

Conflicting memories, competing narratives and complicating histories: Revisiting the Cassinga controversy

Gary Baines

Abstract

Notwithstanding public perceptions to the contrary, the past is unstable and contested. When it comes to controversial episodes such as alleged atrocities and other war crimes, the stake of those with vested interests in how the past is remembered becomes that much higher. Perpetrators and victims have conflicting memories and construct competing narratives about their roles in such episodes. The stories told by members of the South African Defence Force who attacked Cassinga on 4 May 1978 are diametrically opposed to those told by the Namibian survivors: for the apartheid state's soldiers it was a legitimate military operation in a counter-revolutionary war whereas for the South West Africa People's Organization it was a massacre of innocent civilians. If the SADF story is sanitized, then SWAPO's version is contradictory. These mutually exclusive stories have been appropriated for partisan causes that illustrate the workings of the politics of memory in southern Africa's post-conflict societies. This paper reveals how the rhetorical battle has been rejoined and examines the ongoing tug of war over the meaning of Cassinga.

Introduction

The name Cassinga (or Kassinga) came to the attention of the world a little more than thirty years ago. At the time it evoked a range of responses, from outrage to grief to the celebration of military bravado. The name still provokes strong reactions among those who have a stake in a particular version of the Cassinga story. According to the South African Defence Force (SADF), it launched a cross-border strike against the nerve centre of South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) operations in Angola. The strike targeted 'terrorists' and the success of the operation was measured in terms of its achieving strategic military goals. Any civilian casualties were a regrettable but unavoidable consequence of the mission. SWAPO's account is altogether different. The liberation movement's version has it that those killed were innocent women and children; that Cassinga was a 'massacre' on a par with atrocities such as Guernica, Nanking and My Lai.

Rather than detail the events that transpired in the Angolan town of Cassinga on 4 May 1978, I wish to understand how the subsequent controversy has played itself out in the public arena. I first employed the notion of the battle *for* Cassinga in order to describe

the contestation over the meanings ascribed to the events by the warring parties.¹ Then I borrowed the phrase ‘battle for perceptions’ to describe the waging of an ideological contest between competing versions of (past) events² when I prepared a chapter for a forthcoming book.³ Both these earlier versions of the paper simply juxtaposed conflicting versions of the Cassinga story via the reconstruction of narratives of SADF soldiers and SWAPO. In this version of the paper, I attempt to refine my argument by way of explaining how it is that these competing narratives have become established in the public domain. My point of departure is that the past is a conflictual terrain and memories are contested. It follows, then, that an analysis of power relations is necessary to understand why certain (collective) memories are embodied in a specific narrative form which, in turn, is embraced by certain social groups. In other words, it needs to be explained why it is that a specific version of the past takes hold within the imagination of those social groups – especially elites – who have the power to influence the perceptions of the population at large.⁴ The struggle to fix the meaning of Cassinga extends into the (overlapping) spheres of political polemics, public discourse, and scholarly debate.

In this struggle, the name Cassinga serves as a floating signifier (in the Barthesian sense) that attaches itself to a chain of meanings. Meanings are partly determined by other words with which it is associated. So when Cassinga is used in conjunction with ‘battle’ as in the ‘battle of Cassinga’, it suggests an engagement between two (roughly equal) armed forces. This phrase is usually employed by SADF apologists. Other military terms that are frequently used in conjunction with Cassinga include ‘assault’, ‘attack’ and ‘raid’. Such terms imply that the operation was a strike on an enemy base and, as such, a legitimate act of warfare. The use of these terms implies no moral judgment of SADF actions because (so the argument goes) in a war situation it is not always possible to distinguish between civilians and combatants, and civilian casualties are regarded as an unfortunate but unavoidable by-product of military operations – what the Americans

¹ Gary Baines, *The Battle for Cassinga: Conflicting Narratives and Contested Meanings*, Basler Afrika Bibliographien Seminar, Basel, Switzerland, 11 December 2007, available at:

http://www.baslerafrika.ch/upload/files/WP_2007_2_Baines.pdf. Also available at:

http://eprints.ru.ac.za/946/01/baines_Cassinga.pdf

² Deborah Posel, “Symbolizing Violence: State and Media Discourse in Television Coverage of Township Protest, 1985-87”, in: Noel Chabani Manganyi & Andre du Toit, (eds.), *Political Violence and the Struggle in South Africa*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1990: 154-171 (154).

³ Gary Baines, “A Battle for Perceptions: Revisiting the Cassinga Controversy in Southern Africa”, in: Philip Dwyer & Lyndall Ryan, (eds.), *A Natural Inclination: The Massacre throughout History*, New York, Berghahn, in press.

⁴ Anna Lisa Tota, “Collective Memories at ‘Work’: The Public Remembering of Contested Pasts”, in: Frederik Engestr ad, (ed.), *Comparative Studies of Culture and Power*, Amsterdam, Elsevier, 2003: 63-85 (65, 68, 82).

euphemistically call 'collateral damage'.⁵ Conversely, Cassinga is invariably coupled with the emotive term 'massacre' by SWAPO and its sympathizers. This term implies the purposeful killing of innocent civilians, especially unarmed women and children. It also implies moral condemnation.

This article, then, will examine the versions of the Cassinga story narrated by the SADF and SWAPO, respectively. Narratives use not only words but frequently employ images (or visual language) to convey their meanings. They are generated in order to explain, rationalize, and frame events. The SADF soldiers who participated in the operation have a vested interest in preserving the story that it was a daring exploit without parallel in the annals of South African military history whereas survivors of the 'massacre' have adopted SWAPO's narrative that holds that the deaths of those in the camp was a necessary sacrifice for the making of the new nation of Namibia. Members of these opposing interest or warring groups have attempted to appropriate Cassinga for their own purposes.

The SADF story

The SADF version of events goes something like this. On 4 May 1978, it launched Operation Reindeer, a three-pronged attack on targets in southern Angola from Namibia. The town of Cassinga, situated 250 km north of the Namibian border, was the primary target as it was the main operational base of the SWAPO in the region. SADF aerial reconnaissance photographs suggested that it was a well-fortified regional HQ (known as 'Moscow') from which PLAN (People's Liberation Army of Namibia, SWAPO's armed wing) cadres infiltrated Namibia. The objective was to destroy this base and capture PLAN commander Dimo Hamaambo, as well as to disrupt SWAPO's supply lines to the Namibian border. Cassinga was strafed by Alpha anti-personnel bombs and 30mm cannons. This was followed by an airborne assault that resembled a standard vertical envelopment operation without armoured support.⁶ Transport planes dropped 370 paratroopers in the vicinity of the target. The drop went slightly awry with some troops landing in the SWAPO camp and others landing in and across the Cubango river to the west of the town and then having to regroup for the attack on the base. The main assault group encountered fierce resistance from SWAPO cadres who employed the remaining anti-aircraft (AA) gun not incapacitated by the initial SAAF bombing of the camp, as well as machine guns and small arms to ward off the attack. Following a protracted firefight the objective was secured, documents seized, munitions destroyed, and some PLAN cadres and civilians rounded up. But before evacuation could proceed,

⁵ For expositions of the derivation and morality of this notion, see Sahr Conway-Lanz, *Collateral Damage: Americans, Noncombatant Immunity, and Atrocity after World War II*, New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2006; William Andrew Myers, "How Civilians Became Targets: The Moral Catastrophe of 'Collateral Damage'", <http://www.wickedness.net/Evil/Evil%207/myers%20paper.pdf>

⁶ Edward George McGill Alexander, "The Cassinga Raid", unpubl. MA Thesis, UNISA, 2003.

a combined Cuban-FAPLA (Popular Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola) force of armoured cars and tanks from the nearby base of Techumatete approached. Fighter jets were recalled to blunt the counter-attack and their timely intervention enabled the helicopters to evacuate the remaining paratroopers with little time to spare. Casualties amounted to approximately 600 dead and many more wounded among the inhabitants of Cassinga, eighteen Cuban/FAPLA soldiers killed and sixty-three wounded, and four of their own paratroopers killed and eleven wounded.⁷ The SADF claimed its pre-emptive strike against 'terrorists' was justified on account of SWAPO's increased border violations and the assassination of Herero chief Clemens Kapuu.⁸ It had dealt SWAPO's operational capacity a mortal blow.

There is no official history of the Cassinga assault but an account by Willem Steenkamp amounts to a semi-official or SADF-sanctioned chronicle of the event.⁹ A former military correspondent, sometime national serviceman and citizen force reservist, Steenkamp can be regarded as an embedded journalist. He glamorizes the Cassinga story as an exceptional military endeavour by citizen force soldiers and reservists. He is effusive in his praise for the paratroopers' contingent planning after the chaotic drop, which meant that they had to change their axis of attack. Steenkamp's account is peppered with descriptions of acts of heroism befitting the conduct of the paratroopers, as well as gallantry of the pilots of fighter planes and helicopters. His triumphalist narrative is essentially a tribute to South Africa's military capabilities. Steenkamp does not ask hard questions about the timing of Operation Reindeer nor of the motives of the Minister of Defence, P.W. Botha and the SADF leadership in scuttling the negotiations sponsored by the Western Five to secure an internationally acceptable solution of the Namibian issue. He is content to repeat Pretoria's official explanations for the Cassinga attack.

Many accounts of Cassinga on the internet have been written by former SADF personnel who offer little or no contextualization of their stories. A good example is an anonymous and fairly detailed entry in Wikipedia which displays insider knowledge of SADF planning

⁷ These figures vary considerably according to their sources. The SADF based its figures of enemy losses on intercepted and monitored communications. SWAPO statements inflated the number of casualties in order to emphasize the enormity of the slaughter. Cuban sources initially denied any involvement and later downplayed their losses. The TRC estimated a death toll of at least 1,000, a figure that includes 150 Cubans. See *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 2, Cape Town, Juta & Co., 1998: 51. Piero Gleijeses, who has had access to Cuban sources, confirms the extent of their losses. See his "The Massacre of Cassinga" <http://amadlandawonye.wikispaces.com/The+Massacre+of+Cassinga,+Piero+Glejeses> (accessed 26 November 2007).

⁸ Documentary evidence reveals that the South African security forces created incidents and the 'psychological climate' to justify the operation. See Sophia du Preez, "Twisappel van die Nasies: SWA se onafhanklikheidsstryd tot 1979", unpubl. and declassified document, Department of Defence, 1989: 52; Jan-Bart Gewald, "Who Killed Clemens Kapuu?," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 2004: 559-576 (571-573).

⁹ Willem Steenkamp, *Borderstrike! South Africa into Angola*, Durban, Butterworths, 1983: 15-141. Revised and updated third edition produced by Just Done Publications, Durban, 2006.

and obvious familiarity with Operation Reindeer. Indeed, it can be safely deduced that this piece is the work of a SADF paratrooper.¹⁰ It proclaims the result of the Battle of Cassinga a “decisive victory for South Africa.” The outcome is measured by means of a body count ratio of 4:600. These casualty figures suggest a one-sided or unequal engagement. But a repeated refrain in SADF accounts is the acknowledgment of the bravery of the SWAPO and Cuban soldiers. Such accounts emphasize that Cassinga was a battle that was waged by two armed forces, and does not entertain the idea that the SADF might have killed civilians, let alone committed war crimes. Many veterans continue to believe that the SADF was somehow above politics and beyond reproach for its conduct, and that they were fully entitled to engage in pre-emptive cross-border strikes in order to eliminate ‘terrorists’ before they threatened the security of South Africa.

Colonel Jan Breytenbach, who commanded the troops on the ground during Operation Reindeer, insists that most of the SWAPO dead were killed during trench-clearing. He points to SADF photographic evidence to back up his claim that the number of dead on the parade ground killed by the SAAF bombing was relatively small.¹¹ Figure 1 shows some of the deceased in front of SWAPO officers houses.



Figure 1: Parade Ground Dead (courtesy of Mike McWilliams)

He asserts that combatants outnumbered civilians in Cassinga and that they put up a spirited resistance against his men. In Breytenbach’s published account, though, PLAN cadres are simultaneously applauded for their bravery and maligned as cowards for

¹⁰ “Battle of Cassinga,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/battle_of_Cassinga (accessed 18 Sept. 2007).

¹¹ Interview with Colonel (ret) Jan Breytenbach, Sedgefield, 30 April 2008.

using civilians as human shields to protect themselves. Breytenbach believes that the civilians (including schoolchildren) were abductees rather than refugees, having been force-marched or transported against their will from Namibia to the SWAPO base in southern Angola. He observes sarcastically that the 'refugees' were well armed with a variety of weapons, including 14.5mm AA guns, 12.7mm heavy machine guns, 82mm mortars, RPG-7s and AK-47s. He also notes that Cassinga housed an arsenal of weapons of almost every calibre that he instructed should be blown up. The cumulative weight of such claims lends credence to the argument that Cassinga was an operational military base and not a camp for refugees. This implies that the inhabitants of Cassinga were neither unarmed nor defenceless. In fact, Breytenbach has no qualms about his participation in the operation and his exhaustive polemical account savages his detractors and dismisses as unashamed propaganda SWAPO's depiction of Cassinga as a 'massacre'.¹²

Retired SADF generals have acknowledged that civilians may have been killed at Cassinga but reject with contempt SWAPO allegations of a "gross massacre of innocents".¹³ They refused to cooperate with the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in its efforts to document this and other operations in which the SADF were involved. Most refused to testify for fear of implicating themselves in human rights violations. Certain former generals also acted as gatekeepers for SADF soldiers who might have testified before the TRC. In the event, the only soldier who testified about Cassinga was Lieutenant 'Rich' Verster, an ex-SADF Special Forces officer who participated in the assault. His testimony was undoubtedly solipsistic and self-serving as it was designed to elicit sympathy from the commissioners by depicting himself as a victim of circumstances:

I don't know if I must apply for amnesty for Cassinga. It was probably the most bloody exercise that we ever launched... It was a terrible thing. I saw many things that happened there but I don't want to talk about it now because I always start crying about it. It's damaged my life.¹⁴

Verster admitted to having followed orders and to having killed "a lot of people" but he did not implicate his fellow troops in atrocities. On a previous occasion an unidentified

¹² Jan Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike! The controversial airborne assault on Cassinga, 04 May 1978*, Sandton, Manie Grove Publishing, 2008, passim. It should be noted that his real target is not SWAPO but Alexander who is accused of betraying his brothers in arms. See below.

¹³ See, for instance, Jannie Geldenhuis, *A General's Story: From an Era of War and Peace*, Johannesburg, Ball, 1995: 72; Magnus Malan, *My Life with the SA Defence Force*, Pretoria, Protea Book House, 2006: 193.

¹⁴ Testimony of Johan Frederich Verster to the TRC, 4 July and 27 July 1977 (courtesy of John Daniel). The testimony was given to TRC investigators that visited the Winchester prison, London where Verster was being held for drug smuggling. He was not granted amnesty by the TRC for his involvement in the Cassinga operation because this incident was deemed to have been not directly concerned with the conflict inside South Africa and, accordingly, not associated with political objectives as envisaged in terms of Section 18 of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act (No. 34 of 1995). See Jeremy Sarkin-Hughes, *Carrots and Sticks: the TRC and the South African Amnesty Process*, Antwerp, Intersentia Publishers, 2004: 344.

soldier – probably Verster – had confessed to executing wounded survivors at the behest of his superiors.¹⁵ His statement is as close as any of the paratroopers have come to an admission of culpability for the wanton murder of civilians (or POWs) at Cassinga, but it has not been verified by fellow soldiers.¹⁶ Indeed, Breytenbach is at pains to point out that his troops spared the lives of captured cadres and civilians, and again offers photographic evidence to back his claim. Figure 2 shows a group of prisoners rounded up by the SADF wearing both civilian clothes and combat fatigues.

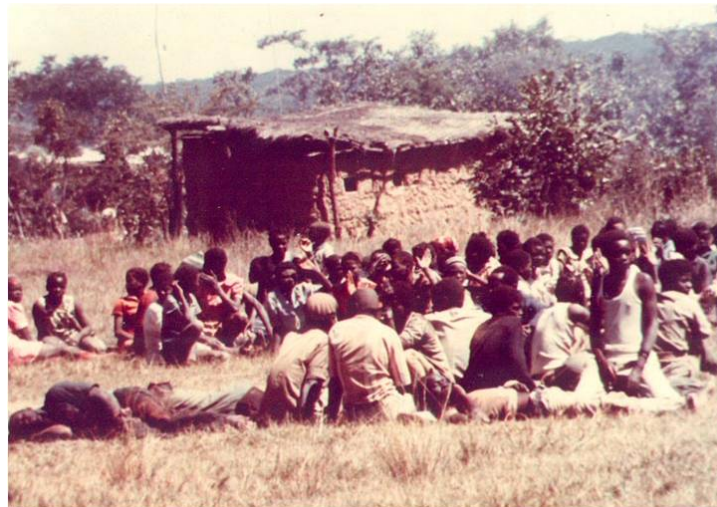


Figure 2: Captives at Cassinga (courtesy of Mike McWilliams)

Breytenbach also expressed regret at not having been able to airlift children who had requested him to take them home; a task rendered impossible by the hasty evacuation of his own troops in the face of the counter-attack. Whereas Breytenbach is held in high regard by most of those who served under him,¹⁷ Verster's subsequent record casts doubt on his reliability as a witness. Verster was known to have participated in 'third force' and criminal activities such as political assassinations, extortion and drug smuggling, and to have been convicted for murder. His erstwhile comrades are unanimous in denouncing Verster (rather than his testimony). Whilst they have clearly closed ranks against a 'renegade', this does not necessarily prove that a code of silence prevails among them.

¹⁵ *The Star*, 8 May 1993 ("Haunted by a mother's look") cited in Annemarie Heywood, *The Cassinga Event. An Investigation of the Records*, Windhoek, National Archives of Namibia, 1994: 34 f.

¹⁶ *TRC Report*, Vol. 2: 44.

¹⁷ An exception proved to be Pierre Hough, a member of the anti-tank platoon, who badmouthed Breytenbach during an unsolicited phone call, 19 March 2008.

Apologists for the SADF are also to be found among conservative positivist historians. The late Leo Barnard of the History Department at the University of the Free State published a number of articles on Cassinga.¹⁸ Barnard is skeptical of SWAPO accounts because they make no mention of military installations, and the presence of PLAN combatants notwithstanding evidence to the contrary. He is equally suspicious of Cuban accounts that ignore their engagement with SADF forces at Cassinga and disclaim knowledge of any losses. He is more inclined to believe SADF accounts that tally with the documents he has consulted and the stories of participants whom he has interviewed. But Barnard's faith in his sources rests on his naïve invocation of 'scientific objectivity'. When he argues that articles such as his own are "based on highly academic reasoning with full reference to the sources used" by a professional historian who has conducted years of research on the subject then the reader is supposed to accept that expertise qualifies him to provide a definitive account of events.¹⁹ And when Barnard asks readers to accept that the "personal experience of people who were involved in the war effort" provides such accounts with the credibility accorded to witnesses then they are supposed to accept this formulation at face value.²⁰ But these assumptions are flawed and have been thoroughly discredited. There is now widespread recognition in the profession that historical knowledge is constructed and that neither expertise nor closeness to the events necessarily guarantees an authoritative account of the past. The veracity of the SADF's version of events can be no more vouchsafed than that of SWAPO or Cuban narrators by appealing to truth and objectivity.²¹

McGill Alexander's dissertation on Cassinga has caused a considerable furore in the ranks of retired SADF paratroopers. As a former paratrooper himself, his opinions have been more closely studied than pronouncements by SWAPO spokespersons. Whilst wishing to focus on strategic and tactical aspects of the military operation, Alexander found it impossible to disengage from the controversy that followed the events of 4 May 1978. He notes numerous inconsistencies in the standard SWAPO version that was disseminated by the international media. However, his effort to achieve balance is compromised by a failure to locate and interview survivors, as well as an inability to secure the cooperation of SWAPO military personnel to answer his queries.²² On the other hand, Alexander had access to declassified SADF documents that accord him

¹⁸ Leo Barnard, "Die Gebeurte by Cassinga, 4 Mei 1978 – 'n Gevallestudie van die Probleme van 'n Militêre Historikus," *Historia*, May 1996: 88-99; Leo Barnard, "The Battle of Cassinga, 4 May 1978: A historical reassessment. Part 1: The course of the battle and ensuing controversy", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3, December 2006: 131-146; "The Battle of Cassinga, 4 May 1978: A historical reassessment. Part 2: Interviews with two SADF soldiers", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3, December 2006: 147-160.

¹⁹ Leo Barnard, 'Preface by the Editor', to Special issue on the Grensoorlog/Border War 1966-1989 of the *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3, December 2006: n.p.

²⁰ Barnard, 'Preface': 3.

²¹ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, London, Hodder Arnold, 2nd ed., 2006: 89-90.

²² He is not alone in this regard as I, too, have been unable to interview Cassinga survivors notwithstanding approaches to well-connected Namibian academics.

privileged insight into the SADF's logistical planning of the operation. Yet, he points out certain anomalies in the SADF story and is occasionally critical of the conduct of the paratroopers. Consequently, he has been taken to task by self-styled 'Cassinga veterans'. Retired SADF captain, Tommie Lamprecht, accused Alexander of betraying his fellow parabats,²³ and members of the Legion of Associated Airborne R.S.A. (LAARSA) condemned his dissertation "as it cast aspersions on the good name and character of the South African paratrooper".²⁴ Whilst LAARSA could hardly claim to speak on behalf of the country's elite fighting force, the mere fact that its members declared a former commanding officer *persona non grata* is an indicator of how much they had vested in their reputation as soldiers and the integrity of their Cassinga story.

Alexander differs from Breytenbach in contending that most of casualties were caused by the bombing and strafing of Cassinga rather than the ground fighting. The air strike was apparently timed to coincide with the early morning parade when inhabitants of the camp assembled in order to be assigned their daily tasks. The death toll caused by the air strike is a matter of dispute. Alexander has reservations about the authenticity of the SADF photographic record and prefers to make inferences from published eyewitness accounts. Accordingly, he suggests that a considerable number of schoolchildren and cadres were killed in the aerial sorties. He seeks to explain this indiscriminate killing by arguing that the SADF grossly underestimated the number of women and children in the camp and that they had no intention of killing them.²⁵ Alexander concedes that the technology of mass destruction is likely to cause unavoidable casualties among civilians but he is not prepared to call the act a 'massacre' — especially as the scale of the killing was unintended. In fact, Alexander studiously avoids using the term 'massacre' (except when directly quoting SWAPO sources) and prefers to speak of the 'raid'. However, this is not acceptable to LAARSA members who complain that they have been effectively portrayed as 'mass murderers'. Paratroopers involved in Operation Reindeer certainly do not regard it as an atrocity.²⁶ This means either that they concocted a story that has remained intact for more than thirty years or that they are telling the truth. Whatever the case, their version has not gone unchallenged.

The SWAPO story

After initially claiming to have successfully repulsed the SADF attack and inflicted heavy casualties on the invaders,²⁷ SWAPO changed its tune and emphasized that the cowardly deed was not a reprisal but aimed at scuppering the prospects of a political settlement

²³ Tommie Lamprecht to McGill Alexander on Cassinga, 4 June 2007.

²⁴ Unsigned letter from LAARSA to Brig. Gen. (ret) McGill Alexander, 1 December 2007.

²⁵ Alexander, "Cassinga Raid": 186.

²⁶ Edward George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: from Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale*, London, Cass, 2005: 135.

²⁷ SWAPO spokesman Peter Katjavivi cited in *The Cape Times*, 6 May 1978 ("5 die as SA hits Swapo base").

proposed by the Western Contact Group. Subsequent SWAPO statements accused the SADF of the “cold-blooded murder of innocent and unarmed refugees” and “of a murderous and destructive attack against defenceless Namibian refugees”.²⁸ SWAPO sources stress that the enormity of the death toll shows that the SADF acted with excessive force and unrestrained brutality against ‘soft’ targets. Claims were made that SAAF planes released poisonous gas and biological weapons prior to the ground attack by the paratroopers, and that once on the ground the paratroopers shot and bayoneted non-combatants. There were also claims that the paratroopers raped some of their victims.²⁹ Furthermore, it was suggested that the SADF soldiers systematically rounded up and killed all those who had not managed to flee the camp before their arrival and, inconsistently, it was also said that they took prisoners.³⁰ Essentially, the SWAPO version of events is that the SADF killed Namibian refugees who had fled their country to escape an illegal and repressive military occupation.

Although SWAPO described Cassinga as a refugee camp and not a military base, the evidence is not all that clear-cut. Relatively impartial sources suggest that it served a dual rather than an exclusive purpose; that it was a refugee camp-cum-military base.³¹ A report of the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) published in *The Namibian* newspaper before the SADF raid stated that: “Although it [Cassinga] housed a considerable number of combatants, including senior officers, it also housed considerable numbers of civilians.”³² Even partial sources attest to this. SWAPO reported the presence of a 300-strong camp defence unit that manned two AA

²⁸ Shapua Kaukunga, Chief Representative of SWAPO for Western Europe, cited in Southern African Information Programme of the International University Exchange Fund, 17 June 1978.

²⁹ Such claims were first made in SWAPO’s Special Bulletin, *Massacre at Cassinga: Climax of Pretoria’s All-Out Campaign Against the Namibian Resistance*, Stockholm, SWAPO, 1978: 17. The reference to a “sticky inflammable phosphate liquid” placed on the ground sounds like napalm, but Alexander, “Cassinga Raid”: 150 discounts this. I have found reference to the use of napalm in sitreps (situation reports) documenting later SAAF air strikes in Angola but nothing to suggest its use during Operation Reindeer. Some survivor’s stories recount they were rendered unconscious by a poisonous gas but the use of a substance that immobilized people has been dismissed as pure fiction by SADF paratroopers who were not issued with gas masks. Such tactics would also have delayed their own deployment in Cassinga. The SADF’s own evidence regarding the use of bayonets is contradictory.

³⁰ Those captured at Cassinga were left behind but the SADF raids on Chetequera and Dombondola netted over 100 prisoners who erroneously became known as the ‘Kassinga detainees’. Despite being relocated to camps where supervised Red Cross inspections were carried out, many of these prisoners were reportedly subjected to torture during lengthy incarceration. There were also reports of the bodies of victims being dumped into the sea from helicopters. The ‘Kassinga detainees’ became a matter of grave concern for the international community. See *International Development Aid Fund (IDAF) Focus* 23 July-August 1978, 16 (“Cassinga Raid”), *IDAF Focus* 28, May-June 1980, 10 (“Kassinga Detainees”), *IDAF Focus* 29, July-August 1980, 8 (“Detainees Visited”).

³¹ *TRC Report*, Vol. 2: 50.

³² *The Namibian*, 2 May 1978.

guns.³³ Yet elsewhere it made no mention of these PLAN members. To do so would have rendered Cassinga a site of battle rather than sacrifice.³⁴ Accordingly, the focus of attention was placed squarely on the defenceless children, women and the elderly who were victims of the SADF attack. By constructing a tale of sacrifice, SWAPO turned its story of Cassinga into a moral – as opposed to a military – one. A narrative coalesced around tropes of the innocence of the Cassinga casualties who became martyrs of the Namibian nation in the making.

The visit of international journalists to Cassinga seemed to confirm the massacre and give credence to SWAPO's version of events. On 8 May, they were shown two mass graves – one an open trench in which 582 victims were awaiting burial and the other covered up and apparently containing the bodies of 122 children.³⁵ The party of journalists included Gaetano Pagano who photographed the open mass grave. The images of corpses, some of whom are women, some young, and some wearing civilian clothing are evident to viewers. The most widely disseminated photograph (Figure 3) is a black and white print showing the body of a woman in a dress prominently visible in the foreground and lying on top of a pile of bodies.³⁶

³³ SWAPO, *Massacre*. 20.

³⁴ For obvious reasons there are no accounts of the fateful day by SWAPO combatants. There is, however, an account by a 'dissident' – some might say 'renegade' – member of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the ANC's armed wing, whose visit coincided with the SADF assault. He describes Cassinga as a military base where Cuban instructors were training SWAPO guerrillas. See Joseph Kobo, *Waiting in the Wing*, Milton Keynes, Word Publishing, 1994: 134.

³⁵ Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!*: 564 reckons that the covered grave might have been an elaborate con trick. He inquires why SWAPO covered this grave rather than the one with the bodies of combatants when it was seeking to score as much sympathetic publicity as possible.

³⁶ This image appears in Pagano's publication *The Cassinga File* but the East German news agency, AND, claimed that it had been taken by one of their photographers. See Alexander, "Cassinga Raid": 170.



Figure 3: Mass grave, Cassinga (Pagano)

It was widely syndicated and published by newspapers throughout the world.³⁷ In June 1978, SWAPO issued a bulletin with the Pagano image on the cover with the byline “Massacre at Kassinga: climax of Pretoria’s all-out campaign against the Namibian resistance.”³⁸ The picture was also included in the Kassinga File, a collection of images compiled by Pagano and Swedish filmmaker Sven Asberg.³⁹ The file was distributed to the network of agencies and organisations affiliated to the international anti-apartheid movement. These organisations distributed and displayed the images of the mass grave at public exhibitions and included it in publications. The shot became emblematic of the Cassinga massacre.

³⁷ Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB), A.A3, Swapo Collection, 78aSPR2, 16 May 1978.

³⁸ BAB, A.A3, Swapo Collection, 78fSLkPb1, Special Bulletin of SWAPO, Lusaka, June 1978 / SWAPO, *Massacre*.

³⁹ Published and produced by the IUEF, an NGO that had provided assistance to Namibian refugees and SWAPO since 1963. See BAB, Swapo Collection, 78aSpb7, The Kassinga File.



Figure 4: Massacre at Kassinga (Pagano/Asberg)

The Pagano image was also reproduced on a number of posters commemorating Kassinga Day produced by solidarity organisations such as the International University Exchange Fund (IUEF) and SWAPO's own Department of Information and Publicity. Figure 4, entitled "Massacre at Kassinga", comprises a montage that foregrounds three colour images presumably of survivors and victims of the massacre.⁴⁰ These include the photograph of the mass grave, overlaid on black and white images reproduced from the SADF magazine *Paratus*. The superimposition of the colour images of Cassinga victims and survivors over the black and white images of text and South African soldiers seeks to focus the viewer's attention on the tragic loss of lives. The poster also seems to suggest that the victims were deemed expendable by the South African state intent on imposing the apartheid system on Namibians irrespective of the (human) costs.

Based on his reading of the imagery of Cassinga in the public domain, as well as what he has been able to access in archives, Alexander argues that the available visual evidence does not seem to support the contention that "photographs and videos of the mass graves at Cassinga show almost exclusively corpses of women and children."⁴¹ This might be so, but it is hardly the point. In propaganda, it is perception rather than reality that matters, and public perceptions of Cassinga were shaped not by the referential but the symbolic value of the mass graves imagery. The graphic nature of the

⁴⁰ BAB Poster Collection, X 445 "Massacre at Kassinga" which is part of the Kassinga File photographic exhibition, 1978.

⁴¹ Alexander, "Cassinga Raid": 170, note 832.

subject matter meant that it resonated with the imagery of mass killing such as the Nazi genocide (or Holocaust). The horrendous sight of a pit piled high with grotesquely twisted bodies in a state of rigor mortis is reminiscent of the images of death camps such as Belsen and Dachau after their liberation by the Allies in 1945. Images of piles of corpses – whether or not women and children were visible – conjured up atrocities or war crimes in the public mind. It was arguably this “icon of outrage” that had a marked effect on public opinion in Western countries and turned Cassinga into a propaganda coup for SWAPO.⁴² Its widespread dissemination demonstrated that Cassinga became synonymous with the murder of innocent victims.

Recollections of survivors have been instrumental in reconstructing the SWAPO story of Cassinga. One such survivor is Ellen Namhila, who in 1978 was a 14 year old trainee nurse who happened to be visiting Cassinga at the time of the assault. She describes how she fled the camp during the bombardment and (mysteriously) fell asleep. She gives no indication that she personally witnessed the paratrooper’s actions and is altogether vague on the details of the episode except to say that she was helped across the (Cubango?) river by a captain Kanhana.⁴³ The mention of the man’s rank would seem to suggest that he was a PLAN cadre who also sought to escape during the confusion caused by the SADF assault in Cassinga. He was presumably armed. But in a recent letter to *The Sunday Independent*, Namhila categorically denies that Cassinga was a military base or that camp personnel carried weapons.⁴⁴ Like many of the Cassinga survivors, Namhila became a political activist who owes her education and training as an archivist to SWAPO’s sponsorship. Survivors’ stories such as hers have been appropriated by the ruling party in the construction of the nationalist narrative of martyrdom. Survivors themselves have a reciprocal interest in perpetuating SWAPO’s version of the Cassinga story and as an archivist Namhila is particularly well placed to serve as a custodian of SWAPO’s history.

A study published in 1994 under the auspices of the Namibian National Archives uses the ostensibly neutral term ‘event’ rather than ‘massacre’ in relation to Cassinga.⁴⁵ Annemarie Heywood’s language is more restrained in its treatment of the topic than most previous publications by SWAPO apologists.⁴⁶ She wishes to avoid being regarded as biased or partial by virtue of her commitment to tried and tested methods of primary research. But her interrogation of extant evidence seeks to confirm that SWAPO’s story is, for the most part, incontrovertible. What Heywood’s work really lacks, though, is an

⁴² David D. Perlmutter, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy: Icons of Outrage in International Crises*, Westport, Conn., Praeger, 1998.

⁴³ Ellen Ndeshi Namhila, *The Price of Freedom*, Windhoek, New Namibia Books, 1997: 40-1.

⁴⁴ *The Sunday Independent*, 9 March 2008 (“I was at Cassinga and it was not a military base”).

⁴⁵ Heywood, *Cassinga Event*.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Denis Herbstein & John Evenson, *The Devils are Among Us: The War for Namibia*, London, Zed, 1989: 31, who are unequivocal in condemning Cassinga as the “bloodiest massacre of the war.”

appreciation of what Cassinga has come to mean for Namibia's narrative of nationhood; that Cassinga has become a model of enduring bravery and sacrifice. As far as SWAPO is concerned, Cassinga's symbolic value outweighs the organization's endorsement of her historical project committed to establishing the "plain truth".⁴⁷ Actually, truth is seldom "plain" and is frequently subordinated to an agenda which may result in the manipulation of memory so as to discredit enemies, as well as political opponents.⁴⁸

After independence, SWAPO proclaimed 4 May a public holiday and Namibians were prevailed upon to 'Remember Cassinga'. Along with Independence Day (21 March) and Heroes Day (26 August), Cassinga Day is part of a ritualized political re-enactment of the postcolonial Namibian liturgical year.⁴⁹ Cassinga Day is staged to commemorate the victims who have come to epitomize martyrs of the liberation struggle who made the sacrifices necessary to build a new nation. Indeed, Cassinga has become part of the founding myth of the Namibian nation. Its officially-designated founding father, President Sam Nujoma, repeatedly reinforced the idea that victims of the national liberation struggle embodied the supreme sacrifice for the nation in public speeches given on Cassinga Day and other occasions. Nujoma's rhetorical flourishes and (error-prone) descriptions of events set the tone by according due deference to those killed by "the Boers" (read 'racist white Afrikaners').⁵⁰ Given that SWAPO exercises extensive control of the media and there are no other groups competing for ownership of the Cassinga story – unlike the detainees' death in detention camps issue – there is not much space to challenge its hegemonic version that prevails in Namibian public discourse.

However, the ruling party still deems it necessary to counter what Nujoma described as the enemy's "disinformation campaign aimed at convincing world public opinion that Cassinga served as PLAN's military headquarters and that the victims were armed combatants."⁵¹ This statement appeared in a foreword to a booklet with a cover portrait that shows Nujoma holding a child, purportedly an orphan and one of the survivors of the massacre. Nujoma does not actually identify 'the enemy' but indicts the racist South African colonial army for its indiscriminate killing of women and children. The body of the text was co-authored by a Namibian journalist and a Swedish political scientist, the latter having served on the UNHCR/WHO delegation that had visited the Cassinga site shortly

⁴⁷ Heywood, *Cassinga Event*: 5.

⁴⁸ SWAPO apparently used the opportunity to discredit Andreas Shipanga, the leader of a breakaway faction, who was regarded as a 'traitor' and was being held in Ukongo prison, Tanzania at the time of the attack on Cassinga. See *In Search of Freedom: The Andreas Shipanga Story as told to Sue Armstrong*, Gibraltar, Ashanti Publishing, 1989: 142 f.

⁴⁹ Heike Becker, "'We Remember Cassinga': Political Ritual, Memory, and Citizenship in Northern Namibia," unpubl. paper, 2008.

⁵⁰ Nujoma interview in "Namibia Special Report," *New African*, 423, Nov. 2003: 8 cited in Henning Melber, "Namibia's Past in the Present: Colonial Genocide and Liberation Struggle in Commemorative Narratives", *South African Historical Journal*, 54, 2005: 91-111 (102).

⁵¹ Foreword to Mvula ya Nangolo & Tor Sellström, *Cassinga: A Story Untold*, Windhoek, Namibia Book Development Council, 2005: vi.

after the attack. The “untold story” of the sub-title presumably refers to the voices of the survivors – the testimonies of sixteen victims of the massacre. Although the booklet’s blurb makes much of the fact that the stories are first-hand accounts of the survivors’ experiences, they give the impression of being well-rehearsed stories that reiterate certain themes such as the brutality of the SADF soldiers who bayoneted and shot wounded refugees at close quarters. Certain of the stories repeat Nujoma’s (unsubstantiated) claim that the SAAF planes emitted poisonous gas or chemical agent prior to the airborne assault. The repetition of such themes in survivors’ stories might suggest a desire to embrace SWAPO’s version of events. On the other hand, their contradictions and inaccuracies might be attributed to their experience of having experienced a traumatic life-threatening situation. Survivors are likely to remember the events of 4 May 1978 differently from perpetrators. Memory is, after all, selective and fashioned by personal and political agendas.

Conclusion: complicating matters

In his introduction to *The Massacre in History*, Mark Levene asked (rhetorically?) whether it is the historian’s role to adjudicate between competing versions of the truth. He also asked whether the historian is capable of cutting through the mythic accretions that attach themselves to massacres and provide a thorough and comprehensive investigation of the event itself.⁵² The public undoubtedly expects as much from historians who they believe are capable of attaining objectivity and establishing ‘the truth’.⁵³ But the general public is neither familiar with the implications of the ‘linguistic turn’ nor the impact of deconstruction on the writing of history. Indeed, many historians are equally uncomfortable with some of the directions suggested by postmodernism. Some critics regard these developments as the death knell of history as the profession has practiced it for more than a century.⁵⁴ I do not subscribe to this opinion. Rather, I think that postmodernism – in its many guises – provides a challenge to the discipline as we know it; a challenge to write a more reflexive history that is aware of the artifice we historians create to give the past a voice and an imagination.⁵⁵ Accordingly, I think that rather than attempt to establish the veracity of historical facts, it is more productive to interrogate competing narratives about past events in order to understand how history is used (and abused). Thus I have attempted to understand how the major stakeholders have sought to commandeer the past for their own political purposes.

⁵² Mark Levene, “Introduction” to Mark Levene & Penny Roberts, (eds.), *The Massacre in History*, New York, Berghahn, 1999: 3.

⁵³ Jeremy Black, *Using History*, London, Hodder Arnold, 2005: 178.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering our Past*, San Francisco, Encounter Books, 1996.

⁵⁵ Konrad H. Jarausch & Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003: ix.

My approach runs the risk of my being regarded as ‘relativistic’ because it avoids taking sides or endorsing the quest for objectivity and truth. It may well be seen by some as a failure of commitment – even the resort of a coward – because a stand is not made.⁵⁶ However, it is not simply a matter of adopting a non-partisan stance. Historians are not arbiters in the court of history who are by virtue of their training and professional status qualify to pass judgments on the actions or conduct of the protagonists in their stories. Their own subjectivities shape their standpoints and the most self-reflective practitioners tend, if anything, to complicate rather than simplify matters. For as Edward Linenthal remarked about the role of historians in the United States of America’s ‘culture wars’ of the 1990s, they frequently “find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being blamed for creating the very problems whose complexities they set out to explore”.⁵⁷ With these caveats, I propose to complicate the issues still further.

Alexander believes that (apartheid) South Africa won the military engagement at Cassinga but lost the propaganda war to the ANC and SWAPO. He laments the way in which the liberation movements have come to exercise a monopoly over the Cassinga story. He holds that:

The victors of the liberation struggle, whose refrain is now the official voice, appear to have triumphed in their version of events. Those who espouse the SADF version are largely seen as discredited adherents of a regime based on lies.⁵⁸

Alexander’s assertion is presumably based on the adage that winners write the history books. In fact, the struggle over who gets to rewrite history is far more complicated.⁵⁹ Most contemporary transitions to democracy do not have clear winners and losers.⁶⁰ In southern Africa the liberation armies emerged as ‘victors’ but this has not necessarily meant that the ‘vanquished’ have been altogether silenced – something attested to by their access to the public sphere and cyberspace. Moreover, the story of Cassinga as related by combat veterans, retired SADF generals or military aficionados still appears in local bookstores. And so long as the SADF story is able to compete with the official Namibian narrative of the war of liberation, the battle *for* Cassinga will continue.

Whilst SWAPO may have successfully prevented Cassinga counter-narratives challenging its hegemony in Namibia, it has been unable to do so outside of the country. For instance, South African paratroopers celebrated the Cassinga raid until 1996 when the

⁵⁶ McGill Alexander to the author, 4 Feb. 2009.

⁵⁷ Edward T. Linenthal & Tom Engelhardt, (eds.), “Introduction” to *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 1996: 5.

⁵⁸ Alexander, “Cassinga Raid”: 5.

⁵⁹ See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, London, Granta, 2004.

⁶⁰ Teresa G. Phelps, *Shattered Voices: Language, Violence and the Work of Truth Commissions*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004: 78.

ANC government put paid to that practice.⁶¹ Although the ANC felt obliged to apologise to the Namibian government for the conduct of its soldiers, the ruling party has not managed to prevent organizations such as LAARSA from celebrating 'Cassinga Day'. Nor does it have quite the same vested interest as SWAPO in establishing a master narrative of the Namibian war of liberation. The solidarity between the (former) liberation movements does not necessarily extend to constructing a shared version of the past. This much is evident from the work of TRC. Overall, the report paid relatively little attention to the apartheid regime's war of destabilization against the frontline states. Nonetheless, it singled out Cassinga as the most controversial cross-border military operation undertaken by the SADF during the period covered by its brief. The report condemned Operation Reindeer as a violation of Angolan territorial integrity launched from illegally-occupied Namibia and a gross violation of human rights. It added that the raid "violated international humanitarian law on other counts, one of which was the failure to take adequate steps to protect the lives of civilians".⁶² It asserted that the SADF took no heed of the doctrine of non-combatant immunity and by its actions on this and other occasions breached its own protocols. However, former generals insist that they observed the rules of engagement despite not officially being at war with SWAPO and that the SADF's code of conduct was strictly enforced in the ranks – notwithstanding the fact that South Africa did not ratify the 1977 amendment to the Geneva Protocol that accorded captured 'freedom fighters' the status of POWs. Although members of the SADF occasionally abused and tortured those described as 'terrorists', there was only a solitary dubious admission of culpability for wrongdoing by a SADF paratrooper at Cassinga.

Cassinga will continue to elicit varied responses as long as participants and survivors are alive and the events remain part of living memory. This much is abundantly clear from the conflicting accounts of Cassinga that have been constructed by the SADF and SWAPO. Whilst the writer of a report headlined "Battle of Cassinga still rages" published on the 29th anniversary might have used an incorrect preposition, there can be no doubt that he was correct to suggest that the events are still mired in controversy.⁶³ The battle *for* Cassinga has been complicated by the intersections and intricacies of the political transitions in South Africa and its neighbouring states (especially in Namibia and Angola). Is this battle likely to have a winner and a loser? If so, will the winner determine the manner in which the event is to be narrated? Will the outcome of this battle shape the rhetoric of the dominant culture? Kali Tel holds that if the dominant culture manages to appropriate the story and can codify it in its own terms, the status quo will remain

⁶¹ *The Star*, 6 June 1996 ("SA to Say Sorry for Celebrating Defence Force Raid").

⁶² *TRC Report*, Vol. 2: 46.

⁶³ *The Star*, 19 May 2007 ("The battle of Cassinga still rages").

http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=vn20070519093038473C345664 (accessed 28 Sept. 2007).

unchanged.⁶⁴ But this begs the question, what is the dominant culture in postcolonial southern Africa? If this were apparent would we be in a better position to determine whether Cassinga will be remembered as a massacre or a military operation?

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⁶⁴ Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996: 7, 18-19.

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