South Africa’s total strategy in the era of Cold War, liberation struggles and the uneven transition to democracy

Review article

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Abstract
The article sets out to review publications that have appeared since the late 1980s dealing with the border war in Namibia, the perceived ‘total onslaught’ against the NP-government of South Africa and its response in the shape of a ‘total strategy’ to combat the forces of revolutionary communism. It is argued that this response was premised on the assumption that African liberation movements were manipulated by the Soviet Union and its Cuban proxies in Southern Africa. The article also focus on publications covering the democratic transition in South Africa and the growing body of reminiscences and assessments of the impact of the border war on former white conscripts. Some of the publications reflect a growing willingness to engage with unpalatable policies and practices of the past, but there is also a tendency, especially among Afrikaners, to apportion blame for what is perceived to have been a botched transition, and a failure to grasp the true nature of colonial exploitation, racism and white supremacy and its continued impact on present-day developments.

1. Introduction
Since 1980 a growing number of books have appeared covering the liberation wars in southern Africa and the response of the South African government to them, as well as the political conduct of the SA government and its security apparatus. Increasingly the veil is being lifted to allow outsiders to see behind the once formidable façade constructed by the National Party (NP) government and inside the secret agencies which started to proliferate during the 1980s and came to constitute entities effectively outside the scope and control of civilian agencies.

The South African government always insisted that they were conducting a war against the ‘total onslaught’ of revolutionary communism, for which a ‘total strategy’ was required. The validity of this claim had hardly ever been analysed, except to criticize the manner in which it was used to subvert the validity of African liberation struggles in the subcontinent. It is therefore considered necessary to review the wars in southern Africa and the SA government’s rationale for conducting a total strategy, by comparing & contrasting it with critical reflections on the United States’ position on the Cold War up to the recent invasion of Iraq. This comparative perspective is useful in attempting to question the validity of SA’s conduct in the region through which wars of liberation and
the Cold War was conflated into one overarching threat. From the books reviewed it is possible to explore these and other related issues, such as the developments preceding the transition to democratic rule in SA and how this process was informed by Cold War rhetoric and an apparent failure to evolve a coherent political strategy premised on universal values and beliefs. Finally, some of these books present highly individualized reflections on the psychological cost of war and the militarization of society as experienced by soldiers.

2. The Cold War & Vietnam and the ‘total onslaught’ in southern Africa

A comparison between the foreign policies of the United States in the post-1950 era and South Africa since 1960 is particularly instructive for the insights it provides into both countries’ responses to what was perceived to have a major challenge posed by the forces of international communism, spearheaded by the Soviet Union. It will be argued that a firm belief in the domino theory, originally applied to South East Asia, appeared to have informed both US and South African responses to perceived threats. Both countries possessed political parties in which strong hawkish elements tended to predominate in matters of foreign policy, to the extent that more liberal parties were always at a disadvantage as far as matters of national security was concerned. The hawks displayed a tendency and a determination to fight rather than negotiate and preferred to engage in unilateralism rather than multilateralism as far as international affairs were concerned. The difference of course, was that in the US electoral politics tended to dilute somewhat the negative consequences of aggressive conservative (Republican) policies, an option effectively precluded in SA by the victory of the Nationalists in 1948.

In a review of two books on the issue of the rightwing turn in US foreign and national security policy, Samantha Power argues persuasively that it began with John Foster Dulles who wrote the Republican’s foreign policy platform in 1952, denouncing the Democrats’ “futile and immoral policy of ‘containment’, which abandons countless human beings to a despotism and godless terrorism”. From then onward Republicans responsible for shaping foreign policy tended to have several core premises in common. One is that no co-existence is possible with evildoers – “rollback is required”. Another is that the US should only participate in “international institutions that are servants of American power; those that constrain American power are enemies of the national interest.”[^1] The most recent and most extreme manifestation of this attitude is of course

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the administration of George W. Bush, which senator Joe Biden, chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee called the “worst in modern history – maybe ever”.2

George Kennan, famous for having coined the concept of containment later expressed remorse in his memoirs for the “militarization of the containment doctrine”, insisting that it “was a distortion of what he intended”.3 Steel, responding to and disagreeing with radical US historians’ embrace of the concept of America’s exceptionalism by depicting her as the “fount of evil”, (contrasting it with the conservative view of “this nation as the embodiment of goodness and justice”), argued that the US “in using its power crudely, immorally, and imperialistically, […] has behaved like many great powers in the past” and did so for “reasons of hegemony, control, and aggrandizement”. Being a non-territorial empire made the US no less imperialistic than its predecessors, only “considerably more hypocritical”.4 Steel acknowledges that ideology, idealism and domestic politics played a part in the decision to go to Vietnam. No president wanted to be known as one who lost a country to communism. There were also people who believed that what they were doing in Southeast Asia was good for US security and for the people living there.

Tony Judt, in an incisive response to former US Secretary of State in the Nixon and Reagan administrations, Henry Kissinger’ defence of his record in dealing with the USSR and the communist threat, argued that to him, Kissinger’s policies reflected “flawed strategic vision”. Kissinger’s complaint that critics fail to see the virtue inherent in his policies caused Judt to quote Raymond Aron who said that a “good policy is measured by its effectiveness, not its virtue”. To Judt “the misfortune of Dr. Kissinger’s illustrious career is not that his policies lacked virtue. The reality is more serious — a good many of his policies were ineffective”.5 For Judt the defect in Kissinger’s conception of the world was that it turned on the US-Soviet conflict and everything else was considered to be of secondary importance. “High-altitude geopolitical calculations can obscure a clear perception of events on the ground. For Dr. Kissinger, his critics’ apparent obsession with victims and human suffering must seem irritating and petty, born of a moralizing cast of mind that doesn’t understand the constraints of decision-making faced by men in power”.6 In similar vein Stanley Hoffman writes that Kissinger’s conception of the world turned on two propositions: the first being that the decisive and dominant issue is the conflict between the US and the USSR, Soviet strategy being incapable of being dealt with by notions of “sentimental conciliation”. The second is to constantly “foreclose Soviet opportunities”. According to Hoffman, for Kissinger the containment doctrine was

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2 Ibid.: 4.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
unrealistic because of its suggestion that creating situations of strength would ultimately lead to harmony. From this he concludes that for Kissinger “balance of power and American hegemony became synonymous”.7

Shortly after the end of the Vietnam War, the New York Review of Books elicited responses from a number of prominent personalities to provide personal perspectives on the lessons, if any, that could be learned from this undertaking. Not only did they almost unanimously condemn the war as unnecessary and unjustified in the first place, all were deeply concerned that the US administration appeared not to have drawn the appropriate conclusions from the war. Instead of recognizing it as a belated attempt at imperial overreach and failing to recognize the nationalistic element in anti-imperial campaigns of those who appeared to carry the flag of revolutionary communism, US leaders believed that a more effective application of power was what was called for in the war against international communism.

Historian Geoffrey Barraclough’s assessment of the US response to Vietnam seems to eerily anticipate the recent US ‘war on terror’ and the attack on Iraq. According to him the liquidation of the Vietnam adventure provided an opportunity for reappraisal of the United States’ role in the world, but there was little evidence at the time that the opportunity had been taken:

“If the object is still, in Kissinger’s words, ‘to re-establish American leadership’ in the world, the lesson of Vietnam has not been learned; for the one thing that is certain is that the world repudiates American leadership – or that of any other country, including Soviet Russia. No one threatens a United States which looks after its own concerns; but a United States which throws its weight around and tries to make the world an ‘American world’ is in for trouble, as Vietnam should have shown.”8

Gary Wills provided a hard-hitting analysis of the characteristic American tendency, which caused much anxiety and introspection after the events of 11 September 2001, to view its role in the world in essentially benign terms. With regard to Vietnam, he argues, the US’s problem was that:

America has never been ‘isolationist’. It has been solipsistic. The world only mattered as a projection of ourselves, our novus ordo sacerdorom. Vietnam should have been, but wasn’t, a reality breaking in. It became our own surreality breaking out. Our success or failure; idealism or greed, philanthropy or cruelty; our spiritual health or sickness. How the rest of the world must tire of America’s rapt self-accusations and exonerations. We shall not understand Vietnam till we stop seeing it as anything particularly American. It was one rather small (but unnaturally inflated) episode in a large historical process. We splashed our way into the quickening ebb of the long colonial tide. France lost Indochina as it lost Algeria, or as England lost India – and France knew

Indochina better than we did, had settled it longer, and fought for it more skillfully. Even now we talk of how things went wrong, how we did things wrong at this or that stage. None of that matters. The only wrong thing was being there.9

Mary McCarthy elaborates by pointing to Americans’ sense of “national superiority and the belief that others should be grateful for its democratic gifts, characteristics ingrained in the national character. The idea that some nations would not want our things . . . is inconceivable to most Americans”, she argues. Susan Sontag was dismayed that most Americans (the ‘Sullen Majority’) turned against the war for what she considered to be the wrong reasons – because it was “interminable”, or “wasteful”, or “bungled”.10

These observations resonate with even greater urgency at present than at the time that they were expressed by the various observers. Brian Urquhart reflects on how in 1945 the United States,

then incomparably the richest and most powerful country in the world, chose, with the admiring support of most other nations, to try to exercise its power and influence through a new international system that was largely its own creation. That experiment, the United Nations, was soon paralyzed by the Cold War and has never regained the wholehearted American support that it enjoyed in its early years. Nearly sixty years later, the exceptionalist policy of the George W. Bush administration is the antithesis of the United States’ 1945 concept of how to use its overwhelming power.11

He quotes Prestowitz who argued that the “imperial project of the so-called neo-conservatives […] is not conservatism at all but radicalism, egotism, and adventurism articulated in the stirring rhetoric of traditional patriotism.”12 The conduct of the National Party government of South Africa in a regional context since the 1960s, it can be argued, was in important respects a reflection of this tendency. Though generally eager to enlist the support of the United States, and to a lesser extent Britain, for its self-proclaimed role as guardian of Western interests in the subcontinent, it often responded with displays of arrogant self-righteousness and anger if the Western world failed to fully endorse its frequently clumsy attempts to deal with the challenges facing it, from the perceived communist onslaught to those posed by waves of liberation movements. European nations, increasingly aware that a changing international constellation of diplomatic forces was emerging, grew noticeably reluctant to embrace white minority governments that were clearly insensitive to the tide of anti-colonial revolt and freedom from white domination. To NP governments though, such an attitude signalled a lack of will-power, a growing loss of religious faith and a creeping tolerance of displays of immorality, all reflected in what was then perceived to have been a general trend towards liberalism in public and private conduct.

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid. Prestowitz’s book, from which the quote comes, is entitled Rogue nation: American unilateralism and the failure of good intentions.
Since the 1960s South Africa transformed itself into a regional superpower in response to the challenges presented by national liberation movements and the forces of international communism. In this regard the NP government arrogated to itself the right to serve as both policeman and judge in managing the conduct of southern African countries that often effectively became pawns in a bigger Cold War chess game. In the process a carrot-and-stick approach was embarked upon to ensure that states in the region conform to Pretoria’s dictates as far as support for liberation movements were concerned. In 1974, pressed to respond to the changing dynamics in the regional balance of power after the Portuguese regime collapsed, Prime Minister John Vorster dramatically announced that he should be given six months “to strive for peace, cooperation, progress and development in Southern Africa”.

The expectation that such a window of opportunity should be granted, was of course premised on the assumption that African countries could be seduced by promises of material assistance to the exclusion of support for liberation movements. The paternalism inherent in what was believed to be a magnanimous gesture is evident from Vorster’s observation that his government subscribed to a

basically religious belief that the White people have been placed at the southernmost tip of Africa for purposes transcending their own existence […] South Africans tend to believe Black Africa desperately needs them, and the Western world needs them in Africa in many ways.

While Vorster was arguably a less committed Cold Warrior, his successor P. W. Botha single-mindedly embraced the notion that what was at stake in southern Africa was a threat posed by the forces of revolutionary communism that served as the controlling force behind black liberation movements. Former president F. W. de Klerk argues that Vorster favoured a less forceful role in conflicts in southern Africa. P. W. Botha though, pushed for more heavy involvement in Angola “to protect Namibia from further Swapo attacks and to support Unita”.

Though some of Vorster’s confidants spoke out in support of him at a cabinet meeting at the time, the majority were behind Botha. On becoming ensconced in power, the latter immediately set the tone for his foreign policy by stating that SA would be willing to negotiate about Namibia’s transition to independence, but defiantly declared that “if we are expected to hand over Southwest to the Marxists under their threat to take over the country through violence, then we say there is nothing to discuss”. Botha, lacking the intellectual depth and political sophistication to shape SA’s transition from white domination to majority rule, instead took the country to the brink of disaster while clinging to delusions of grandeur and infallibility. In the mid-1980s he smilingly responded to opposition leader Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert’s exhortation to free Nelson Mandela by telling him that the majority of

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14 Rensburg, Leaders: 383.
black people in fact support him! (Botha).\textsuperscript{17} De Klerk relates the story of his meeting with P. W. Botha in 1994 to convince him to assist the NP in formulating a response to the envisaged Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Botha’s reaction was to accuse de Klerk of not having supported the security forces. He then accused de Klerk of having allowed himself to be inducted as a member of the New World Order by the former President George Bush (snr.).\textsuperscript{18} To view Botha as an unfortunate aberration that proved to be the obstacle in the hesitant moves towards political and economic reform is to miss the point, however. As the challenge by opponents of white minority rule escalated from the 1970s onward, white South Africans tended to rally in growing numbers behind the NP, at least during election times. Although the election of Botha and his rapid integration of the SADF into a key role in government decision making was viewed with some apprehension by the Police and Intelligence Services, all the security branches would feature increasingly prominently in the era of total strategy. The combined threat of a perceived communist onslaught allied to national liberation movements appeared to have been sufficient to convince most whites that the defence of their material interests and way of life should be entrusted to an increasingly assertive NP under strongman P. W. Botha. Under him the NP came to symbolize a resolve to stand firm in the face of external threats, in the same way that the US Republican Party since the Vietnam War “has developed a reputation for having a superior approach to national security”, the one matter over which they have maintained “issue ownership”.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1990 Albert Grundling wrote an important article in which he discussed the question of war and unrest as reflected in writings about South Africa’s recent history.\textsuperscript{20} His conclusion was that with the exception of two studies, most of the others he reviewed lacked an analysis of the interaction of military campaigns, events and developments in broader society and the diplomatic front. Since then a number of publications have appeared that conform to earlier trends he identified, such as assumptions about SA’s military success in its border wars, the unquestioning acceptance of the right to intervene militarily in neighbouring countries and that the war against Swapo achieved its stated political objectives. In quoting a British military historian, A. R. Bridley who argued that “an extraordinary abdication of judgement by the military historian” often occurs causing them to fail to consider at what price military success was achieved, Grundling delivered a verdict on many accounts of the war which are guilty of this shortcoming.\textsuperscript{21} Books and articles by military historians or people associated with the former South African Defence Forces, published subsequent to his assessment, display

\textsuperscript{17} Jan Heunis, Die binnekring. Terugblikke op die laaste dae van blanke regering, Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2007: 71.
\textsuperscript{18} Klerk, Trek : 374.
\textsuperscript{19} Power, “Democrats”: 1.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.: 167
the same shortcomings. No single study in Afrikaans has yet engaged with the effects of war on South African society to the extent that the publication *War and Society* bravely attempted to do in 1989.22

3. The rationale for a ‘total strategy’ to combat ‘revolutionary communism’ in southern Africa

J. M. Cameron mentions that apologists of the Pentagon often contended that the Vietnam War was fought with restraint. Of course, it was, he argues, if the reasoning for it is that when a superpower does not use nuclear bombs or if it doesn’t use conventional weapons to bring about the total destruction of civilian lives and property, it is said to be exercising restraint. The corruption of the mind and heart represented by such an argument is the worst consequence of the war for the United States. War is a moral question and the lesson of history is that governments can’t be trusted to think of it in such terms, according to Cameron.23 This is a particularly apt observation that leaps to mind when reflecting on the justifications offered for the total strategy devised by South Africa to combat what was believed to a world communist conspiracy aimed at Southern Africa. According to Moorcraft the “international conspiracy implied that black nationalist guerillas and politicians were not freedom-fighters, but criminal tools of foreign agents”.24 This line of thinking inevitably meant that the prescribed ratio of a 80% political and 20% military component of the total strategy could never be successful and as a consequence the military stakes were raised ever higher as political measures proved to be inadequate.25 Former Information Minister in John Vorster’s cabinet, Connie Mulder once stated that when survival is at stake, the rules of the game do not apply.26 Not only did the NP government succeed in manipulating the consent of the dominant majority of whites in support of its total strategy, enormous efforts were expended to convince white South Africans of the validity of this assessment.

The manner in which the NP government by the late 1960s approached and responded to challenges to its authority by national liberation movements, is captured well in Graham Greene’s observations in *The Quiet American* where he refers to the US tendency to consider themselves to be a third force outside the confines of history. “We

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23 Barraclough et al., “Meaning”.


25 Ibid.

26 Quoted in Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, *Afrikaner Afrikaan*, Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1999: 72. Mulder resigned after admitting that government funds were used to fund a newspaper, the Citizen, to support the fight against international opposition to apartheid. Ironically, P. W. Botha who took over as prime minister when the political fall-out from the scandal claimed Vorster too, eventually presided over a vast increase in illegal, extra-parliamentary actions.
would pay no attention to the ‘old colonialists’, whose sins could not infect us. We would be the Good Guys, and everyone would know it – except the Bad Guys, who must be communists. We would shout at the anti-colonial wave, ‘Stop!’ 27 The SA government responded to the wave of anti-colonialism in southern Africa in similar fashion. Although many whites have harboured anti-communist beliefs since the 1950s, it was really only since the late 1960s that the challenge posed by African liberation movements was integrated in seamless fashion with the discourse on the perceived aims of revolutionary communist schemes for world domination. It tended to have the effect of precluding the contemplation of more flexible and pragmatic alternative policies and scenarios for the challenges facing the white minority. Because whites were unable to contemplate the future, they were more likely to uncritically accept government propaganda.28 So much effort had been invested in convincing supporters and opponents alike of the reality of the international communist threat in southern Africa that the evolution of a realistic, coherent strategy, premised on a liberal socio-political philosophy, was not seriously contemplated. It should therefore come as no surprise that the collapse of the communist threat left the proponents of white supremacy ill-prepared to face the justice-based challenge of liberation movements. This will be dealt with in more detail in the next section.

To understand the rationale for conducting a counter-revolutionary war against revolutionary communism in southern Africa, former Defense Minister Magnus Malan’s views are instructive. Next to P. W. Botha arguably the single person most closely associated with the total strategy, Malan’s reflections reveal the hard-core Cold Warrior beliefs informed by text-book definitions of communist insurgency. Thus what was at stake was “the external threat of the Marxist communist imperialism led by the Soviet Union, its allies and surrogates in their pursuit of world domination”.29 That the USA’s record in Vietnam, Latin America and the Caribbean has increasingly been interpreted as reminiscent of perceived Soviet attempts at world hegemony and that the US on occasions also employed terrorist tactics, is simply ignored. Malan approvingly quotes a definition by Kittrie, according to which “a liberation movement which does not use internationally accepted methods to achieve legitimate political ends, is guilty of terrorism, and therefore of a crime.”30 To Malan, when Swapo leader Sam Nujoma “gave orders for strikes, sabotage and revolution” his party became a revolutionary force and this brought “greater clarity to the communist plan to conquer Southern Africa”.31 In Nujoma’s autobiography, which Malan does not mention, though it appeared five years

28 Moorcraft, Nemesis : 443. He also quotes Dennis Becket’s observation that whites tended to “think with their blood and reject the future as unthinkable.”
30 Ibid.: 343.
31 Malan, Life : 72, quoted after Villiers, Villiers, PW : 234.
earlier, Nujoma made clear that Swapo turned to military struggle when peaceful overtures were rejected and he stressed that the military component comprised only one, albeit crucial, element of a three-pronged strategy, the others being political and diplomatic. Malan’s failure to retrospectively reflect on and qualify the validity of epithets ascribed to Swapo and the ANC such as terrorist, communist organizations with revolutionary objectives, more than anything else illuminates the inflexibility with which the NP government responded to internal and external challenges. It also helps to clarify policy positions according to which the counter-revolutionary strategy was conducted with utmost conviction, while the reform element considered to be an integral part of the textbook definition of counter-revolutionary warfare, was carried out half-heartedly, lacking conviction and increasingly subject to co-option by more extreme military measures.

It is therefore no surprise that the books and articles under review here, by military historians as well as a former SADF chief and Minister of Defense, respectively, are virtually unanimously agreed in regarding the battle against revolutionary communism as having been the correct choice. Even the self-styled co-architect of the new dispensation in South Africa, F. W. de Klerk, reasoned that the total strategy “arose from military analyses of the fundamental changes that had taken place since the end of the Second World War. A new form of revolutionary warfare had evolved in which […] revolutionary forces sought to overthrow incumbent governments by mobilizing the masses.” There is also broad agreement about the success of the counter-insurgency campaign applied against Swapo in Namibia, but, to an extent, differences of opinion about the strategic conduct of the war and about the eventual political outcome reached. With regard to the conflict in SA there appears to be much more disagreement about the way in which the political dimension of the total strategy was conceptualized and executed and even more disagreement about the eventual political outcome. Moorcraft argued that the total strategy in SA proved to be spectacularly unsuccessful if measured against the stated objective of using a relatively low level of military force to facilitate finding a political solution. The opposite occurred as the dominant role played by the SA State Security Council failed to “solve the intractable domestic political grievances; they became worse”.

A comparison with the earlier situation in Rhodesia reveals that over there the situation was reversed with military leaders eventually taking the lead in securing a transition towards a political settlement. While the most militant Rhodesian Front leaders “still called for all-out war and military victory […] the Rhodesian military […] ensured that the primacy of the political process prevailed.” Frankel’s observation which came at the time that SA’s domestic situation threatened to escalate out of control, is, judged in

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34 Moorcraft, *Nemesis*: 47.
retrospect, revealing and even more apposite in this regard than it appeared at the time:

Total strategy at its present level of development is no exception to the general rule that most proto-ideologies developed by soldiers are primitive, transparently self-rationalizing and largely devoid of any practical positive content. Total strategy is important in generating and justifying siege psychologies and structures through which the Defence Force can accumulate social power.36

Defence Force officials clearly do not agree that the total strategy was a failure. Both Malan and former SADF head Jannie Geldenhuys have stressed that as militarists they always functioned in a subsidiary capacity. According to Malan the Defence Force’s primary task was to serve the government and the SADF “managed to create for all parties a climate which promoted political negotiations”.37 Geldenhuys stressed that things would have gone much worse in SA if the SADF hadn’t “maintained the barriers”, but he has no doubt that SA would not have been able to resume its place in the international community of states, war or no war, if its internal policy remained as it was.38 If the total strategy was a failure, it was according to them not the fault of the military. They have a case, up to a point. Alden points to the fact that “domestically, the introduction of the full state of emergency in the mid-1980s had effectively crippled the anti-apartheid movement within a few short months after its introduction”.39 Political progress did not however, proceed apace.

In 1989 an attempt was made to analyse the extent to which South African society had been militarized. The publication by Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan entitled War and Society, also shed light on the reasons why the total strategy was decisively adjusted towards counter-revolutionary warfare by 1986. Total strategy

left many fundamentals of apartheid (such as bantustans, influx control and the constitutional exclusion of Africans from central government), but it did introduce significant modifications to some basic institutions of political society [. . .] the city, factory and government.40

By 1986 the state was faced with growing resistance and instead of more comprehensive reform opted for the counter-revolutionary strategy. According to Swilling and Philips the repressive or “hard war” measures included “press restrictions, mass detentions, vigilante and death squad activities, forced removals, banning or restricting organizations and activists, rent boycott evictions and security force

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37 Malan, Life: 362.
harassment”. Accompanying these was the “welfare” component which derived from the conviction that black people would be content if their social and economic conditions were improved. If revolutionaries were annihilated they would be unable to capitalize on popular discontent. The underlying logic of the new approach was that “where once there could be no security without reform, now there can be no reform without security”. When asked whether the state of emergency was aimed at destroying the idea that a “black government is a possibility”, National MP Stoffel van der Merwe was reported to have replied with an emphatic ‘yes’. Until late in 1989 the government’s reform initiatives continued to be unimaginative and lacking conceptual coherence and direction.

Support for this assertion is to be found, amongst other issues, in the images and symbols used to convey state responses to resistance. Deborah Posel argues that old racist notions continued to hold sway even though attempts were made to depict the struggle in ideological, rather than racial terms. Black people were considered to act in group contexts only and lacked an individual capacity for logical reflection. “The symbols of the crowd, stone-throwing and fire strongly connoted disorder, destruction, unbridled energy, and the absence of reason or intelligent purpose”. Blacks are herd animals and only act when incited by “agitators”. In contrast, whites, even the AWB are considered to be rational, though they were aberrant, capable of better behaviour. Black people were consequently not capable of conducting a legitimate, orderly struggle for liberation; they could by implication only operate when led by whites.

Lacking the ability to appreciate and empathise with the aims of Africans fighting for liberation, it is also no surprise that NP governments tended to accept the Soviet Union’s purported threat to the western world in general, and southern Africa in particular, at face value. There was little to suggest that NP leaders were aware of how communist parties in western Europe started to distance themselves from Stalinist discourses and policies after 1960, the internal contradictions displayed by the communist system and how by the 1970s the ideological convictions of the ageing Soviet leadership had been eroded to the extent that they clung to power to avoid having to summon the reserves to restructure the ailing system. As Tony Judt in his masterful survey of the history of Europe after 1945 succinctly put it, leaders like Brezhnev had “every intention of dying in their beds”. The way the NP government responded to the Cold War displayed a mentality and a tendency for ham-fisted

41 Ibid.: 145.
42 Ibid.: 145, 143. The quote is from Prof. W. Breytenbach of Stellenbosch University.
43 Ibid.: 147.
45 Tony Judt, Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945, London, Pimlico, 2007: 583. See also his discussion of the how communism began decaying at the peripheries, until it was pushed to collapse from the centre, chapter 9, “The demise of the old order”.

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approaches to problems, reminiscent of the more reactionary elements in the United States for whom the Cold War and a Soviet threat to ‘our way of life’ constituted an article of faith.

The war in Angola and Namibia

As mentioned, military historians and former defence forces chief Jannie Geldenhuys and defence minister Magnus Malan fully endorse the decision to resist the threat of communist expansion by military means. They also subscribe to the prevalent view of the SADF as an effective and disciplined fighting machine, but differ to an extent about military strategy and the political outcomes following the termination of the war. Revealingly though, there is no mention of the justification for conducting a total war, especially its covert dimensions, let alone an expression of opinion about the abuses that accompanied it, issues dealt with in detail by Potgieter, du Preez and Labuschagne. Former SADF Chief General J. Geldenhuys is of the opinion that rather than being a futile endeavour, the war in Namibia and Angola ensured that “South West, Angola and South Africa had the best chance of the past ten years for a constitutional transition to democracy”.46 Swapo wanted to take over SWA through military means, something which they themselves often stated, according to Geldenhuys and the chances were good that they would have established a “one-party Marxist government”.47 The widely respected former SADF chief is still as convinced of the validity of this position in 2008 as he was in 1993 when he penned the abovementioned views. Participating in a discussion on the war in Namibia he stated that the war “prevented us from being much worse off today”. The (former) Soviet Union wanted to render the (former) Southwest (Africa) a little Cuba, he argued.48. He also disparaged the notion of the much-publicised ‘defeat’ inflicted upon the SADF at Cuito Canavale by Cuban forces. There now appears to be a growing consensus that it was a victory for the SADF, or at least a battle which both SA and Cuban/MPLA forces fought to a stale-mate and for political-diplomatic reasons chose not to pursue any further.49

Geldenhuys’ refusal to adopt a state of retrospective enlightenment about the wisdom of waging war against opponents who were first and foremost nationalists, reflect the deep-seated and fundamentalist attitudes held by him and a generation of Afrikaners. As elaborated in section five, a younger generation of Afrikaners tend to be either ignorant about these issues or to display profound misgivings about it. Given his views about the

46 Geldenhuys, Feite : 247.
48 Beeld, 14 July 2007. “Bosoorlog was noodsaalik en die Boeroorlog was veel erger.”
49 Geldenhuys is unapologetically asserting a SADF victory – SA forces did not try to move beyond Cuito, because it achieved its objective to secure Unita’s position in S.E. Angola and prevent MPLA/Cuban advances in the area. In Border War, one author argues that the SADF was well-positioned to inflict a severe defeat on its opposition, but a tactical blunder (taking on Cuban/MPLA forces front-on, rather than execute a circling manoeuvre and cut off supply lines), led to a disastrous stalemate.
war, it is perhaps not surprising that Geldenhuys is appreciative of the political leadership of the time. For him John Vorster, P.W. Botha, Dirk Mudge and Ronald Reagan were the heroes, because they refused to consent to the implementation of the UN-sponsored plan for Namibia’s independence before the issue of Cuban troops in Angola was satisfactorily resolved. His view appears to be that the linkage issue, rather than obstructing the development of Namibia towards independence, ensured that Swapo would be stripped of its Marxist and authoritarian aspects. There is certainly room for debate about whether Swapo would have been inclined to establish a populist, quasi-Socialist form of government if it had managed to gain power in the 1970s. The weakness of the Cold Warrior civilian and security elite discourse, however, is that it fails to subject such assertions to incisive analysis. Grundling rightly questions Steenkamp’s argument that the establishment of a politically neutral Swapo government can be considered as a “minimum political objective” by South Africa, ignoring that the original aim rather appeared to have been the elimination of Swapo as a political factor.50

A further example of similar analytically deficient accounts of the war, is Turner’s assessment of the SA counter-insurgency campaign against Swapo as being the only case of a “clear-cut victory by security forces [...] against a communist-backed insurgency”. Turner reasons that there is no doubt that “from 1984 on, the security situation in Namibia was clearly resolved in favour of the security forces, including both military and civilian authorities”.51 He further elaborates on the successes of SA’s policy towards Swapo by pointing out that by the late 1980s Swapo had to face its own lack of success as an insurgent organization, declining support from East Block countries and a realization amongst its allies and Swapo supporters that the armed struggle “was not only useless but also irrelevant in the light of the new developments in Africa and the world”.52 He is convinced that US diplomacy, which emphasized linkage between Namibian independence and Cuban troop withdrawal, effectively forced SWAPO into “a framework for independence that gave it little leeway but to comply; attempts to disregard this framework and try to disregard the process, as in April 1989, met with disaster.” Swapo has since then “managed to steer a course midway between its former benefactor, Luanda, and its former overlord, Pretoria.”53 In these and other respects already touched upon, Turner and other military historians tend to judge the war in Namibia largely in terms of the extent to which it conformed to text-book definitions of counter-insurgency warfare and to formulate an assessment of the conflict in narrowly technical terms, by stressing military successes and deflection of Swapo from achieving its presumed revolutionary objectives. Turner, like Malan, Geldenhuys and the military

50 Grundling “Oorlog”: 162. Steenkamp’s book, Suid-Afrika se grensoorlog, 1966-1989, apart from dealing with the military dimension, provides political justifications for the war, which, however, according to Grundlingh suffers from a lack of analysis and balance. (ibid.: 161).
52 Ibid.: 32.
53 Ibid.: 54f.
historians covered for this review, assumes that the main objective of organizations like Swapo and the ANC was to achieve liberation through violent means and establish Marxist dictatorships, disregarding the long diplomatic and political struggle to achieve this objective.

A number of other military historians, mostly from South Africa, appear to harbour certain misgivings about the war in Namibia. Leopold Scholtz is evidently disillusioned by the political turn of events and refers to Swapo as “a broken force saved by political developments”.54 He also questioned the strategy in the war against Swapo, for example evidenced by the failure to decisively defeat the Cuban/MPLA forces at Cuito Canavale. The preference for a counter-insurgency approach to the war in Namibia, rather than to conduct a conventional war, resulted in the failure to exploit initial military successes. For Scholtz, more comprehensive military victories should have been the objective, instead of scoring localized tactical victories or deterring insurgents which did not ultimately alter the overall security situation.55 As mentioned Geldenhuys argued that the aim at Cuito was to stop the advancing enemy forces, inflict debilitating damages on them and secure Unita’s position in their heartland. He also mentions that he was instructed by P. W. Botha to avoid getting bogged down in a Namibian equivalent of Vietnam. Without elaborating about what the perceived benefits of a more forceful military strategy in Angola might have been, Scholtz’s observations hint at frustration that the rather disappointing political outcome of the war was incommensurate with the military success achieved. Grundlingh detected in Reitman’s work a similar sense of disappointment about SA’s failure to risk more lives to achieve a bigger military advantage.56

Total strategy and the counter revolution

It is when one turns to developments in South Africa that more glaring discrepancies in the evaluation of the conflict against the ANC and other government opponents become obvious in the studies reviewed here. The recent special issue of the Journal for Contemporary History about the Border War set out with the ambitious task to “provide a few insights into a topic that was regarded as taboo for many decades.”57 Yet perusal of the various articles at best reveal some disenchantment with the political dimension of the struggle, but for the rest, appreciation and a consistently complimentary perspective on the achievements of the SADF and the justness of the struggle they undertook, is the

55 Ibid.: 118-130.
56 Grundlingh, “Oorlog” : 159. He also mentions that Reitman assumed that SA’s military dominance made a political agreement possible, a conclusion not premised on an analysis of the political dimensions of the war. (Helmoed-Römer Heitman, War in Angola: the final South African phase, Gibraltar, Ashanti, 1990).
57 Barnard, Border War : Preface.
organizing principle underpinning the various articles. What is considered taboo would appear to be an entirely different matter from what neutral observers could have been expecting to confront.

One criticism directed against the military is their role in support of the civilian power when it was deployed in townships in South Africa in the mid-1980s, a step military analyst Willem Steenkamp calls “extremely ill-advised”.58 Resident military historian C. Jacobs argues for example that as far as the conflict in SA itself is concerned, it was a case of the government being victorious in the military struggle, but suffering defeat in the political and economic struggles. To him SA did not use the room gained in the period 1960 – 1975 to construct a constitutional system that would have been supported by the majority of people in the country.59 Such a dispensation, by implication, should have excluded the ANC and PAC, suggesting a kind of internal solution similar to the one in Namibia that failed lamentably to achieve its original objective, namely to emasculate Swapo politically. Some of these views, especially from academics inside or outside the former military establishment, or with ties to it, suggest a preference for a political solution that would have significantly limited the ANC to the point that its ability to govern would have been subjected to severe constraints.

Most of the pro-military accounts ignore the nationalist dimension of the ANC’s and Swapo’s struggles, or like Malan, argue that it was overtaken by revolutionary objectives, in the 1950s in the case of the ANC and in the 1960s with Swapo. In 1980 P. W. Botha, exasperated about the constant squabbling among whites in Namibia and their failure to engage in a unified front against Swapo, a highly unrealistic prospect given the fundamental disagreements among them, thundered: “go ahead and continue with your squabbles. The day when you fall into the hands of the communists you would have no time for squabbles — by then you would be slaves”.60 A realization of the historical role of racism, colonialism and apartheid as causative factors in the struggle against white domination, appears to be implicitly absent. Several observers have suggested that the obsession with a total onslaught, whatever its empirical validity, was immensely useful in deflecting considerations about the justness of African liberation struggles. This view tends to ignore the fervour with which the secular crusade against a perceived revolutionary communist onslaught was undertaken. In the end though, it may have been a distorted priority. Van Zyl Slabbert perceptively noted that “nothing provided the struggle with more impetus than the SA government’s twin strategy of brutal suppression and external military aggression.”61

The failure by books poised at a more or less pro-war and security angle to discuss and account for the fact that that the total strategy spiralled into gross human rights abuses

60 Quoted in Villiers, Villiers, PW: 352.
61 Zyl Slabbert, Afrikaner: 75.
is rendered more questionable when one considers the growing body of publications depicting gross human rights violations that were perpetrated by elements of both the SADF and SAP. The books by Potgieter (Totale Aanslag) and Labuschagne (On South Africa’s Secret Service) present a unique inside view of the shadowy world of covert operations and the people involved in them. The former book is especially valuable for the wide array of documents that he (a former journalist) managed to obtain about the covert counter-information, counterinsurgency and elimination operations undertaken by elements of Military Intelligence, the Security Police and National Intelligence. The question that is implicitly raised by the author is how the political and military leadership can still deny responsibility for gross abuses when considering the pervasive, all-embracing nature of strategic and tactical planning and conduct of operations revealed in documents and accounts published in the book.

This issue becomes more pertinent if the two books mentioned above are considered together with the excellent analysis of the militarization of South Africa by Cock and Nathan that appeared in 1989. It also renders the account by former defense minister Magnus Malan that appeared in 2006 exceptionally bland, even disingenuous in his single-minded insistence that the SADF conducted its wars in the best traditions of military warfare and that human rights abuses were committed by unauthorized individuals. He also maintains a stubborn ignorance with respect to accusations relating to chemical warfare tests, campaigns to eliminate opponents and often unregulated violence against the civilian population in townships. Malan for example, fails to respond in his book to Jacques Pauw’s exposure of the death squads and doesn’t mention the evidence provided by Vrye Weekblad and in Max du Preez’s book (Pale Native, memories of a renegade reporter) about General Lothar Neethling’s experiments with “different kinds of knock-out drops and poison for the use of security policemen to kill activists”.62 Potgieter provides accounts of several covert operations, spanning financial fraud, assassinations and disinformation campaigns. It also contains an account of a mid-level security officer who secretly obtained a copy of a bulky document from his superior officer’s office in which the whole total strategy was laid out in detail, providing information about how and which enemies should be targeted.63

The book by Labuschagne is fascinating as it involves the life story of an undercover intelligence service agent. Apart from confirming a wide variety of activities directed against the enemy (particularly the ANC & USSR), he also confirms how often assassination attempts were undertaken against real, or imagined enemies. Operatives like him, though, were continuously reminded of the fact that when caught in activities that would embarrass the SA government or intelligence and security services, they

63 See De Wet Potgieter, Totale Aanslag, Apartheid se vuil truus onthul, Kaapstad, Zebra Press, 2007: 65-84. The book deals inter alia with a disinformation campaign against the ANC, the Salem oil scandal, the assassination of academic David Webster, the cabinet meeting at which P. W. Botha was ousted as president, the Olaf Palme assassination and F.W de Klerk’s dismissal of a number of relative junior intelligence officials in an attempt to break the back of the so-called Third Force.
would be on their own. Though not really surprising, in the light of TRC hearings, admissions by former perpetrators of gross human rights violations and books about the death squads, it is nevertheless instructive to learn of the often immoral world inhabited by those involved in the shadowy world of espionage, counter-intelligence and misinformation. Labuschagne related how suspicion tended to erode even personal friendships. They were all involved in the “trade’s twisted morality of manipulation, deceit, opportunism and self-righteousness”. 64 Both authors also provide indications of how readily available money proved to be for secret operations and how sex and alcohol featured prominently as facilitating agents. All these revelations tend to co-exist very uneasily with the then NP government’s professed defence of a moral order against the immoral forces of internal communism.

White South Africans tended to be shocked when first being confronted by revelations of the extent of security force involvement in and perpetration of gross human rights violations. Although newspapers like the Weekly Mail and Vrye Weekblad and books by investigative reporter Jaques Pauw did lift the veil on aspects of the covert actions by the notorious Civil Cooperation Bureau in particular, it is the appearance of a spate of books by insiders or people with access to insiders or secret documents, that allows one to grasp something of the astonishing breadth of extra-legal covert actions sanctioned against opponents of the regime. 65 Both Potgieter and Labuschagne’s books clearly indicate how security operatives were often spurred on to ever more extreme and illegal actions, including political assassinations, because of the heat that international opposition generated for political and military leaders which in turn led to growing pressure on subordinates. The assassinations of academic David Webster and Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme are good examples in this respect.

In a sense the growing body of literature with the border war as theme, from novels to autobiographical accounts of life as national servicemen to anecdotal accounts of events in the military, suggests that those who endorse the rationale for the wars in southern Africa and tend to conceive of it in generally positive terms, are to an extent wittingly or unwittingly out of touch with the experiences of many individuals. Section five will reflect on this in more detail. At the same recent occasion that former SADF chief J. Geldenhuys defended the war in Angola and Namibia, two former soldiers hinted at this alternative perspective: one mentioned that he was indoctrinated as a child to view the world as comprising two parts — the evil East which “burns bibles” and the “good West, who was on our side”. 66 According to him a large group of veterans still experience trauma about what happened in Angola. Another war veteran confessed that he still battles to make sense of his role in the war: “I have fired at people and was fired upon. I have lost

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66 Beeld, 14 July 2007, “Bosoorlog was noodsaaklik en die Boereoorlog was veel erger.”
More and more critical accounts of the recent past can be expected to challenge beliefs once widely held, according to which the total strategy was conducted within the bounds of established laws and that a time-honoured military ethos pervaded planning and execution of operations and activities. At one stage in his book Malan notes with exasperation that despite the fact that the Defence Force created a climate to promote political negotiations and that it peacefully surrendered military power and supported the installation of the new government, “it was rewarded with denigration and persecution”.  

What is ultimately missing from justificatory accounts in support of the role of the SA Defence Force is the inability to view the events and developments from the period of the total onslaught as integrally linked to the history of colonialism, racism and capitalist exploitation in southern Africa. The moral high ground that is being claimed also displays a notorious disregard for the immense psychological cost of not only these historical forces, but the measures adopted by the government and military to conduct their total war. The publication War and Society, an account of the overall impact of the militarization of SA society on its inhabitants, which appeared at the height of the internal conflict, brings home this point in stark fashion. This is evident from analyses grounded in, for example, the role of military (and civilian) censorship designed to imbue a sense of moral amnesia, the manipulation of the minds of youths which resulted in a heightened degree of intolerance designed to exacerbate the existing divisions in society, the promotion of an official cult of secrecy (which Malan defends and justifies at length) that facilitated a culture of contempt for life, human values and the maintenance of a rules-based society, assisting the defence of an unjust system and imposing upon a generation of young white men immoral obligations, the impact of which are only slowly being assessed. (see section 5 also).

A final aspect concerning the conduct of a total strategy is that it may inadvertently have contributed towards solidifying rightwing resistance to reform. As the books by Alden, Cock and Nathan and Moorcraft make implicitly clear, a significant degree of political sophistication is required to reconcile two essentially opposing discourses: one of comprehensive mobilization to resist the threat of revolutionary communism and the other the need for reform to ensure a peaceful resolution of the problems associated with white domination. This is evident in growing rightwing resistance to reform since the 1970s. In the 1980s the Conservative Party mobilized supporters to eschew participation in SADF civilian initiatives such as the cadet programmes at schools and youth preparedness, which were aimed at enlisting support for the government’s total

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67 Ibid. The first speaker referred to, Dr. Louis Bothma, wrote an acclaimed account of the experiences of the controversial Buffalo Battalion, also known as 32 Battalion. The book is entitled Die Buffel Struikel.

68 Malan, Life: 362.

strategy. The rationale for this appeared to be that effective resistance to the forces of communist and black domination could not be expected from a government unsure as to how much reform and how much resistance was required. Very anxious times prevailed in the period preceding the 1994 election as rightwing resistance rhetoric increased in intensity. That this threat eventually proved to have been considerably inflated was not easily anticipated. The Afrikaanse Volksfront (AVF) initiated invasion of Bophuthatswana in 1994 to prop up the tottering regime of Lucas Mangope ended in a humiliating retreat when the undisciplined AWB’s simultaneous appearance on the scene jeopardized any possibility of effective intervention. The AVF initiative though, also suffered from being ill-conceived and poorly planned. This failure, two Afrikaner historians noted, was the result of decades of NP indoctrination which induced in whites feelings of racial superiority and distorted conceptions of the Afrikaners’ supposedly superior military craft. This event, the authors reason, caused the crumbling of rightwing resistance. Naked racism certainly pervaded rightwing politics in more overt fashion that elsewhere, but as mentioned, the perception amongst those who occupied the rightwing of the political spectrum that government policy exhibited incompatible objectives, clearly assisted in mobilizing resistance against reform.

The defeat of rightwing resistance no doubt was of immense significance, but the abolition of white rule left behind feelings of resentment less easily qualified. For the rightwing the new SA has been and continues to be an unbridled disaster, but is among a ‘silent’ section of the Afrikaner community that one senses displays of disquiet, fuelled by the conviction that the transition was botched. Potgieter relates the story of an old politician, former NP & Broederbond member and Dutch Reformed Church supporter, who mentioned that US politicians were astonished over what they perceived to be the manner in which political power was handed over without “let or hindrance”. Certain Afrikaner leaders arrogated for themselves the right to decide the political future and in the process treated ordinary “uninformed” and “blameless” supporters with disdain. It is a theme that recurs in various contexts throughout Potgieter’s book, with several incidents reflecting the political leadership’s failure to accept responsibility for misdeeds, failing to protect officials carrying out policies and engaging in self-serving activities rather than working for the common good. His, as well as the books by Heunis, Slabbert and Labuschagne, are indicative of how some people now consider past professions of religiosity and appeals to elevated moral precepts with contempt and anger. Former president de Klerk’s insistence that his government tried to “adhere to Christian norms and principles” in their conduct of the war against their opponents,

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brings us to the theme of the transition to democracy in South Africa and the issue of moral guilt.73

4. Reflections on the legacy of apartheid and white domination in the transition to a democratic dispensation in SA

The recent books by Heunis, du Preez, Potgieter, and earlier ones by designers of the new dispensation that emerged after 1990, such as F. W. de Klerk and perceptive observers like F. Van Zyl Slabbert, amongst others, reflect how relatively poorly prepared the NP leadership was for engaging opponents in fashioning a democratic constitution. A good overview of the ‘verligte’ trajectory in NP politics has recently appeared. Its author dates the origins of the process to the post-1966 era, tracing the developments ranging from uniform support for apartheid in Afrikaner ranks, with differences about how it was to be implemented, to the acceptance of a limited form of power-sharing in the early 1980s, to the final acceptance of the idea of power-sharing at the central government level in 1991. At that stage the NP moved from an insistence on group rights and federalism to a government in which various parties would cooperate.74 In the end a system of majority rule with constitutional protection for individual rights was accepted, something which conservative Cabinet ministers, insistently on power sharing, vigorously opposed and the majority of verligtes, favouring a system that featured a variety of checks and balances, were not happy with. Divided and lacking a coherent vision of the future, the small group of verligte negotiators under Roelf Meyer acceded to what they considered was inevitable, namely majority rule. Former president de Klerk’s support for them was critical for the eventual outcome, but he continued to hope that he would be able to secure one or other form of power sharing in the final constitution.75 The outcome of this long process ushered in democratic rule in SA, international plaudits for both the NP and ANC, but serious internal dissent in the ranks of the NP over the perceived sell-out to its opponents. Since the outlines and details of this process are now reasonably well-known, the rest of this section is concerned with the question why Afrikaners, given the widespread praise lavished on them for having peacefully surrendered power, seem to be so distressed about the eventual outcome of the process.

This argument assumes that reform in NP party ranks was premised on repeated assurances that it would never substantially affect white power and the ability of elected white leaders to control the process and outcome of change. In the many publications that have appeared since 1990 and attempt to trace the contours of the transition to

73 Former president F. W. de Klerk, in response to a question whether it is believable that ordinary officers could have been involved in gross human rights violations without the knowledge of the political and military leadership. Quoted in Preez, Native: 251.
75 Ibid.: 217.
democracy in South Africa, due credit is usually given to the reformist element in the National Party and F. W. de Klerk in particular. Some observers also look back for precedents to the developments that resulted in establishing a liberal democracy in 1994 and find it as far back as the Cape liberal franchise of the 19th century. In such assessments the apartheid years of National Party government (1948 – 1990) effectively represented a deviation from the relatively liberal political tradition that preceded the victory of the nationalists. For Furlong “the new regime also marked a sharp break with the liberal state which, despite its limitations, the pre-1948 state still was, at least for whites and to a degree for Coloureds”.76 This was in response to Giliomee’s assertion that the influence of Cape Afrikaners on apartheid was more benign, of the paternalist variety, compared to more overt racist and oppressive apartheid policies that came to characterize the post-1954 apartheid era in which the northerners, Transvalers in particular, dominated. In a sense, this more enlightened strain in Afrikaner Nationalism provided continuity and it can thus be argued that it emerged as the dominant element in NP discourses by the late 1980s. Plausible as this interpretation may be, the reform tradition ultimately failed to provide a coherent philosophical tradition and clearly-defined political principles derived from it, to replace apartheid as a political philosophy. The confusion which features so strongly in NP negotiations during the transitional phase is indicative of the NP’s inability to conceive of a democratic dispensation based on majority rule. According to Giliomee, instead of preparing for a transformation of power, Afrikaners thought that the country could never be governed without them.77

With this observation in mind, it is perhaps understandable that Afrikaners failed to grasp the degree of continuity that the democratic transition represented. Christopher Saunders’ discussion of several books that dealt with the transition can be roughly divided between those who viewed it as representing continuity with the past, and others who consider the period of 1989 to 1994 of crucial significance. Exponents of continuity include leftist critics who argued that the transition amounted to transfer of power from one elite to another. Murray’s book Revolution deferred: The painful birth of Post-Apartheid South Africa, and that of Marais, South Africa: limits to change are indicative of such views. Saunders also endorses the concept of continuity, but from a slightly different position, arguing that the “many roots of democracy must surely include the non-racial franchise at the Cape in the nineteenth century.”78 For Afrikaners, though, the triumph of an essentially liberal tradition appeared to have offered little comfort, precisely because this tradition never featured prominently in their own political tradition.

77 Herman Giliomee, “Die skryf van Geskiedenis onder radikaal nuwe omstandighede”, speech delivered at centenary of History Department, University of Stellenbosch, 5 April 2004: 10.
The weaknesses inherent in the NP’s reformist discourses, is well illustrated by the example presented by Dr Willem de Klerk, former Dutch Reformed Church minister, academic, newspaper editor, father of the verlig-verkramp epithets depicting conservative and more enlightened Afrikaners, and brother of the former president. In 2000 journalist Chris Louw fired off an open letter to de Klerk in which he accused him, a self-declared enlightened Afrikaner, of having favoured reform from the inside of the ruling establishment, yet at the same time supporting the infrastructure of repression that was created to secure white, and particularly Afrikaner hegemony. According to Louw while ordinary people were dying on the border, and those that refused to take up the weapon were incarcerated or declared insane, “you would not know about it, because you were too engrossed in thinking of new concepts to provide new meaning and new moral and intellectual content to ‘separate development’”. Louw’s letter and subsequent book were prompted by de Klerk’s book Afrikaners. Kroes, Kras, Kordaat in which he argued that Afrikaners should abandon racism and exclusivity.

For Louw, this tendency towards earlier justifications of apartheid and present condemnations of it reflects the fundamental dishonesty of a generation of super-Afrikaners. He recounts psychologist Dreyer Kruger’s plea in 1976 in front of the Afrikaner Reading Circle at Grahamstown that “the Afrikaner should create opportunities for himself to grow out of his racism” and to “admit the reality of our isolation and the manner in which we rationalize our ethical shortcomings”. De Klerk, then editor of the Transvaler, responded by stating that: “such an overcritical view of the Afrikaner is totally unjustified”. Kruger is like “a depressive person, one-sided […] distorted in his depression”. De Klerk was in a sense a late convert to the verligte reform tradition. In 1972, at the age of 45 he still wrote an introduction to a text book for students entitled Call and Reality in which liberalism is described as entailing “compromise and unprincipled thoughts” and that it attempts to “reconcile irreconcilable positions by abandoning principles”.

Van Wyk argues that Louw’s attack on de Klerk for having provided credibility to apartheid is devoid of all truth. It is true that de Klerk has gained a reputation as a cautious reformer, but Louw’s argument gains in credibility when considering de Klerk’s repeated assurances as newspaper editor that no change in SA was possible without the Afrikaner. De Klerk’s position, despite numerous qualifications, effectively amounted to an attempt to square the circle by insisting that reform should be reconciled with the protection of white, particularly Afrikaner interests. It is quite certain that abdication of white, particularly Afrikaner domination without any provision for constitutional

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79 Chris Louw, Boetman en die swaneswang van die verligtes, Cape Town, Human and Rousseau, 2001: 11. According to Louw, de Klerk’s initial use of the term ‘verligte’ in 1966, was as a term of abuse, to denote people who wanted to ‘destroy our legacy’ (ibid: 227).


81 Louw, Boetman: 238f.

82 Ibid.: 229.

83 Wyk, “Rol”: 220.
protection of group rights, is most definitely not what even verligtes like de Klerk originally had in mind. Yet, he appears to view the role of verligtes as having provided the foundations for the present democratic dispensation. Such displays of political schizophrenia to be found here and in countless examples in the books by du Preez, Heunis, Potgieter and Slabbert, testify to the fundamental uncertainty, resistance and eventually half-hearted support for political transformation and the lack of self-confidence with which it was conducted. It should come as no surprise that condemnation for having sold out the volk was widespread. Former Defense Minister Malan, in his book *My lewe saam met die SA Weermag*, accused R. Meyer & the NP negotiating team of having “given the country away”.84 The perception of a spineless concession of power continues to resonate strongly in the popular press and is addressed in the books under review. It is ironic that if newspaper reports and letters by readers, as well as some of the books covered in this review can be accepted to accurately reflect the public mood among Afrikaners, the dominant sentiment would appear to be one of annoyance about the immediate pre-1994 developments, rather than the 1970s and 1980s that brought SA to the brink of large-scale civil war.

To what extent the PW Botha regime undermined the ability of its successors to compete on an equal footing with adversaries occupying the moral high ground, is difficult to say, but Heunis’ account of the negotiations tend to reinforce the impression that the NP negotiators were constantly struggling to display their democratic credentials convincingly and attempts to secure future constitutional and political advantages in advance, tended to heighten scepticism about them. According to Heunis P. W. Botha never intended to share power with black people, partly due to a racist personal inclination. He states that “P. W. entrusted negotiations with the ANC to seurocrats under his control and sidelined his enlightened political colleagues”.85 Most commentators tend to agree that Botha proved to be either unwilling or unable, or both, to transform hesitant reforms into decisive all-embracing steps to secure a democratic dispensation. Fascinating glimpses provided by du Preez, Heunis, de Klerk and Van Zyl Slabbert confirm that Botha was more comfortable with retaining an authoritarian status quo than with imaginative and bold reform initiatives. Ministers, like Chris Heunis who favoured change, were sidelined and though exploratory talks with the ANC commenced in 1986, they were conducted by figures in or responsible for security like Kobie Coetzee or elements close to Botha, like the NIS head, N. Barnard, who did however, later prove to be a reformist.

It is also evident that once F. W de Klerk took over the reigns from Botha in 1989, the impetus for reform gained momentum. There is no doubt, however, that his conception of reform had definite limitations. Slabbert and Heunis, amongst others, present an image of de Klerk as not entirely at ease with being the enforcer of a democratic

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84 Quoted in Heunis, *Binnekloof*: 159. The title reflects the Afrikaans version of *My life with the SA Defence Force*. Du Preez (Native), Louw, (Boetman), Zyl Slabbert and Giliomee (Afrikaners), have also provided informed accounts of the transitional negotiations that broadly confirms Heunis’ views.

85 Heunis, *Binnekloof*: 69.
De Klerk, like most other NP leading figures conceived of reform as essentially premised on a protection of group rights. As mentioned earlier, the senior NP leadership entered negotiations determined to secure at least a form of power sharing. De Klerk apparently continued to believe at an advanced stage of the negotiations that his insistence on a rotating presidency for the leaders of the three biggest parties would be attainable. In the end the NP failed to attain even more realistic objectives. Louw mentions that chief ANC negotiator Cyril Ramaphosa believed that if the NP had set themselves more realistic targets such as on the position of Afrikaans, concessions would have been possible. Heunis, a legal adviser to the government during the World Trade Centre negotiations, believes that de Klerk neglected the opportunity presented when the Constitutional Court refused to certify the new constitution once the NP left the government of National Unity in 1996, to push forcefully for more meaningful provincial rights, better protection for language rights, property rights and mother tongue education. He argues that de Klerk understood that the momentum towards power sharing was irreversible, and de Klerk himself argued in his autobiography that he tried “to find the balance between nationhood on the one hand and the reality of our cultural differences on the other”. Heunis believed however, that he overestimated his ability to influence ANC policy instead of using his position to campaign for substantial constitutional weights and counterweights.

In the final analysis it may have been a matter of moral as much as physical fatigue that torpedoed the NP in the negotiations. Heunis mentions that Roelf Meyer, NP chief negotiator in 1994, often fed-up with unrealistic demands by the members of the special (NP) cabinet committee called the Policy Group for Reform (Afrikaans acronym: BGH), would simply fail to put the more outrageous demands to the ANC team, figuring that it would be treated with contempt if presented for consideration. An official commenting on the odds against the NP negotiating team stated: “they had the disadvantage of 45 years of apartheid”. It is against this background that the initial optimism displayed by the NP at the outset of the constitutional negotiations that they would be able to engage the ANC by occupying the moral high ground, suggests a fundamental inability to come to terms with the reality of the situation.

Many explanations have been offered to account for this failure, ranging from political indoctrination to fear of the disruptive potential that reform would present to the growing ranks of right-wingers opposed to change. Though the notion of indoctrination aimed at justifying apartheid and white domination does not easily lend itself to analytical clarity and exposition, it may indeed have been a key factor in the psychological inability of many whites to come to terms with a post-apartheid SA. Several observers testify to the apparent inability to contemplate a future where whites,
Afrikaners in particular, would be stripped of their position of hegemony. De Klerk himself argues that his reputation for being a verkrampte (reactionary) came about as a result of his insistence always to question the logic and consequences of reformist ideas and proposals, unwittingly providing a hint as to his apparent inability to embrace reform as a matter of moral necessity rather than out of pragmatic considerations or a as response to pressure. Afrikaner politicians, and P. W. Botha is no exception, instinctively responded to the white electorate’s preference for powerful assertions, in word and deed, of the refusal to dilute white power. Van Wyk mentions that Willem de Klerk, for one, acknowledged that verligtes did not always put their case with sufficient clarity and aggression and for fear of being driven from the Afrikaner establishment. They neglected to organize themselves into a structured pressure group.90

Lacking a principled, philosophically coherent reform tradition, the NP was also ill-positioned to contemplate the issue of historical guilt. Criticized for failing to accept responsibility for the gross human rights violations perpetrated as part of the total strategy, F. W. de Klerk angrily retorted that “those who are trying to drag us down to the sordid level of the murder squads of the CCD and Vlakplaas are robbing us of our right to stand with honour as the co-founders of our new nation.”91 It is this display of unrepentant self-assurance underpinning a conviction that the eventual concession to majority rule somehow obviated the wrongs of the past, which caused Slabbert to state that whereas he once admired de Klerk’s moral courage, he was filled with revulsion upon reading his autobiography and sensing its failure to display personal accountability for the wrongs of the past.92

To some extent de Klerk is the unfortunate recipient of a poisonous legacy, that of the Botha era’s obsession with security and a resultant willingness to resort to virtually any measure to obliterate the threat against the NP government. He certainly acted with firmness to abolish the State Security Council, rein in the security forces and clamp down on extra-legal actions facilitated by them. Whenever he failed to act expeditiously, such as the delayed response to stop the security forces’ involvement in ‘black-on-black’ violence, it might to an extent be ascribed to the fact that under P. W. Botha he was, like many other ministers initially not part of the core of the decision-making group in the State Security Council and as such would not have been fully briefed on the nature and extent of covert actions. He was also not even informed of the negotiations that were conducted with Mandela between 1986 and 1989. What has however tarnished de Klerk’s reputation is a double failure: on the one hand he refused to accept full responsibility for the historic wrongs committed in the name of white racism and apartheid and on the other he tended to equate the counter-war against those committed to fighting apartheid and white domination as being the other side of the same coin. He argues that he rejects “the contention that one side had been morally

90 Wyk, “Rol”: 222.
91 Klerk, Trek: 385.
superior to the other during the conflict”. Those on the government side fought to “maintain their right to national self-determination; their commitment to resist the expansion of global Communism; and their duty to defend individuals and the state and to uphold law and order. All these factors were legitimate and had nothing to do with racism or apartheid per se.” The ANC’s armed struggle had been “unnecessary and counter-productive” and they opposed the government’s reform measures adopted from the end of the 1970s.93

De Klerk’s inability to conceive of the policy of apartheid and the measures taken to promote and defend it, including human rights violations, as an integral whole, is also evident in his response to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). He viewed the TRC hearings as being especially vindictive as far as Afrikaners were concerned. He expected it to conduct an even-handed investigation instead of focusing more closely on security force abuses, yet he admitted that many whites, Afrikaners in particular, were ashamed and confused by what they witnessed. The mass coverage of the hearings, despite the fact that moving testimony was presented and that it had a cathartic effect, did not “contribute to the balance or perspective so necessary for a genuine attempt to find the truth”. 94 As to the issue of morality, “we did not regard ourselves as being morally superior — or inferior — to any other party.” For him the NP and ANC managed to overcome the “divisions and bitterness of our history” since 1989.95 Taken together, it is clear that de Klerk’s view of the past amounts to one in which everyone should admit to mistakes and accept that everyone else acted in good faith. It is this moral blind spot, even when he admits that people “suffered the indignities and humiliation of racial discrimination” that causes him to immediately qualify it by stressing that his government and the Afrikaner people believed they were doing what was right.96 Slabbert argues that the one thing the TRC made clear is that de Klerk, the NP and Security Services were totally unprepared for the moral and ethical implications following the abolition of apartheid.97 Rather than engaging in a display of “imaginative political action”, De Klerk appeared hurt and unrepentant as if SA and the world failed to appreciate the greatness of his deeds. The NP was confused and unprepared and the Security Services angry because of the fraud and betrayal they had experienced.98

It is with these observations in mind that it should again be stressed that de Klerk’s lifting of the ban on Mandela and the ANC do not represent such a fundamental break with his predecessor. H. Gilomee believes that P. W. Botha squandered a vital opportunity with his refusal to use his Rubicon speech to announce the significant

93 Klerk, Trek:376.
94 Ibid.: 377.
95 Ibid.: 379.
96 Ibid.
97 Zyl Slabbert, Afrikaner: 111.
98 Ibid.
reforms already prepared by ministers Piki Botha and Heunis, but he mentions that
Botha subsequently announced most of these proposals as NP policy at congresses.
The chance for an epoch-making breakthrough was however, missed in Durban in
1985.99 H. Giliomee pointed out that the Afrikaner leadership eventually acted
pragmatically to ensure Afrikaner survival, at a time when belief in the morality of
apartheid had long been undermined.100 What this pragmatism failed to secure,
however, was a paradigm shift to facilitate the transition from apartheid to a democratic
dispensation without veto power for minorities. Van Zyl Slabbert has perceptively pointed
out that the apartheid policy necessitated a total strategy against a total onslaught.101 It
was not merely a policy infused by good intentions that somehow failed to find
expression in practice. That the eventual outcome of the transition should be regarded
as of enormous significance and possibly the best, most realistic outcome under the
circumstances, was not fully appreciated by both Afrikaners on the one hand and
leaders like de Klerk on the other. His ambivalence is evident in the way he claims co-
authorship for a democratic South Africa, yet is clearly unhappy that a more effective
system of checks and balances were not devised. And of course, many ANC supporters
were also not happy with the nature of the compromise with the NP, the difference being
that a statesman like N. Mandela justified it in ethical and moral terms, something the
NP failed to conceptualize.

A final observation on the matter of the immorality of the total strategy is that apart from
the destruction, pain and discomfort inflicted on opponents of the government, it is now
possible to reconstruct with a greater degree of clarity the degree of corruption, self-
enrichment and undermining of the democratic procedures, accountability and
transparency that resulted from the militarization of SA society and its government
structures. What many whites apparently still fail to comprehend is that the current trend
towards an apparent gradual subversion of the democratic and moral fibre of the SA
government, seen from the perspective of the last twenty years of white rule, represents
an almost unbroken continuum, rather than a rupture, with the past.102 It should come
as no surprise that among the several books that have appeared to document the pre-
and post-transition period, there is a glaring absence of books by theologians to reflect
on and account for the shameless way in which the Afrikaans churches submitted to this
erosion of morality and their complicity in this process. The perception that many
Afrikaners refuse to reflect on a discredited past and to have embraced with great
vigour the growing cult of consumerism and a superficial feel-good form of religiosity, is
arguably in no small measure due to the lamentable lack of spiritual leadership and
guidance from the major Afrikaans churches. The ability of Germans, admittedly after a

100 Saunders, “Perspectives”: 165.
101 Zyl Slabbert, Afrikaner: 110.
102 Hyslop provides a good overview of the prevalence of corruption in both pre-and post apartheid South
shameful delay, to engage with the horrors of the Holocaust and the issue of personal guilt, can be ascribed in no small measure to the role of certain German religious institutions and their pastors. People like Martin Niemoller offers shining examples of how moral leadership is still possible even under conditions of great moral dislocation brought about by war. In the SA context N. Mandela and D. Tutu fulfilled that role, but from the heart of Afrikanerdom there wasn’t a figure capable of rising above personal limitations to demonstrate awareness of and guilt for generations of historical injustices. Critical Afrikaners like Braam Fischer and Beyers Naude, and even Van Zyl Slabbert were never considered true Afrikaners, at least not until the transformation process was decisively underway.

What many whites fail to recognise in their lamentations about the state of affairs in SA at present, which they largely ascribe to the collapse of white resolve during the negotiations, is that the struggle by the ANC and related organizations that broadly subscribed to the principles of the Freedom Charter, was principally one born of a concern for justice. There is currently a danger that the struggle for justice may be superseded by the intolerance of those ignorant of this historical legacy: whites unable and unwilling to admit the legitimacy of the struggle against apartheid and white domination, and elements in the new ANC leadership and its alliance partners justifying restitution on shaky populist grounds. In an acerbic assessment of this dilemma Slabbert believes that by 1994 an almost unholy alliance was created when those on the opposite sides of the ‘struggle’ were forced to enter into a compromise none of them were ever ideologically, historically or politically equipped to undertake. Suddenly, he writes, SA witnessed the spectacle of “sanctified crooks, murderers and liars that had to make the new SA work, irrespective of how holy or unholy their battle against each other was.”

The books by Potgieter and Labuschagne, former newspaper reporter (mostly with English language papers) and National Intelligence operative respectively, argue persuasively that members of the different security services were caught unawares when the decision was made to transform these agencies into servants of the new dispensation. This raises the important question why the military did not intervene to secure a more favourable outcome. Moorcraft has earlier already argued against the likelihood of a military dictatorship on the grounds that SA lacked a tradition of military intervention and that the practice of the civilian soldier predisposed respect for a constitutionally elected government. SA was also not a ‘banana republic’ where weak political leadership and an overassertive military could facilitate intervention. Two other considerations may also have worked against this outcome. General Constant Viljoen’s decision to participate in the elections of 1994, following the Bophuthatswana debacle, probably proved to be the final nail in the coffin of white organized resistance. Furthermore, one of president de Klerk’s first steps was to involve the military

103 Zyl Slabbert, Afrikaner: 73.
104 Moorcraft, Nemesis: 409-416.
leadership. He reportedly informed generals at the Phalaborwa military basis in 1989 that he “was going to take over to conduct the political war himself”. According to Potgieter, a general afterwards told him that the “generals agreed after the meeting that F.W does not understand the situation and from then on would ignore his generals and Military Intelligence. He did, and he lost”, the officer said. That the upper echelons of the military sensed this, yet chose not to intervene in the political process, tends to confirm Moorcraft’s assessment. It also throws new light onto the military leaders like Geldenhuys, Viljoen and later G. Meiring’s repeated insistence that the solution to SA’s problems were overwhelmingly political.

Feelings of loss and bewilderment that seemed to grip Afrikaners once it became clear that political authority had been irrevocably signed away, can ironically be seen as the unintended consequence of decades of ideological investment in racist and anti-communist discourses. When president Thabo Mbeki addressed 2,000 members of the former secret Afrikaner Broederbond in the Pretoria City Hall their first reaction was not how they could use the space he has granted them to establish themselves as a new cultural formation and to make themselves useful in the new dispensation, but to respond in anguish: “why does he not tell us how we should adapt. Tell us what to do”. Called upon to address farmers’ days, Ruiterweg (junior Broederbond), Afrikaans language and culture associations and smaller Afrikaner discussion groups, Slabbert concluded that he was struck by the wholesale confusion and aimlessness that caught hold of these people. Responding to a young farmer’s lament that he does not know whether he should be furious because he did not try to find out what was going on, or because he was so susceptible to believing “die bliksems” (rascals), Slabbert stated that “I know the world where he came from and I know how systematically he was rendered ignorant and incapable to face the challenges of the new South Africa.”

Anger about the NP’s abdication of power did not only derive from perceptions that it was signed away at the negotiating table. As mentioned, some observers stress that the transition reflected an elite compact. Many believe that elements of the former NP government positioned themselves to benefit from the changes in the political landscape. In the process subordinates were perceived to have been abandoned to face their own fate. The books by Labuschagne and Potgieter contain several accounts by individuals who did not receive ‘golden handshakes’, asserting that numerous key figures responsible for devising the infrastructure of repression retired in great comfort and with huge pensions, while the operatives charged with carrying out decisions were effectively sidelined.

In conclusion, although the Botha security state did introduce significant reforms during the late 1970s and 1980s, its impact was decisively diluted by the lack of conviction and

105 Quoted in Potgieter, Aanslag: 306
106 Ibid.
107 Zyl Slabbert, Afrikaner: 127.
108 Ibid.
sincerity with which it was done. Alden concludes that the “verdict on the National Security State in South Africa must necessarily be that of failure”. While the Botha administration launched an assault on many aspects of apartheid policy, they continued to convey to the world “a singular reluctance to tackle the root racialist assumptions which underlaid these policies”. Instead of rapidly dismantling the remaining so-called legislatively pillars of apartheid, as de Klerk did, Botha preferred incrementalism, which Alden considers, in retrospect, to have been “a fatal blunder”. The reluctance to engage meaningfully with reform, Alden believes, was a result of the inability to break completely with the structures of South Africa’s past.

The result in the political sphere was the institution of a Byzantine parliamentary structure established on a racial basis, despite the fact that it was a significant break from the fundamentalist apartheid policies of the previous thirty years, which retained the form of the apartheid state and consequently engendered suspicion amongst black South Africans; and, in the area of social segregation, an overt attentiveness to what were fundamentally racist sensibilities on the part of the white community at the expense of black sensibilities and dignity.

5. The trauma of war: hidden identities and hidden memories

The books discussed here have assisted in the process of deconstructing the mythologies that surrounded the total strategy pursued by the SA government and its security agencies in the 1970s and 1980s. A steady stream of accounts depicting personal experiences have likewise begun to appear, constituting challenges to the image once put forward of the SADF as an essentially honourable organization in which codes of justness and fairness were maintained, as well as an esprit de corps that reflected the belief in the justness of the cause. The books by Slabbert, Potgieter and du Preez contain personal accounts of their authors’ growing disillusionment with the policies of the NP government and all treat with contempt the bourgeois morality and superficial religiosity that infused it all.

In the 1970s and 1980s determined steps were taken to portray life in the former SADF as normal, characterized by loyalty to country and government, a high degree of discipline and combat readiness. Nevertheless, in line with the expanding literary output about recent political history, there are growing signs of a willingness to confront the demons that for so long were relegated to silent corners of the individual psyche. Many earlier accounts by former soldiers tended to glorify the army, the sense of camaraderie experienced and the extent to which individuals were positively transformed by their experiences. This façade is gradually being torn down and subjected to revision. The re-issue of a selection of the late Koos Prinsloo’s work offers powerful evidence of the shattering impact of the immorality of civil war, authoritarian rule and homophobia in an

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110 Ibid.
oppressive, intolerant and narrowly moralistic society. As Shaun de Waal has argued, Prinsloo’s is one of the most powerful voices in Afrikaans literature in recent times. De Waal refers to one of the pieces in the collected work, entitled *Slagplaas* where a man picks up another for sex, but in the flat close to an abattoir they found that the overwhelming stench made them unable to continue. “Disgust replaces desire. The title of the collection echoed the place that housed the state’s assassination squads – Vlakplaas. The whole country was becoming a slaughterhouse”.

Andre Carl van der Merwe’s controversial and much debated debut novel, *Moffie* (Afrikaans term for a gay man), a thinly disguised autobiographical account of his life from childhood until his abduction into the army, powerfully depicts the struggles of a gay person to be reconciled with his inner self in an essentially intolerant society and a military institution sometimes manned by people who were either schizophrenics or possessed of massive inferiority complexes which they hid behind abusive behaviour. What is impressive about both these books is that its authors, in stark contrast to conventional Afrikaner morality, engage in honest and at times robust and decidedly immodest and anti-authoritarian attempts to come to terms with their predicament as human beings relegated to the margins of ‘respectable’ society. It is no surprise that van der Merwe relates how he had been inundated by thousands of messages, even from conservative farmers in the arid Karoo region of SA who told him his book has caused them to reconsider their relationship with their sons. Together with the books by Slabbert, du Preez, Heunis, Potgieter and Labuschagne, it represents often amusing, at times irreverent and impolite attacks on Afrikaner conventions, delusions and images of grandeur. Underneath, though, resides an immense sadness at the intolerance and bigotry of institutional life in the recent past and an expression of commitment to and the embrace of essentially civilized human values.

J. H. Thomson’s book contains snippets of life in the defence force as experienced by more than 40 soldiers during basic training, camps, border duty, actual engagement with opposing forces and township duty. Although interesting, it lacks a narrative thrust, the elaboration of individual experiences and a more sustained analysis of the impact of defence force duty on identifiable persons. Occasionally though the veil is lifted to reveal some of the more sordid aspects of life, esp. at the border, rendered all the more gripping and believable for the matter-of-fact manner in which it is recounted by former soldiers interviewed by the author. A soldier simply named Van gives an account which is at once moving and utterly revolting: a Swapo guerilla shot in the stomach was engaged in conversation by his guards (troops). He spoke about his girl friend and his family. The person who related the story, a young serviceman, mentions how he was moved by the

114 Melt Myburgh, interview with Andre Carl van der Merwe, Litnet, 3 January 2007. Litnet: http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi
experience and his complex feelings when he found the young Swapo guy dead the next morning. The account then descends into the immoral with a description of how an interpreter informed members of the local population of what will happen if they support Swapo. Then followed the gruesome burial ‘ceremony’, with the body being dumped in a shallow grave, petrol being poured over it and the bystanders watching how it is consumed by the fire. “I think one’s brain suppresses what you are busy doing, you have no scary dreams or remorse. You do not feel sorry for what you have done. It comes only years later”. The last quarter of the book manages to reveal to an extent the brutalizing effect of war, its dehumanizing tendencies, fear and the way in which individuals are reduced to single-mindedly trying to ensure their own survival. Soldiers who were involved in military engagement had to contend with death all around them in desperate attempts to cope and survive.

Dr. Louis Bothma, author of Die Buffel Struikel (the buffalo staggers), relates his experience of meeting with a group of about ten former soldiers from 1 SA Infantry Battalion who meet annually on 10 June to commemorate their attack on that day in 1980 on Swapo’s Smokeshell basis deep in Angola. Of their group of 44 soldiers 12 died and 23 were wounded. They recount their harrowing experiences for the benefit of the author, talk about the disintegration of their private lives and how they attempt to cope with life. Reference is made to one of the group who used to go to the Boksburg cemetery on 10 June every year to sit and cry between the graves of his two former comrades. Bothma afterwards read a notice in a newspaper about the 32nd commemoration of the events of 16 June 1976 and the Free State’s premier’s statement that “we are again reminded of the sacrifices and heroism of our youth when they rebelled against a brutal system considered to be a crime against humanity”. He reflected that “this was only for Hector Peterson and friends. Politically correct. The sacrifices and heroism of white boys, who were mercilessly disciplined, forcefully withdrawn from the labour market and taken from their fatherland, to fight a war in another country, not against rubber bullets and tear gas, but against machine gun bullets and phosphorus, do not qualify”. It is upon encountering accounts like this that one is inclined to reflect on the banality of politics and politicians, be it of those who enlisted these men in service for immoral wars, or of those who today claim that soldiers fighting for apartheid are not entitled to be honoured in the same way as liberation fighters.

The outpouring of anguish and anger in some of these books can be understood against the background of how generations of whites, Afrikaners in particular, were indoctrinated into subscribing to a defined system of ideas and beliefs. As such some of the writing tends to reflect mixed feelings: painful individual memories as well as feelings of humiliation caused by the way in which most people allowed themselves to be duped into supporting or tolerating immoral and plainly unworkable policies. Though English-

116 L. Bothma: Litnet.
speaking South Africans lent their support to the government in growing numbers during the 1970s and 1980s, they are generally considered to have been more sceptical of the ideological justifications for apartheid. Most of the books by persons who did border service or who wrote accounts of life on the border tend to agree that Afrikaners were considered to be less critical of the war and more inclined to support justifications for it. Schools were also expected to assist in enge ndering ‘correct attitudes’ towards military service, but the official Youth Preparedness programme was treated with more scepticism by English-speakers: “Most Afrikaans schools encourage the programme vigorously while many English schools merely pay lip service to it […] There has been a growing sense among teachers at many English and some Afrikaans schools that the YP-type programmes are futile, ineffective and inherently deceptive.”117 There is certainly more than a hint of truth in assertions that most whites supported apartheid while paying lip-service to opposing it. There is however, also evidence of moral anguish about the abuses that the system tended to generate. The moving story by Shaun Johnson, entitled the Native Commissioner, depicts the life of an English-speaking civil servant who, while respecting Afrikaners in general, was torn apart emotionally by having had to implement increasingly inhuman government policies.118

In sharp contrast to these often very personal accounts reflecting the pain and anger of individuals about a system that touched the core of their humanity, others appeared to have derived different moral lessons from the experiences of the past. Judging from the books by de Klerk and Malan, the real message that their authors and a substantial number of Afrikaners appeared to have taken from SA’s democratic transition, is one of disillusionment and anger. Malan argues that the ANC Alliance were able to “engender a humiliating feeling of guilt amongst the ‘political losers’. If nothing is done to address this feeling of guilt and subservience, it may last for generations to come.”119 For Malan, and as was noted for de Klerk too, reconciliation also entails having to make sure Afrikaners do not commit the fallacy of believing the past was only their fault: everyone was equally at fault, would appear to be the implicit message they would like to convey to posterity.

Conclusion

What is striking in an assessment of the publications reviewed here, as well as others referred to in the course of the discussion, is how much in common the conduct of the SA NP government had with its US counterparts, mostly various Republican Administrations during the Cold War. In both cases an identified threat was arguably blown out of proportion to justify strategies that arguably exacerbated this perceived threat. Since the 1940s a substantial body of evidence has been accumulated to

117 Evans, “Classrooms”: 291.
119 Malan, Life: 363.
disqualify the worst case scenarios put forward by Cold Warriors in both the US & SA. From G. Kennan, father of the containment concept, who later lamented that he did not have in mind the aggressive military offensive to deal with communism that subsequent US administrations adopted, to the Bush administration’s manipulation of the ‘war on terror’ to justify an attack on Iraq, a distinct thread of imperial overreach is evident, arguably bedevilling, rather than contributing to the cause of world peace and mutual cooperation and understanding. In both the US and SA the hawks seemed to have had the upper hand in crucial periods of the Cold War, making a speedier, less militaristic solution to problems associated with this war, more difficult.

As several books make clear, in South Africa the ascendancy of the hawks, personified by the PW Botha administration and the merger of the political and security establishments helped to create an ideological and institutional framework that intensified the already intolerant racist elements of the apartheid policy. Criticism, let alone opposition, was equated to disloyalty. The fear of black political domination could then be submerged into a broader cause – a struggle against a perceived godless ideology that was depicted as being aimed at the annihilation of whites and their way of life. As a result the ability to respond flexibly and imaginatively to the changing nature and assess the true roots of the perceived threats, caused whites, particularly Afrikaners, to watch with abject bewilderment as the infrastructure designed to sustain their prejudices and beliefs born of fear, collapsed all around them. As South Africa enters a particularly sensitive period in its evolution as a democratic state, there still appear to be many Afrikaners who, essentially still equipped with prejudices and ignorance born of the era of total strategy and generations of white domination, and a lamentably superficial religious foundation, find it impossible to recognise the deep and complex roots of the problems currently being experienced.

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