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eckl@namibian-studies.com

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Review: Gavin Cooper, *The Killing of Elifas. The Enigma Surrounding the Murder of Chief Filemon Elifas*, Cape Town, Reach Publishers, 2021.

When leading political figures are assassinated, there is an obvious desire to find out who carried out the deed and why. Historians try to establish the consequences as well as the causes, of assassinations, despite it being impossible to know what might have happened had the person lived. Take the murder of Chris Hani in South Africa in April 1993: we know who pulled the trigger, but there has been ongoing speculation over what led Janusz Walus to carry out the assassination, while historians and others are still debating the consequences for the way the transition to constitutional democracy unfolded in South Africa. Whether, had Hani lived, he would have become a worthy successor to Mandela we cannot know.¹

Similarly in South Africa's colony of Namibia, there seems little doubt that the bullets that killed lawyer and South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) member Anton Lubowski in September 1989 were fired by Donald Acheson, who was hired to carry out the deed by South Africa's so-called Civil Co-operation Bureau, a 'dirty tricks' organisation within the South African Defence Force. In this

case too there is ongoing speculation about the reasons for the assassination, though there has been relatively little attempt to assess its significance for the way in which Namibia became independent. It is easy to exaggerate the effects of an assassination – that Dimitri Tsafendas not only killed Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd but, as the title of a biography of Tsafendas suggested, "killed apartheid" is an obvious example.² Lubowski's death did not derail Namibia's first democratic election and we cannot know what role he might have played in independent Namibia had he lived.³

In the decades of South African rule of Namibia preceding the Lubowski assassination, the two most notable assassinations were of very different political figures: when he was shot and killed in Katutura township in March 1978 many saw Clemens Kapuu, who had shown himself ready to participate in the Turnhalle Conference process, as the man most likely to lead an internal opposition to SWAPO. In this case, who carried out the deed remains unclear. Denis Herbst and John Evenson thought "the likeliest explanation is that Kapuu was assassinated by angry SWAPO supporters, with or without a direct order from the leadership". Jan-Bart Gewald thought the evidence pointed to members of the South African security forces who thought they

¹ See, for example, Robert Brand, "The Chris Hani Assassination", in: Charl Schutte, Ian Liebenberg and Anthony Minnaar, (eds.), *The Hidden Hand Covert Operations in South Africa*, revised edition, Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 1998; Evelyn Groenink, *Incorruptible: The Story of the Murders of Dulcie September, Anton Lubowski and Chris Hani*, n.p., ZAM, 2018: 194 ff.

² Harris Dousemetzis, *The Man who Killed Apartheid: The Life of Dimitri Tsafendas*, Auckland Park, Jacana, 2018.

³ See, for example, Gwen Lister, *Comrade Editor*, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2020, chapter 45, pp. 266-74; David Smuts, *Death, Detention and Disappearance*, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2019, chapter 14; Groenink, *Incorruptible*: 118 ff.

could pin the assassination on SWAPO, but, as Herbstein and Evenson pointed out, "Pretoria needed Kapuuo for, if as seemed possible at the time, it resorted to an unilateral declaration of independence, he was the only possible black prime minister of any legitimacy".⁴ His death was clearly a major blow to the internal forces prepared to work with the South African authorities for a new dispensation for Namibia, but we cannot know whether, say, Kapuuo, had he lived, might have taken the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance in a significantly different direction from that taken by Dirk Mudge.

Though Kapuuo wanted to see Namibia free of South African rule, it was because he was prepared to work within the Turnhalle framework of the mid-1970s that he incurred the ire of SWAPO. In his history of resistance in Namibia, Peter Katjavivi sees the murders of Kapuuo and of Chief Elifas in August 1975 as similar in that in both cases SWAPO was blamed, yet there are suspicions that South African forces were responsible.⁵ The two assassinations were of course different in that, unlike Kapuuo, Elifas was a leading supporter of the South African regime in Namibia and was Chief Minister of Ovamboland when he was gunned down. As Chief Minister he had instituted a brutal regime of terror against SWAPO in Ovamboland and therefore became a hated figure for SWAPO's supporters in

that region. In his memoir, Sam Nujoma writes casually of "the elimination of some puppets like Chief Elifas".⁶

Gavin Cooper was led to write about Elifas' s assassination because his father, Wilfred Cooper, was the main defence lawyer in the trial that followed, and Gavin, who served in the South African army in occupied Namibia in 1978, wanted to understand what had happened to create the situation he had found there. Many years later, he devoted a chapter to 'the Swakopmund Swapo trial' in a well-written memoir of his father.⁷ He has now greatly expanded that account in this lengthy book, which provides a detailed examination of the circumstances of the Elifas assassination.

In setting the scene for the assassination, Cooper includes much too much background, some of it extraneous to his topic: there is even a chapter on the genocide of the Herero and Nama in 1904-08. It is the second half of the book that is focused on the assassination itself and its consequences, for while who carried it out may remain a mystery, there is no mystery about its short-term consequences, for the South African authorities used it to try to deal a major blow to SWAPO within Namibia. This was at a time when there was international pressure on South Africa to include SWAPO in discussions for a new dispensation in what was then called South West Africa. The police made little

⁴ Denis Herbstein and John Evenson, *The Devils Are Among Us. The War for Namibia*, London, Zed Books, 1989: 40; Jan-Bart Gewald, "Who killed Clemens Kapuuo?", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30 (3), 2004: 559-576; Lister, *Comrade Editor*, chapter 16, 86-92.

⁵ Peter H. Katjavivi, *A History of Resistance in Namibia*, London, Currey, 1988: 102.

⁶ Sam Nujoma, *Where Others Wavered*, London, Panaf Books, 2001: 251.

⁷ Gavin Cooper, *Under Devils Peak. The Life and Times of Wilfred Cooper, an Advocate in the Age of Apartheid*, n.p., Burnet Media, 2016, chapter 12, pp. 177-210.

attempt to find out who had committed the crime and instead arrested and put on trial leading SWAPO supporters. Though the trial badly damaged SWAPO inside Namibia, it seems unlikely that the South African authorities wanted to use the trial to ban SWAPO (208, 354), given the international repercussions that would have followed had they done that. Their efforts to link the internal wing of SWAPO to the armed struggle being pursued by the external wing were hardly successful.

Many readers are likely to find Cooper's very detailed and well-researched account of the trial that followed the assassination the most interesting part of his book. The security police treated those whom they arrested appallingly, and the judge was shockingly partisan and biased. It was extremely fortunate that evidence emerged, after the judge had in May 1976 sentenced two of the accused to death, that led to an appeal in which his judgement was overturned, and the accused were all released. On their release they were "greeted by jubilant crowds in Windhoek", which enables Katjavivi to see the outcome as "a victory for SWAPO and the Namibian nationalist cause".⁸

Those who have written about the trial in detail before Cooper have been lawyers and have not engaged directly with Katjavivi's suggestion that "What was intended to strike a blow at the heart of

Namibian nationalism ultimately strengthened it".⁹ David Soggot, who would have been the main defence lawyer in the case had he not been busy elsewhere, wrote about the trial at length in his seminal text *Namibia. The Violent Heritage*,¹⁰ while much more recently the American human rights lawyer Ralston Deffenbaugh, who had observed the trial for the Lutheran Church, published an account based on the trial record and some interviews.¹¹ Though Cooper sets the trial in a wider context than Soggot and Deffenbaugh, he might have tried to say more about, say, how Elifas's assassination played into the ending of the South African idea of turning that part of Namibia into a nominally independent Bantustan.

After his 76-page chapter on 'The Trial of the SWAPO Six', Cooper goes on to provide a wide-ranging examination of the question of who was responsible for the assassination (chapter 20). In the end, he cannot say whether Elifas was killed by SWAPO because of his anti-SWAPO collaboration with the South Africans and the reign of terror against SWAPO he instituted in Ovamboland or by the South African security forces in order to be able to accuse SWAPO of the deed and use it as an excuse to deal harshly with the liberation movement. It is unlikely that conclusive evidence one way or the other will ever emerge, though one must beware

⁸ Katjavivi, *Resistance*: 82.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ David Soggot, *Namibia. The Violent Heritage*, London, Collings, 1986, chapters 21-27 and pp. 130-182.

¹¹ Ralston Deffenbaugh, "The SWAPO Trial: A Partisan Trial", in Ron Christenson, *Political Trials: Gordian Knots in the Law*, New York, Routledge, 2017, chapter 3, pp. 35-78.

Surveying all political trials through history, Christensen had earlier selected two involving Namibians: that of Andimba ya Toivo and others in 1967 and that of Aaron Mushimba and others for the Elifas assassination: Ron Christenson, (ed.), *Political Trials in History. From Antiquity to the Present*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 1991: 218-20 and 312-14.

of reading consequences into causes, as he does when he writes, in summing up his findings: “the preponderance of the evidence is that the benefit derived from the death of Elifas (and Kapuuo) was far more significant for the SA government than for SWAPO” (p. 389).

Unlike many of the assassinations that come most readily to mind – in the African context in the era of decolonisation one thinks, say, of those of Patrice Lumumba, Dag Hammarskjöld, Eduardo Mondlane, Amilcar Cabral, Steve Biko, among others – that of Elifas did not put an end to the life of one who had shown great leadership and the potential for greater. Elifas was a brutal, relatively minor ruler. His death did not lessen the oppression suffered by the people of Ovamboland. What Cooper’s book shows is that his assassination can be used as a window into aspects of the many forms of injustice that characterised South Africa’s long rule of Namibia.

Chris Saunders
University of Cape Town