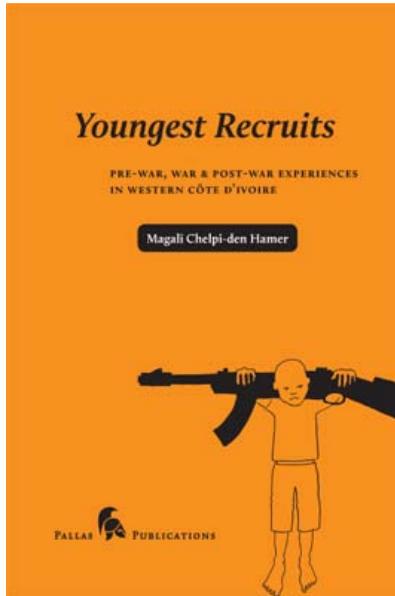


BOOK REVIEW: Youngest Recruits: Pre-War, War & Post-War Experiences in Western Côte d'Ivoire

MAGALI CHELPI-DEN HAMER (AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS, PALLAS PUBLICATIONS, 2010)

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KEY TERMS:



Based on data collection and first-hand experience in Man, Côte d'Ivoire, *Youngest Recruits* is a remarkably refreshing contribution to existing studies of armed conflict in this region of sub-Saharan Africa.

The author, Magali Chelpi-den Hamer, deftly surveys the literature on youths involved in conflict, as well as many of the debates taking place among international organizations. With great skill and respectful language she considers the various sides of the arguments in what is, inevitably, a very sensitive subject. Chelpi den-Hamer considers, for example, whether it is best to introduce new codified international law, to clarify texts where there remain challenges of interpretation, or to simply enforce existing laws on the rights of children and, in particular, children in armed conflict? (52-53)

With clear and concise writing, Chelpi den-Hamer considers the complex contexts within which youth are too often drawn into conflict, based on three time periods: pre-war, war, and post-war experiences. Her conclusions are thought-provoking as they counter the views of many that seem to suggest that youths are necessarily manipulated into conflicts as they have virtually no agency or any ability to make their own decisions. In a real sense, den-Hamer is giving more credit to the youths' ability to make decisions, thereby humanizing them, more than most, and gives us a sense of the agency that youths do have. She also humanizes the groups involved in conflict by reminding us that international efforts to ban child soldiering was actually heard and acted upon by rebel officials. After UNICEF was able to establish a direct dialogue with the main belligerents in order to raise their awareness of child soldiering, she tells us, "an official declaration by FAFN officials on 15 September 2003 [stated] that the rebellion would put an end to the recruitment of children into its ranks; it also announced the release of 273 child soldiers" (13).

In many ways, Chelpi den-Hamer reminds us of the degree to which international actors tend to generalize their views on those involved in conflict and what the real motivations are on the ground. Even the youngest recruits have "some degree of reflection and agency when

enlisting into armed forces” and this simple fact, in her view, is not adequately reflected in the literature on in the actions of most international actors. Moreover, in conflict situations, short-term “band aid” approaches tend to dominate. A longer-term view is needed if patterns of recurring conflict, throughout the region, are to be effective. And, rather than be mysterious about the kind of “interview guide” Chelpi den-Hamer has in mind, she provides it as an appendix to the book, with contextual questions that she obviously believes to be helpful. Using what social science scholars might term a “social constructivist” approach, den-Hamer asks contextual questions such as: the number of siblings and where they reside, the professions of the parents, whether they are deceased, divorced, social status/condition, levels of education, and the like.

At the end of this short read (56 pages excluding notes and appendices) we are left with the impression that: 1) empirical work is need, with more attention to contextual issues; and 2) international efforts can and do make a difference, which is a remarkable message to hear in today’s intellectual and practical environments filled with so much despair.