

## *Book review*

# **Apartheid's black soldiers: Un-national wars and militaries in Southern Africa**

*Lennart Bolliger*

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Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press  
2021, 240 pages  
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In his recent book, *Apartheid's black soldiers: Un-national wars and militaries in Southern Africa*, Lennart Bolliger examines the history of black soldiers from Namibia and Angola who served in the security forces of apartheid South Africa from 1975 until 1989. He focuses specifically on the three all-male units that consisted predominantly of black troops that were commanded by white officers – 32 Battalion of the South African Defence Force (SADF), 101 Battalion of the South West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF), and the infamous paramilitary police unit, Koevoet.<sup>780</sup> During this period, these soldiers primarily fought against the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) – the military wing of the Namibian liberation movement, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) – in the anticolonial struggle in Namibia, as well as the post-independence civil war waged in Angola.<sup>781</sup> The book builds on some earlier works by Bolliger, as well as another work co-authored with Will Gordon.<sup>782</sup>

The central argument put forward by Bolliger in the book is that these soldiers' trajectories and experiences profoundly challenged the dominant framing of the wars of decolonisation in Southern Africa as national liberation struggles fought by and for Africans against settler and colonial state militaries. Bolliger clearly demonstrates that the history of these soldiers is largely incomprehensible within both popular and scholarly narratives of national liberation. He instead draws attention to the transnational and un-national dynamics that shaped the wars of decolonisation across Southern Africa. Bolliger explores two main questions throughout the book. Firstly, how and why did black soldiers from Namibia and Angola get involved in the South African security forces? Secondly, what were the legacies of that involvement for the individual soldiers and their families?<sup>783</sup>

The book follows a clear chronological order. It starts with a very detailed introduction in which Bolliger provides the rationale for the book, and discusses the sources consulted and the methodology he used in constructing the book. Thereafter follows the six core chapters. The first chapter of the book presents a historical overview of colonial rule in the former South West Africa and Angola from the late 1880s to 1990. Bolliger specifically focuses on the long history of black soldiers' involvement in different colonial armies, as well as the clear fractures that exist(ed) between and among political groups exploited by the settler colonial regimes. In the second and third chapters, he discusses how and why black soldiers from Namibia and Angola came to fight in the

South African security forces. Bolliger specifically questions the perception that these soldiers fought for apartheid, and shows that their motives and actions in joining the security forces were indeed very complex. The fourth chapter compares the military cultures of 32 Battalion, 101 Battalion and Koevoet. Here Bolliger shows that, contrary to their frequent depiction as one static whole, each of these units developed its own distinct institutional practises and mythologies that differed from one another. In the fifth chapter, the post-war politics of associations of former SWATF and Koevoet members in Namibia is discussed. Bolliger shows that, in this case, these veterans had not been persecuted or silenced – instead, different groups have demonstrated repeatedly and publicly for recognition from the SWAPO government since Namibian independence in 1990. The final chapter turns the attention to the very different post-war trajectories of former 32 Battalion and Koevoet members who moved to South Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Bolliger shows that many of these former soldiers left the security forces since South Africa's transition from apartheid, and now work in private security or military industries around the globe. In the conclusion, Bolliger draws together the central themes of the book and discusses some points worth considering for future research.<sup>784</sup>

The book further includes a comprehensive list of abbreviations and illustrations as well as a detailed bibliography and handy index for a work of this nature. There are also four maps included in the book, which are more than adequate. The book further contains four very general figures. From a personal point of view, I think it would have been ideal to have included more photographs in the book – specifically of the various units during their existence, as well as portraits of some of the veterans themselves. I realise however that the latter would have been difficult to include owing to the protection of personal information or fear of victimisation.

I was particularly impressed by the depth of research that went into the book. Between 2014 and 2016, Bolliger conducted 148 interviews with black former soldiers and white officers of 32 Battalion, 101 Battalion and Koevoet as well as family members, government ministers, politicians, former guerrilla commanders and civil society representatives, both in Namibia and South Africa. These interviews provided the book with a rich tapestry of 'voices', which Bolliger cleverly organised when examining the history of the black soldiers from Namibia and Angola who served in the security forces of apartheid South Africa. He is commended for this, for an undertaking of such depth and breadth has never been attempted according to my knowledge. In fact, Bolliger puts local historians to shame in proving what can be accomplished with the right drive and motivation.

All in all, *Apartheid's black soldiers* is a riveting read from start to finish and a welcome addition to the historiography of the broader War for Southern Africa. By allowing readers or academics the opportunity to consider the varying reasons why black soldiers from Namibia and Angola joined the security forces of apartheid South Africa from a historical or sociological point of view, Bolliger helps us to move beyond our perceived understanding of this complex and emotive phenomenon in Southern African history. In doing so, he makes a distinct and valuable contribution to the historiography. I can only

hope that the future crop of historians in Southern Africa, and South Africa specifically, will utilise and build on the work of Bolliger. His book comes highly recommended and can be considered for inclusion into university course material, particularly postgraduate modules that deal with the military history and related aspects of the War for Southern Africa.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>780</sup> Bolliger's rationale for only focusing on 32 Battalion, 101 Battalion and Koevoet is that they not only came to constitute most of South Africa's troops in Namibia and Angola, but they also bore the brunt of the war, as they formed the spearhead of the security forces. Also, during and after the war, many members of these units repeatedly crossed boundaries between countries, liberation movements and military organisations. See L Bolliger. *Apartheid's black soldiers: Un-national wars and militaries in southern Africa*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2021, 3.

<sup>781</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>782</sup> L Bolliger. "Apartheid's transnational soldiers: The case of black Namibian soldiers in South Africa's former security forces". *Journal of Southern African Studies* 43/1. 2017. 195–214; L Bolliger. "Chiefs, terror, and propaganda: The motivations of Namibian loyalists to fight in South Africa's security forces, 1975–1989". *South African Historical Journal* 70/1. 2018. 123–151; L Bolliger & HW Gordon. "Forged in battle: The transnational origins and formation of apartheid South Africa's 32 'Buffalo' Battalion, 1969–1976". *Journal of Southern African Studies* 46/5. 2020. 881–901. Readers with a specific interest in the role of black soldiers in 32 Battalion are further directed to Gordon's PhD dissertation as well as a published chapter on the topic: HW Gordon. "Forged in battle? A socio-military history of South Africa's 32 Battalion (1975–1993)". PhD dissertation. Stellenbosch University, 2019; HW Gordon. "The evolution of 32 Battalion: From renegade guerrillas to township troopers". In IJ van der Waag & AM Grundlingh. *In different times: The war for southern Africa, 1966–1989*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2019.

<sup>783</sup> Bolliger, *Apartheid's black soldiers ... op. cit.*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>784</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17–20.