

## **BEYOND THE BORDER WAR: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTHERN AFRICA'S LATE COLD WAR CONFLICTS**

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*Baines, G. & Vale, P. (Eds)*

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Namibia became independent after decades of struggle when the *apartheid* government accepted UN Resolution 435. In Windhoek the flag of the occupier finally made way for one heralding a rising sun. Peace returned to Namibia and Namibia to the Namibians. South Africa had withdrawn from Angola after years of intimate involvement. Jonas Savimbi, leader of the rebel movement Unita and a former proxy of South Africa, continued the civil war for another dozen years. The landmines remained. In many towns and villages in Angola the maimed and the wounded are still to be seen.

In the northern part of Namibia (then called South West Africa) the *bush war* (or *border war*) against SWAPO raged since the 1960s. South African security forces collaborated with Caetano's authoritarian colonial regime in Angola in fighting "terrorism" before 1975. By 1975 South African forces were not only engaged in southern Angola but also active in the north together with the forces of Mobutu seSeseko of Zaïre, the FNLA of Holden Roberto and the CIA. Following forced withdrawal in 1976, the apartheid forces were soon active again in Angola in what they viewed as necessary cross-border-, deep penetration and/or pre-emptive strikes against the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), the military wing of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO). Together with Ian Smith's

Rhodesian Air Force and supplied with British Canberra bombers and French helicopters these two countries at times jointly executed air raids in Angola and Zambia. An era of destabilisation dawned over Southern Africa.

In November 1975 Portuguese forces left Angola in haste with the Alvor Accords diminishing to mere words on paper. Several actors became involved in the to-be independent Angola. South African forces, the CIA, Zaïre and Holden Roberto's "freedom fighters" funded by the USA were as guilty of the chaos that erupted in Angola on the eve of independence as were the "Soviet led communist forces" which they claimed caused all the trouble.

Published works over the past years fall into the following categories:

- Romanticising or justifying the Rhodesian and South West African border war (Peter Stiff, earlier works of Willem Steenkamp and others), or perhaps better described as advocating the safeguarding of Western civilisation in Africa against Communism by military means;

- Narratives of former generals and their admirers that tell the "real story" and give "all the facts" (e.g. the work of Magnus Malan, Jannie Geldenhuys, Dick Lord, Hilton Hamman and to a certain degree Heitman);

- Contributions related to specialist forces and elite units such as the parachute regiments ("parabats"), 32 Battalion and the "reccies" or reconnaissance commandos. In this regard authors such as Els, Botha and Diedericks and Korff catch the eye. The majority of the latter works dealt to a lesser extent with politics and focused more on the experience of the participants, tactics, units and people involved. Most of these contributions are valuable historical sources.

- Contributions portraying a form of *history from below*: These works represent important inputs by former citizen force members and conscript veterans. Some of the authors still believe in the supposed Total Onslaught, while others are more self-reflective and critical (David Williams in the first category and Clive Holt in the latter).

In the latter two categories many of the contributions break through the static thinking within the closed Afrikaans-speaking society. It touches on new social and cultural values – a re-look, a second reflection onto the ideology and attitudes of then. Perhaps these works also provide timely warnings against repeating the same mistakes by new incumbents in power.

*Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa's Late Cold War Conflicts* falls in a different genre than the publications mentioned earlier. Borders, forced or imagined, left deep scars in the psyche of South and Southern Africa.

Indoctrinated prisons of collective consciousness from 1960 to 1990 convulsed violently and left blood-ridden soil from Cape Town to Cabinda.

*Beyond the Border War* attempts to analyse the *Bush War* from various perspectives. Seventeen authors present chapters ranging from strong contributions to ones less so. Aspects looked at are the breaking of (breaking through) physical and metaphysical boundaries; the dissection of the then prevailing language games (discourse analysis on various levels); historical (un-)consciousness; even social subconsciousness, and the (still lasting) outcomes of that war.

Those looking for a serious work about liberation, or for a definition of “terrorist”, insurgency and counter-insurgency (today called a-symmetrical warfare by some), military strategy and small group tactics, or for generals as carriers of the truth, should look elsewhere. New perspectives on culture and ideology, as well as text and inter-textuality, and the comical, even insane and tragic consequences of the war are scrutinised here. Music and art in favour of, or against a certain *Weltanschauung* are addressed. How did people protest against apartheid and militarization in various open, subtle and subversive ways – also those from the white Afrikaans speaking community? These writings touch on critical literature as did the groundbreaking *border literature* of the 1980s. For self-appointed philosophers forcing postmodernism everywhere, the book offers perhaps something to discuss during late nights though few contributions to this work espouse this paradigm.

Authors touch on critical aspects such as the *border literature* of the eighties, i.e. books like *Forces Favourites*. In passing it refers to the activist alternative Afrikaans magazine *Stet* and small Afrikaans *struggle* printers such as Taurus. A pity that not more about an era rich in social criticism and activism is unearthed here.

Contributions to the book present a balance against those of generals and their loyal lieutenants that so often revile the people with moral fibre who protested against and resisted *apartheid* and its consequences. The work also offers connecting reading material to those who were unable to participate in active protest politics in the 1980s.

Baines writes about boundaries and how fragile they are; about silence and the breaking of self-imposed silence. Vale writes about the influence of the Cold War in southern Africa; Popesque about the local anti-communist fanaticism and language games around it. She touches on capitalism, racial obsession, the *Voortrekker* mythology and Protestant work ethic which translated into social alienation and violence against “the other”. Graig writes about justification by the *apartheid*-disciples of their struggle and the ideological manipulation coupled with it. The

“Total Onslaught” was resisted by a “Total Counter Strategy” (Afrikaans: *Totale Teenstrategie*) which oft-times bent heads and terminated human lives in South(ern) Africa.

The contributors address boundaries in more than the physical sense of the word; boundary as subtext, metaphor and transcendental phenomenon/experience. The contributions of Craig, Conway, Drewett, Rogez, Morris and Henriette Roos are important. Historians, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, political philosophers and linguists would find these useful. Roos and Morris touch on representivity and offer some food for thought.

Karen Batley handles raw, anti-heroic poetry by conscripts. These stand in glaring contrast to the authoritarian voices of the *apartheid*-leaders and their academic fans (of which many in amazing quirks of logic changed their political stance overnight after 1990). Batley’s work is based on research done in the 1990s. It only appeared in 2007. The “losers” back then were seen as of the same ilk, the “victors” conveniently forgetting that some young whites were forced into conscription by draconian laws. In the euphoria of freedom coupled with the idea that strong armies and forceful action cannot fend small nations like the Namibians forever, Batley’s collection were not “the flavour of the month” in the 90s (Could it be that some within the new government could not believe that there had been and still are many in other communities who fought against *apartheid* then, and now they resist new tendencies to maintain racial constructions?) A pity, as these voices would have liked to be heard earlier. At the time no publisher had the courage to take the risk and therefore Batley’s work (published by Jonathan Ball) only appeared nearly two decades later.

Windrich analyses the South African and the USA’s favourite *proxy*, Jonas Savimbi and Unita. These two conspiring countries built up Unita from an ineffective guerrilla force to one of the main destabilizers in Angola - still with lingering consequences. South Africa could only keep on waging its war thanks to the USA and the policy of *constructive engagement*. The USA, South Africa and Savimbi manipulated the Cold War rhetoric like manna from the skies to serve their own illusions of power. Windrich’s remark about institutions that presented themselves as authorities/experts but in fact were servants of the West and their own wallets is insightful. More should have been written about this.

In the 70s and 80s the role of Unita was lauded by pro-Western journalists (one example is Fred Bridgland). Very few wrote critically about this “movement” and this contribution is most welcome. Hopefully somebody at some stage will start writing about Holden Roberto’s FNLA which had an equally suspicious past. The only book about the FNLA as a “movement” I have ever come across was written by

a Russian translator deployed in Angola, now a senior academic at a military academy in Russia. Hopefully this work would one day be translated and published in some South African language.

Dosman talks about Cuito Canavale. This is about the closest that military historians and observers of strategy and tactics would come to what they might regard as serious reading material in this volume. Dosman shares interesting perspectives which have the old *apartheid*-battle-axes hot under the collar. The information shared offers good reading to those who are of the opinion that the Cubans were mere puppets in the hands of the Soviet Union or that battles had been won by accident. A story is being told about the Cuban opposition that launched a frontal attack that was repeated in exactly the same way and route as previously. This contribution raises issues about the Angolan defenders including FAPLA on the battle field and their heavy losses. Likewise it raises questions around the forces that invaded Angolan territory. Wars are not necessarily won by suffering fewer losses. "Strategic goals" are not always reached or ground held with little losses. And those suffering fewer losses are not always the "winners", achieving strategic gains or holding ground ...

Films, humour, humankind and social pathologies come under Robert Gordon's magnifying glass. Even Leon Schuster, Casper de Vries and Pieter-Dirk Uys are mentioned. The role which media and films can play and have played is illuminated from both sides. This is enlightening and hilarious, yet at the same time tragic.

Sasha Gear writes about veterans and the effect of the war on them and those close to them - or rather, those who had been close to them. The potential of this chapter was under-exploited. The historian Christopher Saunders touches on the issue of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; especially on how lightly the TRC treated the *apartheid*-transgressions by the SADF and *apartheid*-leaders. He also refers sharply to how SWAPO's transgressions in their camps were side-stepped. This is a useful chapter, but one expected more from Saunders. This also applies to Peter Vale's contribution. Throughout the book one gets the impression that the contributions were produced in a hurry or not tightly woven into the work as a whole. What a pity!

Post-colonial literature, forgive-and-forget, hang-them-and-built-a-new-place or pay-and-pain-approaches are discussed by Becker and Hunter. Namibia and South Africa like Nazi-Germany years after the Second World War painfully entered this debate. In this regard the USA lags behind. For a relatively short time Vietnam forced the Americans to reflect (the films *Apocalypse Now*, *Deer Hunter* and *Platoon* as examples) but the *Star Spangled Banner* en *Top Gun*-mentality led to

transgressions with long term consequences which will evoke international law debates in future.

Border war publications are set to continue and readers have not yet finished reading about it. One publication after the other appears in South Africa, Cuba, Russia, Namibia and Angola. It is a pity that linguistic and historical prisons inhibit these publications from different worlds of experience to communicate with one another.

A selected bibliography concludes the work. Whether the title is appropriate or not I am still uncertain about ...

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**Ian Liebenberg**, *Centre for Military Studies, Military Academy, Saldanha; Faculty of Military Science, Stellenbosch University.*