Review: Gary Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War': Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories*, London/New York, Bloomsbury, 2015.

Gary Baines's new book *South Africa's 'Border War': Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories* follows on the earlier work jointly edited with Peter Vale, titled *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on South Africa's late-Cold War Conflicts*, which aimed to deconstruct official narratives of the border war, in particular "the ideological motives and subsequent policies that underpinned the conflict, (and) also the effects that it had on people".[1] In his new book Baines' is concerned with analysing the 'memory wars' that continue to rage over the war, focusing primarily on how SADF veterans and former conscripts have tried to make sense of their role in the conflict. Especially valuable is his use of a wide array of sources, as well as his adoption of a cultural studies approach that employs theoretical and conceptual insights derived from disciplines such as media studies, linguistics, literature, performance and visual culture, memory, political and international relations and psychology. Added to this is the utilisation of sources on transitional justice and demobilisation, demilitarisation and reintegration. The study also utilises a comparative approach by analysing the legacy of colonial wars, such as those in Vietnam, Algeria and Israel. Because the war continues to generate "unprecedented public interest", the book is the "first extended study of the afterlife of the 'Border War'".[2] Whereas in the earlier book he argued that the war was a 'taboo' subject, this is no longer the case and the present study offers an opportune moment to investigate how the war is memorised by various constituencies.

South Africa's 'Border War' does not present new findings about the war.[3] It is rather concerned with highlighting the way in which conflicting interpretations continue to inform debates about the war. This, comparative literature reveals, is often the norm in deeply divided societies. Instead of attempting to avoid confrontation, Baines argues for an approach to develop mechanisms to contain it. He therefore employs the concept of conflictual dialogue[4] and this

[1] Christo Botha: "Review: Gary Baines and Peter Vale, (eds.), Beyond the Border War: New perspectives on South Africa's late-Cold War conflicts, Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 6, 2009: 115-126 (115).

[2] Gary Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War'. Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories*, London/New York, Bloomsbury, 2015: 7.

[3] The current study under review can be considered to be the final instalment of a trilogy of studies on South Africa's total strategy for maintaining white domination. The first study was by Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan, (eds.), *War and Society. The Militarization of South Africa*, Cape Town, Philip, 1989, which analysed the manner in which various sectors of South African society were mobilized in support of the government's total strategy. The second study was the one by Gary Baines and Peter Vale, (eds.), *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on South Africa's late-Cold War Conflicts,* which aimed to review the political, diplomatic, psychological, social and military dimensions of these wars and its impact on the people of South Africa and in neighbouring countries.

[4] The concept is derived from Leigh A. Payne, *Unsettling Accounts: Neither Truth nor*

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is evident throughout the ten chapters where he consistently presents both sides of issues and debates. His stated aim is not to resolve disputes, but to complicate them (p. 102). He does not shy away from making moral judgements, but is careful to avoid elevating a particular interpretation of the past as definitive.

The book consists of 10 chapters, all dealing with the 'border war'. The first titled 'SADF soldier-authors reclaim the Border War', argues that former soldiers and senior officers have increasingly taken to recording their experiences of the war, in the process challenging accounts critical of the SADF and assertions that soldiers fought on the "wrong side of history" (p. 13).[5] In the second chapter the point is made that the 'Border War' narratives are culturally constructed. According to Baines South African soldier-authors utilised representations of the Vietnam War when discussing their 'Border War' stories. He identifies a number of "universal war themes", all of which applied in varying degrees to both Vietnam and the Border War. It was however, by listing ten "common themes in Vietnam and Border war literature" that the similarities between the two theatres of conflict become particularly evident.[6] Under the former are listed the following themes: rite of passage, love-hate relationship with combat, dehumanisation of the enemy, terror and gratuitous violence, fatalism and superstition, emasculation, combat madness, post-traumatic stress disorder, sense of betrayal and the futility of war. In the second category the following themes are listed: an invisible enemy, war waged against hostile elements, the enemy ruled the night, faith in superior technology/weaponry, the ineptitude/menace of the enemy, winning hearts and minds, battlefield success measured in terms of body counts and kill ratios, survival strategies, a lost cause and veterans readjustment to civilian life. The reason why Vietnam figures so prominently in war stories of South African soldiers/servicemen can be ascribed, Baines reckons, to globalisation, which has the effect of making American "cultural memory and historical discourse hegemonic" (p. 48). Just as significant, if not more so, are the common threads coursing through the two categories (universal war themes and common themes in Vietnam and Border War literature), signifying contempt for the life of other humans, the meaninglessness of war and its debilitating psychological and physical effect on individuals. Here, the heroism and glory so often associated with war is strikingly absent.

Reconciliation in Confessions of State Violence, Durham, Duke University Press, 2001. According to Payne the case of South Africa had proved that "new democracies can survive profoundly unsettling and even antidemocratic political discourses" (quoted in Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War'*: 192).

[5] The expression 'the wrong side of history' implies that SADF soldiers aligned themselves with a defence of white domination in a country with a black majority, a position that had been universally condemned.

[6] The "universal war themes" are cited in Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War'*: 34-41 and the "common themes in Vietnam and Border War literature" in pages 41-48.

This observation also applies to the chapter entitled 'Codes of Conduct in Captivity: Narratives of South African POW's in Angola, 1975–1978'. There were striking differences between the reality of captivity and the way the South African government and military chose to portray it. Information about SA prisoners of war was not made available to the media and their families, often causing great uncertainty and distress. For all the oft-stated expressions of concern for the well-being of soldiers by military authorities, military and security considerations often tended to militate against individual human concerns. Accounts by individual servicemen of their experiences also indicate that they had to overcome feelings of shame and continued to have conflicting emotions about their ordeals.

Increasingly, a tendency has become apparent in debates about the meaning of the 'border war', namely the claim to victimisation status put forward by South African war veterans. In the chapter titled 'PTSD and Victimhood: A Veteran's Story', Baines questions the ready use of the concept of victimhood by those who participated in the war. Though conceding that the categories such as hero, perpetrator, victim, are not mutually exclusive, he argues that SADF veterans simplistically subsumed their war-time experiences into the category of victimhood, failing to acknowledge adequately that they had choices and should have been aware of the moral implications of their actions. This is especially evident in the manner that war veterans, mostly senior officers, have chosen to portray the war, in particular the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, as having been hijacked by the ANC government to bolster its own rather meagre military achievements in the war. For those interested in an objective assessment of the battle, its wider geo-political ramifications (peace, independence for Namibia and democracy in South Africa) are of greater significance than the rather tired debate about the military outcome of the battle. Nevertheless, the ANC has also invested a lot of effort in portraying their participation in the battle and presenting it as "an SADF defeat and catalyst of transformation in South Africa" (p. 113).[7] Stunned into action by what they perceived to be a distortion of history, the "minority rights lobby group"[8] Afriforum launched a campaign to demonstrate that the "so-called Cuban victory was a myth perpetuated by 'Zuma's people' [...] to discredit the history of 'our people'".[9] This again demonstrates Baines' argument that in the case of Vietnam and the 'border war', there seems to be a pattern of opposing, mutually contradictory perceptions about events. The battle to dominate the debate about the outcome of the conflicts in Southern Africa confirms the prevalent tendency to reduce the complexity of events and developments in favour of sectional claims to be on what is perceived to be the right side of history.

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[7] According to Baines no credible evidence of ANC participation in the battle exists.

[8] Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War'*: 115. Baines refers to this group as a 'white Afrikaner' entity.

[9] Ibid.

The same argument applies to the chapter on the Cassinga battle/ massacre, where the nomenclature utilised depends on one's political position. Again, the desire to present as objective an account of the event as is possible, is overshadowed by political and sectional concerns: the SADF consistently defended its actions as an attack on a military command post while Swapo equally consistently claimed that it amounted to a massacre of civilians. Rather than admitting that the matter was more complicated, the SADF refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing, for which it was castigated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,[10] while Swapo likewise failed to admit that there was a "refugee camp-cum-military base".[11] The SADF attack may have been a military success, but Swapo undoubtedly won the propaganda war by the way in which they presented the event as a brutal attack on unarmed civilians, including many women and children. Baines concludes that even A. Heywood's attempt to provide a measured, scholarly analysis of Cassinga tends to support Swapo's claims.[12] "As far as Swapo is concerned, political expediency trumps truth for what actually happened is often of less significance than how it is remembered" (p. 100).

A somewhat similar phenomenon is evident in literature on the 'border war' where the tendency is to ascribe to particular battle set pieces an importance out of proportion to their real military significance. The battle for Cuito Cuanavale is illustrative of this phenomenon. SADF "vindicationists"[13] consider the conflict associated with Cuito and surrounding regions to be a key element in the war, one decisively won by the South Africans. Focusing on the south-eastern front of the war in Angola, they deflect attention from the south-western part of the country where they suffered a reversal in fortunes. By contrast, ANC supporters believe the SADF had been defeated at Cuito, an outcome of crucial significance for the liberation of South Africa from white minority rule.[14] The ultimate aim is to ensure that a particular version of the past is vindicated and officially conveyed to posterity. Contrary to the protagonists claims, Baines set out to "debunk three myths relating to Cuito Canavale": first, that there were outright winners and losers, that the ANC's military wing

[10] The TRC report "condemned Operation Reindeer as a violation of Angolan territorial integrity launched from illegally occupied Namibia and a gross violation of human rights." The SADF is also accused of failing to take adequate steps to protect the lives of civilians (p. 103).

[11] Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War'*: 96. According to Baines this highlights the dual nature of the camp, a view confirmed by what he terms relatively impartial sources. He cites the TRC Report, vol. 2, p. 50.

[12] See Annemarie Heywood, *The Cassinga Event. An Investigation of the Records*, Windhoek, National Archives of Namibia, 1995.

[13] According to Baines the term originated from the Vietnam War, where it was argued that the United States achieved the overall strategic objective of slowing down the advance of communism. Likewise, SADF supporters argued that their efforts contributed significantly towards ensuring a managed transition to majority rule. In effect this is an argument premised on the assumption that the SADF foresaw the eventual collapse of the Soviet, the chief sponsor of the ANC (Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War'*: 116).

[14] Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War'*: 112.

participated in the battle and that the political transition in South Africa was crucially determined by the battle's outcome.[15]

The Namibian ceasefire violation of April 1989, which for a while threatened to derail the implementation of resolution 435, illustrates the extent to which adversaries would go to achieve propaganda victories. According to the Swapo leadership, their fighters were moving to establish a presence in northern Namibia and were instructed to avoid initiating hostilities. According to SADF reports the movement of Swapo combatants into Namibia amounted to an "invasion" designed to "instigate violence, intimidate the local population and establish a visible presence in the region".[16] Both the SADF and Swapo acted with callous disregard for the Swapo combatants involved: the former attacked the Swapo combatants with great zeal and show no respect for the dead, while Swapo did not commemorate the dead by according them the status of heroes whose deeds were to be enshrined in ritualised commemorations and the erections of memorials. They were by and large, forgotten. The discovery of at least six war graves in Oukwanyama district of Namibia in 2005 pushed the matter squarely back into the limelight. Both the SADF and Swapo quickly acted to deflect attention from their own actions or inactions. The former denied having acted in an improper manner with General J. Geldenhuys, army chief at the time, praising SADF soldiers' discipline and stressing the SADF's adherence to its code of conduct. Blame was deflected to Swapo and Untag, who supervised the burial of Swapo combatants. Swapo had consistently refused to allow an investigation into the events of 1989, stating that it would harm the cause of national reconciliation. Its response to the discovery of the mass graves was to announce the erection of a national memorial. On it are depicted three armed combatants as well as three civilians providing food and ammunition to fighters. Contrary to the triumphalist narrative usually associated with the heroic national liberation struggle, this memorial reflected a more ambiguous message: the war had more than one dimension, including a civilian one.

Characteristic of narratives about both sides of the war is the repeated reference to the war in Vietnam. The spectre of the Cold War allowed South Africa to depict its involvement in Namibia and Angola as serving the purpose of fighting communist expansionism and protecting vital western interests. South Africa argued that it had learned valuable lessons from Vietnam, especially concerning the importance of winning the support of the local population and treating the military aspect as being less important than the political (the so-called 20-80 percent doctrine). The ANC also stressed the significance of lessons learned from the Vietnam experience: they too, appreciated the importance of political mobilisation rather than concentrating on military victory. Fighting a 'people's war' would compensate for the disadvantage of waging a military battle against a superior adversary.

[15] Ibid.: 106.

[16] Baines and Vale, *Beyond the Border War*: 128.

Here again, the SADF, through reminiscences of former soldiers and senior officers, tend to stress the 'esprit de corps' of personnel and adherence to the SADF code of conduct. In the process, it ignored instances of brutality committed by its own soldiers, such as at Cassinga, as well as the actions of its proxies such as Koevoet and Battalion 32. The SADF assumed that it was fighting a just war and that it operated with due regard for the conventions of military warfare, in the process ignoring, or downplaying the human rights violations that did occur.

In the chapter titled 'The Freedom Park Fracas: Commemorating and Memorializing the Border War', the fault lines that characterise the new SA were again evident when a veterans organisation applied to the Freedom Park Trust to have the names of SADF soldiers who died in combat during the apartheid era included on the Wall of Names in Freedom Park, a legacy heritage project. The request was rejected whereupon the Voortrekker Monument and Heritage Foundation announced that it would erect its own memorial for deceased SADF soldiers. The 'Wall of Remembrance' was inaugurated on 25 October 2009 on a site in the Voortrekker Monument's garden. The Freedom Park's trustees responded to claims of selectivity by stating that the memorial was designed to honour those who fought for freedom and democracy. SADF soldiers, by contrast, fought to prevent the realisation of this aim. Opponents of the Freedom Park memorial claim that it is an 'ANC monument' and that it does not represent an honest attempt to i) promote reconciliation and nation-building, ii) reflect on the past and build the future and iii) contribute towards better understanding among 'nations and peoples'.[17] Baines argues that on the one hand those who fought for the SADF had, with a few exceptions, hardly owed up to the fact that they were complicit in upholding a system that deprived their fellow South Africans of their basic human rights, while on the other hand, if nation-building and reconciliation are to be taken seriously, the names of all who fell in wars and conflicts in SA history ought to be included (p. 168). On the contested nature of debates on the history of conflict in South Africa, Baines, is however sceptical of attempts to bridge the gap and suggests that the real question which ought to be posed is whether "irreconcilable memory regimes" will be able to co-exist in South Africa and whether it is desirable that they do (p. 170).

The final chapter focuses on SADF veterans who have established connections in cyber space where they "articulate discontent with the country's political transformation from which they feel marginalized as white South Africans" (p. 186). Common themes in these discourses are that SADF veterans obeyed orders from their leaders and often sacrificed their lives and that they helped to bring the new South Africa into being. There is a widespread tendency to claim victimhood, rather than admissions of guilt in oppressing others. A scholar quoted by Baines observed that "the TRC's

[17] From the mission statement, quoted in Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War'*: 159.

attempt to bring about reconciliation was unsuccessful because [...] [r]econciliation conditions what gets told and how. It demands a particular story about South Africa's past to be told, a story of a cleavage between or violent 'splitting' of 'two' communities that requires healing".[18] Inevitably, therefore, it entails a narrative of the good versus the bad, of having the latter admits its mistakes and the former responding through forgiveness. But, as Baines points out, as implied in the subtitle of his study ("Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories") there is very little evidence of the discordant memories about the SA past being reconciled. This should not come as a surprise. In Germany it took a third post-war generation to fully face up to the nature and consequences of their country's role in World War II. Similarly, in Argentina, human rights violations committed by that country's regime during the 1960s were not debated nor aired by those involved, until the early years of the new century. In her study titled *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* Marguerite Feitlowitz[19] demonstrated how people kept silent about this and either "refuse to recognize the enormity of what happened or argue in anger, or fear, that the past is best forgotten."[20]

From a neutral perspective, if such a position is ever conceivable, one might think that white South Africans should have been able to admit their complicity in upholding and benefiting from apartheid. However, unqualified admissions of guilt do not appear to come easily to people. Even when persons in authority like former president De Klerk acknowledge the wrongs of the past, they usually accompany this with qualifications, such as that apartheid was applied in good faith.

In the final instance, Baines' book is a timely reminder of the deep divisions that still exist in South Africa. Recent events, with their subtext of government incompetence and the legacy of white racism, can make more sense if a central theme in this book is appreciated: South Africans have not yet made their peace with the past and are unlikely to do so soon. Baines' observation that discordant debates should be allowed to continue may therefore be a realistic prescription for the future. However, to prevent the continuation of such debates further inflaming passions and preventing mutual understanding, there is evidently a pressing need for initiatives to be taken by persons of good will and a keen understanding of the SA past, to engage with each other across the sectional divides.[21] Current

[18] Claire Moon, "Narrating Political Reconciliation: Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa", *Social and Legal Studies*, 15 (2), 2006: 257-275 (260), quoted in Baines and Vale, *Beyond the Border War*: 190.

[19] Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

[20] K. Maxwell, "The Dirty War", *The New York Review of Books*, 14 May 1998: 2.

[21] A recent initiative called The Foundations Initiative (TFI) appears to represent a move towards establishing consensus about ways to address South Africa's problems. Foundations representing illustrious personalities such as

events and developments in South Africa clearly demonstrate the inability of people to be reconciled with the past. Idealistic as it may sound, a continuing search for common ground and mutual understanding appears to be the only realistic alternative. Maxwell demonstrates how in her book on Argentina, Feitlowitz demonstrates that, "against the odds, persistent and heroic efforts of many Argentinians eventually forced light on a horrifying secret record".[22]

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Adeleide Tambo, Desmond and Leah Tutu, Chief Albert Luthuli and Thabo Mbeki, as well as foundations for Helen Suzman, FW de Klerk, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe and former deputy president Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka's Umlambo Foundation, among others, have banded together to help solve the country's problems, <http://www.news24.com/search?q=the foundations initiative>, accessed 3 April, 2016].

[22] Maxwell, "2. Feitlowitz spoke with the army chief of staff, Martin Balze, who apologised for the atrocities of the war, saying "almost all of us are guilty by commission or omission, by our presence or our absence, by recommending or passively allowing it to happen" (quoted in ibid.).