

WAR, POPULAR MEMORY AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE OF THE ANGOLAN CONFLICT

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1. BACKGROUND: THE RECIPROCAL IMPACTS BETWEEN WAR AND SOCIETY

Southern Africa was ravaged by war for much of the second half of the twentieth century. Great changes followed World War II. Black consciousness and Pan-Africanism grew alongside and in southern Africa at least partly in response to the consolidation of Afrikaner political and military power. As South Africa moved down the path to “garrison statehood” and “total strategy”, the liberation movements in southern Africa, invigorated, funded and supplied with arms by one or other party of the bipolar Cold-War world, formed armed movements with the aim of overthrowing white rule on the subcontinent. The result was an interconnected series of wars fought in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), in the then Portuguese territories of Mozambique and Angola, and in the northern part of the territory of South West Africa (SWA) (now Namibia), combined with an armed struggle against South Africa itself.

Most of these conflicts have now ended. But they were a colossal physical and psychological experience, and fought at great expense. It cost the region hundreds of thousands of men and women and billions of rands. However, the socio-economic and political cost is greater than the statistics immediately indicate; for they belie the consequences. The large numbers of war orphans and child soldiers, land mines and land-mine amputees, make the war-scarring run deep and this is therefore yet another case where the psychological trauma remains even after much of the physical damage has been repaired.

This “long war” phenomenon is not surprising. Arthur Marwick explained the interrelationship between war and society in terms of a four-tier model based upon an examination of the disruptive and destructive aspects, the test set, the participation levels, and the psychological impact of the war.² Using this or any other argument, few

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² A Marwick, *War and social change in the twentieth century A comparative study of Britain, France, Germany, Russia and the United States* (Basingstoke and London 1974), pp. 11-14.

will argue that the Southern African War has had little social, economic or political impact.³ Moreover, according to Andreski's notion of the military participation ratio, the wartime gains by the less privileged members of society are dependent upon "the proportion of militarily utilised individuals in the total population".⁴ In other words, the greater the participation of the less privileged, the greater the societal fluidity and the more the social pyramid is flattened. This generally did not happen despite wide participation by entire populations. The war – for most of the belligerent groupings – was fought for the benefit of relatively small in-groups. It was not easy for southern Africans to "forget" the pain of the war, which dominated life since 1961. The deaths and maiming, the high participation ratio and refugee crisis, together with the apparent futility of the conflict, introduced a desperation and a hopelessness which has cast long shadows upon southern African society.

For South Africa, the focus of this specific paper, the conflict in Angola lasted 23 years - from 1966 to 1989 – and the impact of war, although of course not as heavy as in Angola itself, was significant in terms of the financial commitment as well as the cost in human life. As a result of the escalating operational activities the force requirements of the SADF increased continuously; national service for all white male citizens was introduced in 1968 and, in 1977, this was lengthened from 12 to 24 months. These men were withdrawn from economic activity and long absences from home and family sometimes brought a variety of socio-economic complications on the home front. The so-called "Bush War" certainly cut deeply into the fabric of South African society. And yet South African historians have left this history largely untouched.⁵

This article aims to present a broad sweep of publications that appeared in South Africa on the Angolan War and place these within the context of the publication politics of the day. In our quest to uncover what Arthur Marwick has termed "witting" and "unwitting" evidence, we hope to understand not only *what* these historical works said about the past, but also *why* they said what they did and *who* did the saying. As Richard Bosworth noted:

³ R Ferreira and I Liebenberg, "The impact of war on Angola and South Africa: Two southern African case studies", *Journal for Contemporary History* 31(3), 2006, pp. 42-73; SM Fourie, "Van mobilisering na transformasie: Die era van Suid-Afrika se militêre hoogbloei met die Vaaldriehoekse samelewing (1974-1994) as konsentrasieveld", *Scientia Militaria* 30(2), 2000; SM Fourie en JWN Tempelhoff, "Die era van Suid-Afrika se militêre hoogbloei (1974-1994) met die Vaaldriehoekse samelewing as konsentrasieveld", *Historia* 46(2), 2001; and M Alexander, "The militarization of white South African society, 1948-1994", *Scientia Militaria* 30(2), 2000.

⁴ R Pope, *War and society in Britain, 1899-1948* (London and New York, 1991), p. 9.

⁵ G Callister, "Patriotic duty or resented imposition? Public reactions to military conscription in White South Africa, 1952-1972", *Scientia Militaria* 35(1), 2007, pp. 46-67; and Ferreira and Liebenberg, pp. 42-73.

“If as much as possible could be discovered about the political, cultural and social assumptions of the authors and the works of each could be accurately set in their time and context, then much of their meaning would be revealed.”⁶

Writers, to invoke Edward Said, are “very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure”.⁷ Some publications will be discussed in more detail; others for reasons of space are barely mentioned; while still other works may simply be victim of a research in progress. Throughout we have furnished lists of books and manuscripts and, at times, journal articles in the hope that this may prove useful to others wishing to access some of the work we discuss or only mention in passing, depending on what space permits and importance dictates. However, our focus in this article on works appearing in South Africa means necessarily that there is less emphasis on work generated by members of the liberation movements and publishing houses sympathetic to the liberation cause. This hiatus will be addressed as the wider project develops.

2. THE FIRST ACCOUNTS AND THE FACTORS MILITATING AGAINST HISTORY WRITING

Scholarly military histories of the Angolan conflict took a long time to emerge, both within South Africa and without. Much of the first history to be produced abroad was political and diplomatic, such as Piero Gleijeses’ *Conflicting missions: Havana, Washington and South Africa, 1959-1976*.⁸ In fact, the first comprehensive history of Cuban involvement in Angola, Edward George’s *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale*, appeared only in 2005. This important work, based upon a PhD thesis delivered at the University of Bristol, draws upon a wide array of published material and a number of interviews with historical participants in Angola, Cuba, South Africa, the USA and even Mexico. But even this book lacks sound archival underpinning.⁹

In South Africa, until the mid-to-late 1980s, the only South African narratives of the war in Angola were produced either by novelists and poets or by journalists and popular writers with little or no historical training.¹⁰ There were several reasons

⁶ RJB Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima History writing and the Second World War 1945-1990* (London and New York 1998), p. xi.

⁷ Edward W Said, *Culture and imperialism* (London 1994), p. xxiv.

⁸ Wilfred G Burchett, *Southern Africa stands up Revolutions in Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa* (New York, 1979); William Minter, *Apartheid's Contras An inquiry into the roots of war in Angola and Mozambique* (London, 1994); Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting missions Havana, Washington and South Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill, 2002).

⁹ E George, *The Cuban intervention in Angola, 1965-1991 From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (London, 2005).

¹⁰ War, perhaps inevitably given the region's recent history, was a central theme of contemporary literature, both in Angola and in South Africa. Ana Mafalda Leite, "Angola", *The post-colonial literature of lusophone Africa* (Evanston, Illinois, 1996), p. 111.

for this. A lack of archival sources, something often cited, was certainly not the main cause. By 1994 there were some 46 000 linear meters of archival material in the custody of the Documentation Service Directorate, of which some 8 percent, or 3,68 thousand linear meters, bears directly on the SWA-Angola War (figure 1).¹¹

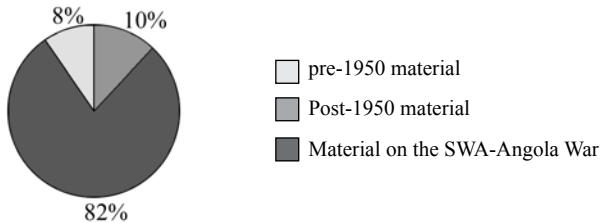


Figure 1: Approximate archival holding of the SADF Archives in 1993

More primary as a cause was the embargo maintained by the South African government on any publications appearing in South Africa on the war. The official archives moreover remained classified after a relaxation of the restrictions, resulting in little research of any reasonable depth. Troubled by these archival restrictions, the need for security clearances and the vetting of manuscripts, university-based and other historians confined themselves to the safer, less bothersome distant past, leaving contemporary history to those satisfied with a quick fix and happy to spin a penny.¹²

Most of these works were commercial in nature and produced by popular writers, who, to invoke Jeremy Black, are “obliged to live by their pens”. Besides, they enjoy neither sabbaticals nor ready access to research funding, which diminishes any attraction for work in the archives.¹³ Moreover, writing for the popular market and even a specific reading public, they often “know what they want to say beforehand” and, as Black notes, they are therefore not particularly attracted to detailed analysis based on archival work or, indeed, reflection. Many important but unglamorous aspects of the military past, such as logistics and force preparation, are neglected in favour of campaign and battlefield accounts, which feed public demand and therefore roll of the press at greater regularity.¹⁴

This drive for an instant history, unsophisticated in approach and poorly researched, is fed too by varying degrees of aversion to the military, coupled with a lack of technical knowledge and understanding of warfare. Yet, more important

¹¹ IJ van der Waag, “Military record preservation in South Africa, 1914-1992: A history of Directorate Documentation Service”, *Militaria* 23(4), 1993, p. 31.

¹² On the difficulties faced by historians working in the field of military history, see CJ Jacobs, “Die problematiek in die navorsing van kontemporêre krygsgeskiedenis in Suid-Afrika”, *Militaria* 23(2), 1993, pp. 19-26.

¹³ J Black, *Rethinking military history* (London and New York, 2004), p. 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-42.

perhaps, is the lack of time in our “quick fix” society. Even the historian who does not want to give a blow-by-blow account of a particular battle, but wishes rather to focus on the larger strategic picture, has to conduct “blow-by-blow” research. His/her understanding of the events might otherwise be based on incorrect assumptions and the conclusions will be severely undermined. However, popular writers are not the only writers to cut corners. University-based historians are under much pressure to produce regular research outputs, accumulate research funding and further their careers. Thorough, time-consuming primary research is the first victim.

In trying to understand the decision making behind South Africa’s cross-border operations and the course of events during operations such as Savannah and Protea, the historian has to plough painstakingly through a range of sources, including boxes upon boxes of signal messages with confusing and often now unknown code words. Even those with a military background find the going tough; for civilian historians with little or no military knowledge or experience, this is often an impossible task. Many turn, therefore, to existing published sources and repeat or try to reinterpret superficial accounts produced by journalists and market-directed popular historians. In the end, of course, thorough accounts can only be produced by dedicated historians with ample time and funding, commissioned by academic or other institutions to engage the available primary sources thoroughly and systematically. There are no quick “victories” in this regard, not if the historian strives to get to the ever-elusive “objective truth”. Yet the politics of publication are such that there is little true recognition for the value of thorough, protracted research. More, simply stated, is better.

3. OFFICIAL HISTORY

Official historians are often the first to explore the primary sources and lay down the first historical accounts. Official historians – often maligned and sometimes with good reason – are however “only as good as the evidence, training, energy, perspicacity, and time to do the job”.¹⁵ The South Africa official history programme, after having been closed by minister Erasmus in 1961,¹⁶ was revived in 1968 within what was to become the Military Information Bureau (MIB). The MIB produced a

¹⁵ Robin Higham (ed.), *Official military historical offices and sources 1 Europe, Africa, the Middle East and India* (Contributions in Military Studies, Westport, Connecticut, 2000), p. xv.

¹⁶ A further important reason for the absence of academic work, albeit in terms of official history, was organisational. Field Marshal JC Smuts established a Union War Histories Section in late 1940 for the writing of South Africa's history of the Second World War, but this was closed with effect from 31 July 1961 after long-term sidelining, severe underfunding and ongoing battle with the Nationalist defence minister, Frans Erasmus, who had issues with the staff and work of this section. See the discussion in I van der Waag, "Contested histories: official history and the South African military in the 20th century" in J Grey (ed.), *The last word? Essays on official history in the United States and British Commonwealth* (Westport, Connecticut and London, 2003), pp. 38-40.

monograph series from 1968 (the so-called Black Publications) and commenced the publication of a military history journal, *Militaria*, in 1969.¹⁷

However, as Phillip Frankel, in a perceptive study of the South African high command during the early 1980s, noted, the SADF used its in-house media in combination with intellectual input from the Military Academy and elsewhere, to nurture and develop the ideology of total onslaught. There is little doubt that *Paratus* and the service magazines – *Uniform, Ad Astra*, and *Navy News* – were used to this effect; all show the assumption of moral positions and an inculcated cultural norm that colours the stories they carried. However, the position with regard to *Militaria* was a little different. It is somewhat surprising that over the 27 years that *Militaria* appeared (1969 to 1996)¹⁸ only 13 articles touched on the broader security situation in southern Africa and as few as a further six appeared on the Angolan War itself (Figure 2).

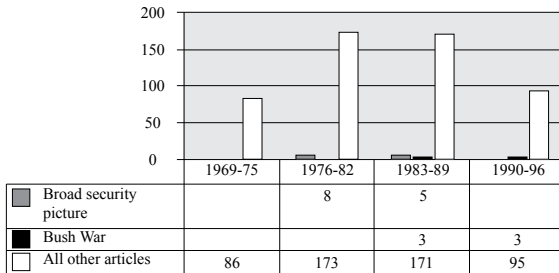


Figure 2: Articles appearing in *Militaria* on the Bush War and the security situation in southern Africa, 1969-1996

Moreover, many of these articles appeared from 1986, when the journal “lost” its history moorings and was transferred to the Public Relations Directorate, where “official history” could be harnessed more effectively.¹⁹ The SADF, as part of a broader militarisation of White South Africa, undoubtedly recognised that the media was an essential link in the construction and dissemination of the total onslaught strategy and, of course, in the manipulation of public opinion. Quoting Frankel, the SADF media bombarded “their readership with simplistic analyses of the ‘total onslaught’”.²⁰ Staffs at institutions of higher learning, chiefly the Afrikaans-

¹⁷ The emphasis in the monograph series was at first on the Anglo-Boer War, but this soon shifted in the direction of regimental and corps history. Jan Ploeger and Ian van der Waag, "South African state and state-sponsored military historical research, 1924-1995" in Higham, pp. 279-280.

¹⁸ *Militaria*, having shrugged its Public Relations orientation, was transferred first to the Military Archives (1993) and then, following the posting of the editorial staff as lecturers in the Faculty of Military Science, to the South African Military Academy (1996). In 1997, it was reconstituted as *Scientia Militaria* and, having under peer review since 1993, achieved DOE-accredited, subsidy-bearing status with effect from 2000.

¹⁹ I Van der Waag, "Contested histories..." p. 42.

²⁰ PH Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians Civil-military relations in South Africa* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 67.

medium universities, were co-opted, willingly or inadvertently, for the refinement and development of the government ideology, or, as Frankel notes, in the case of the University of Stellenbosch, the formal link to the Faculty of Military Science, housed at the Military Academy, was exploited.²¹

The foundations for the link between the staff at the Military Academy and the use of *Militaria*, specifically, for the dissemination of the government's ideology, are easily found for when this journal first covered the Angolan conflict, the first persons to write on the broader security scenario in southern Africa and the developing conflict, were all staff employed at the Military Academy. Cmdt JC Kotzé, a lecturer in the Department of Military Geography and later the Dean of Military Science at the Military Academy, produced the first article for *Militaria* relating to the security situation on the borders of South Africa, which appeared in 1977.²² This was followed in the next issue with two articles, written by Maj. PO Verbeek (Department of Military Geography) on Mozambique and the development of "the insurgent state" and Capt. Chris Nelson (Department of Political Science) on communist propaganda.²³ Nelson followed on with an article on the role of sea power in the USSR's "strategy for world domination"²⁴ and others, including those attached to the Center for Revolutionary Warfare at the Military Academy, joined in. On occasion, as Frankel pointed out, popular or university-based writers were also contracted. Helmoed Römer Heitman, for example, wrote in late 1977 on "Some possibilities in counter-insurgency operations".²⁵

The first article on the war itself appeared in 1984. This was the first published piece of official history on the war. It was titled "Die SAW se rol in SWA" (English: The SADF's role in SWA) and appeared anonymously. This placed some emphasis on the community development and agricultural and medical services delivered by the SADF to the people of SWA/Namibia and ominously warned the readership that "the moment the SADF withdraws from SWA this will create a void enabling the Cuban Forces to advance towards the south".²⁶ The following four articles appeared during the Public Relations era and some of them bear the typical hallmarks of this kind of writing. Volume 17(1), a commemorative issue marking the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the SADF, included a very short account of the operations

²¹ Frankel, p. 67.

²² JC Kotze, "Calueque en Cabora-Bassa: ekonomiese bates of politieke waagstukke?", *Militaria* 7(1), 1977, pp. 45-56.

²³ PO Verbeek, "Mosambiek: Die ontwikkeling van die insurgente staat", *Militaria* 7(2), 1977, pp. 66-69; Chris Nelson, "Propaganda: dodelike wapen van die Kommunisme", *Militaria* 7(2), 1977, pp. 70-78.

²⁴ Chris Nelson, "The role of sea power in the Soviet Union's strategy for world domination", *Militaria* 8(2), 1978, pp. 67-74.

²⁵ Helmoed Römer Heitman, "Some possibilities in counter-insurgency operations", *Militaria* 7(4), 1977, pp. 58-70.

²⁶ Anon., "Die SAW se rol in SWA", *Militaria* 14(1), 1984, pp. 37-41. Louise Jooste was the writer.

against the MPLA and SWAPO.²⁷ Colonel Neels Nöthling, then attached to the Public Relations Directorate, produced the first overview of operations in SWA/Namibia and Angola and covered the period from 1914 to 1988.²⁸ This work, really a chronicle as the title suggests, was the first treatment of some length to appear in the media of the SADF and coincided with the appearance of Willem Steenkamp's *Border War*. Most gratifying, however, after 1990 two primary sources on the war were published. They were the Operation Savannah diary of Captain JA Laubscher (1990) and a retrospective view of a sub-commander on Operation Askari (1992).²⁹ These five articles, together with Louise Jooste's historiographical essay,³⁰ are the only articles that appeared in *Militaria* on the war itself. This amnesia is also reflected in the other South African history journals.³¹

However, although the SADF published very little on the history of the Bush War and its constituent operations and little appeared in *Militaria*, which was for much of this period the SADF's military history periodical, this is not to say that no research was taking place. The then Military Information Bureau (later SADF Archives) contributed directly to the acquisition of archival material as well as the production of history on South Africa's involvement in the Angolan War. The desire of the South African general staff to learn so-called "lessons" as well as the need expressed by the government to "correct" histories appearing abroad, led to the publication of *Operasie Savannah: Angola 1975 – 1976* (1989) by FJ du T Spies. This and the other official accounts of cross-border operations that followed became the primary research base for popular writers not having access to the archival sources. Understandably, these official accounts were very selective and superficial, for all the relevant sources were not available, even to the MIB staff, and moreover classified or "sensitive" information was not disclosed.

Nonetheless, the MIB staff, with a view to the eventual production of a comprehensive history, had a strong sense of the importance of collecting and preserving as much as possible of the source material on the Bush War. The writing of the aforementioned history of Operation Savannah revealed many hiatuses (or

²⁷ Anon., "Active service in southern Africa," *Militaria* 17(1), 1987, p. 57.

²⁸ CJ Nöthling, "Kort kroniek van militêre operasies en optredes in Suidwes-Afrika en Angola, 1914-1988", *Militaria* 19(2), 1989, pp. 5-18.

²⁹ "Operasie Savannah: Dagboek van kapt. JA Laubscher (Eng. Operation Savannah: Diary of Capt. JA Laubscher", annotated and prepared for publication by Cmdt S du Preez), *Militaria* 20(2), 1990, pp. 5-27; and Brig. RS Lord, "Operation Askari: A sub-commander's retrospective view of the operation", *Militaria* 22(4), 1992, pp. 1-12.

³⁰ L. Jooste, "Die stand van Suid-Afrikaanse militêre geskiedskrywing oor die SA Weermag se betrokkenheid in Suidwes-Afrika en Angola, 1966 tot 1989", *Militaria* 23(2), 1993. On the historiography, see also SL Barnard, "Die Suid-Afrikaanse 'Grensoorlog', 1966 tot 1989: Militêre historici by die kruispad", professoral inauguration, University of the Orange Free State, 6 October 1993.

³¹ JWN Tempelhoff, "Writing histories and creating myths: perspectives on trends in the discipline of history and its representations in some South African historical journals, 1985-1995", *Scientia Militaria* 27, pp. 121-147.

“gaps”) in the historical record. This strengthened their resolve. Peddling the utilitarian value of history to a lessons-hungry Defence Headquarters (DHQ), who also wanted to counter hostile propaganda, steps were taken to ensure that all possible sources were collected and preserved at MIB. Defence Headquarters, however, went a step further; the idea that a history might be written as the events unfolded, with the final sentence written as the echoes of the last rounds fired in the operation died away, was attractive. The MIB staff could but point out that such a task was also virtually impossible, but lacking the perspective of time, would only lead to distorted history.

The confluence of interests, military and archival, produced great benefit for later historians. By the early 1980s MIB sent historians or teams of historians to the front to document cross-border operations. This involved the collection of all archival material generated during the operation, including documents (correspondence files, war diaries), maps and hundreds of photographs. They also produced logs, war diaries and tape-recordings of command meetings and interviews with combatants (officers and troops). And, all the while, the material gathered was despatched to Pretoria for final collation and safe-keeping. During Operation Protea, military archivists were deployed at the operational headquarters (Sector 10 HQ, Oshakati), the combat group headquarters and at combat team level. In so doing, some archivists crossed the Angolan border and, in one instance (Xangongo), even came under enemy fire! During and after such operations, photographs were captioned, an electronic register for the photographs was created and the tape recordings were transcribed. Substantial amounts of material were, in this way, accumulated by the military archives depot.

There was, though, not success at all the operations. In fact, the extent to which archivist and historians were embedded during Protea was not repeated. They were often treated poorly, sometimes abused, by senior officers “busy fighting a war” and without time for nice-to-haves, such as writing diaries or giving time to diary writers. The historical staff, no matter how unobtrusive, was regarded as a nuisance, always under the feet of real soldiers. They were even fobbed off as potential security breaches, as unreliable repositories of sensitive information. Information was sometimes withheld and access to some sources was barred. This is not to say that the historical staff had an even reception. Some general and senior officers had great understanding for their task and role and rendered valuable assistance to them.

The archival material chiefly collected but also generated by the MIB historians is supplemented by much promotional material, including information and propaganda pamphlets, produced by the SADF, all of which cast good light on perceptions and *modus operandi*. A few examples in this regard are *Die soldaat se*

*handboek oor Owambo*³² (*The soldier's textbook on Ovambo*), *South African Defence Force 75*,³³ *Figure in Brown*,³⁴ *Your Guide to National Service*³⁵ and *Our flag, our tradition*.³⁶ This and much similar material may be consulted in the reading room of the Documentation Centre of the SANDF.

The Military Information Bureau and its successor organisations³⁷ delivered many research products in the form of unpublished manuscripts. These were commissioned by the SADF – having largely a practical view in mind, in terms of the learning of so-called “lessons” – and most were classified (certainly) before 1994. They were written or compiled by staff of the MIB or by groups working under their tutelage.³⁸ These manuscripts include:

- WA Dorning, *The history of the Joint Monitoring Commission from the South African perspective*.
- WA Dorning, *A history of co-operation: The SA Defence Force's involvement with UNITA*.
- S du Preez, *Twisappel van die Nasies: Suidwes-Afrika se onafhanklikheidstryd tot 1979*.
- L Jooste, *Die SA Weermag in Suidwes-Afrika, 1969-1973*. This manuscript was reduced to form the first article on the war to appear in *Militaria*.³⁹

To these must be added the theses and dissertations, commenced perhaps as such projects, but presented by MIB and other SADF staff at South African universities. They invariably enjoyed official sanction and include the following:⁴⁰

- MC Dempsey 1984. *Die militêre konflik tussen die Suid-Afrikaanse magte en SWAPO in die operasionele ebied, 1974-1980* (MA, UOVS).
- JCK van der Merwe 1985. *'n Ondersoek na die ontstaan en verloop van insurgensie in Owambo tot 1983* (MA, UNISA).
- WA Dorning 1987. *A historical analysis of the military strategic implications for the Republic of South Africa of UNITA's activities in Angola, 1976-1983* (D Phil, UOFS).

³² Sektor 10, *Die soldaat se handboek oor Owambo* (Sektor 10, n.d.).

³³ South African Defence Force, *South African Defence Force 75* (South African Defence Force, c.1987).

³⁴ Military Information Bureau, SADF, *Figure in brown* (South African Defence Force, n.d.).

³⁵ Personnel Division, SADF, *Your guide to national service* (South African Defence Force, 1982).

³⁶ AM le Roux, *Our flag, our tradition* (Military Information Bureau, SADF, n.d.).

³⁷ The Military Information Bureau became the SADF Archives in 1987 and the Documentation Service in 1990. See Van der Waag, "Military record preservation in South Africa, 1914-1992", pp. 16-31.

³⁸ Jooste, "Die stand van Suid-Afrikaanse militêre geskiedskrywing...", p. 12.

³⁹ Anon., "Die SAW se rol in SWA", *Militaria* 14(1), 1984, pp. 37-41.

⁴⁰ Van der Waag, "Contested histories", pp. 27-52.

- WS van der Waals 1990. *Angola 1961-1974: A study in revolutionary war* (D Phil, UOFS), a popularised version of which was published in 1993 as *Portugal's war in Angola, 1961-1974*.⁴¹

Moreover, in the realm of official history, unit, corps, formation and service magazines and newsletters, past and current, make a useful contribution to the literature of the Angolan conflict. The accounts of specific battles or other aspects of the war, which still appear in these sources, are often helpful from a tactical and even an operational perspective, even if they are not always firmly researched-based, for most are written by military practitioners rather than academics. Major J-P Scherman's article on the battle for the Lomba River, which appeared in the *School of Armour Newsletter* (2007), is a recent example.⁴²

It is easy to criticise official history and official historians, and the blows that may be delivered are many and varied. However, in many ways, as Jeff Grey and Robin Higham argued, official histories "are best understood as the first word, not the final one"; they are useful exploration and route markers for others to exploit and statements on the frame of the official mind at the time.⁴³ However, like the Union War Histories Unit, the MIB and its successors were constrained by a lack of higher vision, poor funding and an inability to retain good staff. As a result, most of the writing of the history, even within the SADF, increasingly took place elsewhere or under contract. The production of the official history of Operation Savannah, the first of the South African campaigns in Angola, is a case in point.

4. CAMPAIGN AND BATTLEFIELD HISTORY

Although the first South African official history of Operation Savannah (an incursion into Angola that lasted from November 1975 to March 1976) only appeared in 1989, the writing of this history had started in 1978. Savannah, the first conventional deployment of South African troops since Korea, took place under the greatest secrecy and for years afterwards, due to severe restrictions on the dissemination of information to the public, South Africans were still unfamiliar with the details of the South African involvement in the Angolan conflict. However, the many journalists who were in Angola at the time of the war supplied the world press with reportage. The Columbian reporter, Garcia Marques, in particular, gave detailed information on Cuban involvement in the war and yet the South African government, despite this relatively comprehensive reportage, muzzled the South African media and released little information, historical or otherwise.⁴⁴

⁴¹ WS van der Waals, *Portugal's war in Angola* (Rivonia 1990).

⁴² J-P Scherman, "The battle for the Lomba: South African armour in Angola", *Corbadus XXIII(II)*, 2007, pp. 18-25.

⁴³ Grey, *The last word?*, p. xi.

⁴⁴ Jooste, "Die stand van Suid-Afrikaanse militêre geskiedskrywing...", p. 12 passim.

In the meantime, however, the SADF's historical services (a section of the MIB) commenced with an official project on the operation, the purpose of which was both utilitarian (there were the so-called lessons to be learned) as well as propagandistic (an alternative, corrective story had to be produced to counterbalance the accounts appearing elsewhere in the world, which were considered at best unsympathetic, but largely misinformed, even vindictive). At least one person felt it was owed to the South African public. Professor FJ du Toit Spies, an Afrikaner historian from the University of Pretoria's history department, was appointed in July 1978 to undertake the work, together with a small group of collaborators. They produced a fully-annotated manuscript, which lay fallow until the classification was lifted and a censored version of the original manuscript was published in 1989 as an official publication of the SA Defence Force. However, this book, which was to present the SADF viewpoint, also appeared only in Afrikaans and was therefore inaccessible to most foreigners.⁴⁵ Popular writers, due to restrictions imposed by defence and archives legislation, were not given access to the military archives.

As Louise Jooste observed, Operation Savannah in many ways marked the beginning of a new era in South African military history. It was not only the first conventional operation conducted by the SADF since World War II, but it also ushered in a new direction in the historiography. The research focus now switched in part from the Anglo-Boer Wars to the new series of conflicts on the South African frontier; twentieth century campaigns that, it seemed, would determine the future of white South Africa and of the Afrikaner in particular.

These new campaign histories, for the reasons stated in the introduction, were "military" in orientation, focussing on the operational activities of the SADF. Several operations following Savannah – Reindeer, Sceptic, Modular, Hooper, Packer and Displace – received attention. Willem Steenkamp, in his *Borderstrike* (1983), dealt with operations Reindeer and Sceptic (the pre-emptive strikes against SWAPO that lasted from May 1978 to June 1980) as well as the follow-up operations in Zambia.⁴⁶ The histories of the following four operations – after which the SADF ended its involvement in Angola and its connection with UNITA (lasting from August 1987 to August 1988) – were addressed by Heitman in his *War in Angola* (1990).⁴⁷ Peter Stiff produced a most readable account of the nine days of war (1 to 9 August 1990) during which 1 600 PLAN members crossed the border and clashed with South African security forces. This was the last military operation of the war in which the SADF took part.⁴⁸ An overview of the entire war was presented by Willem Steenkamp as

⁴⁵ FJ du Toit Spies, *Angola Operasie Savannah 1975-1976* (SA Weermag: Pretoria, 1989); Jooste, "Die stand van Suid-Afrikaanse militêre geskiedskrywing...", p. 13.

⁴⁶ Willem Steenkamp, *Borderstrike South Africa into Angola* (Durban, 1983).

⁴⁷ Helmoed Römer Heitman, *War in Angola The final South African phase* (Gibraltar, 1990).

⁴⁸ Peter Stiff, *Nine days of war* (Alberton, 1989).

South Africa's Border War (1989).⁴⁹ This is a commendable work, which does not meet all of the standards of rigorous historical research and publication, but curiously remains *locus classicus*, there being no other book-length work. More recently, Paul Els, in a rather disjointed effort, addressed the 1966 clash at Ongulumbashe, which triggered the so-called Bush War.⁵⁰

Some of the journal articles and book chapters that cover broad swathes of the period are:

- WS Barnard 1982. "Die geografie van 'n rewolusionêre oorlog: SWAPO in Suidwes-Afrika", *South African Geographer* 10(2).
- SL Barnard 1991. "'n Historiese oorsig van die gewapende konflik op die noordgrens van SWA/Namibië, 1966-1989", *Acta Academica* 23(1).
- J Cock and L Nathan (eds) 1989. *War and society; the militarisation of South Africa* (Cape Town and Johannesburg), various chapters.
- D Conradie 1982. "South Africa at war, 1912-1982", *Militaria* 12(2).
- D Conradie 1983. "Achievements of the SADF, 1961-1982", *Militaria* 13(2).
- W Dorning 1987. "A concise history of the South African Defence Force, 1912-1987", *Militaria* 17(2).
- JS Kotze 1994. "Die strategiese kontinuum: Raamwerk vir 'n studie van Suid-Afrikaanse strategie in die Namibiese konflik", *Joernaal vir Eietydse Geskiedenis/Journal for Contemporary History* 19(3).
- GC Khwela 2000. "Umkhonto we Sizwe's contribution to the defence of the African revolution in Angola", *Scientia Militaria* 30(2).
- L Scholtz 2006. "The Namibian Border War: An appraisal of the South African strategy", *Scientia Militaria* 34(1).

Some important sources, published elsewhere (and therefore falling outside this discussion), are:

- KM Campbell 1988. "The soldiers of apartheid", *School of advanced international studies Review* 8(1).
- G Cawthra 1986. *Brutal force; the apartheid war machine* (London).
- G Cawthra 1988. "South Africa at war" in J Lonsdale (ed.), *South Africa in question* (Cambridge).
- C Coker 1983. "Conflict and conflict management in Africa: South Africa; a new military role in southern Africa, 1968-1982", *Survival* 25(2).
- R Dale 1980. "The armed forces as an instrument of South African policy in Namibia", *Journal of Modern African Studies* 18(1).

⁴⁹ Willem Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War, 1966-1989* (Gibraltar, 1989).

⁵⁰ Paul J Els, *Ongulumbashe Where the Bushwar began* (Wandsbeck, South Africa, 2007). This work was originally published in Afrikaans in 2004 under the title *Ongulumbashe Die begin van die bosoorlog*. The English edition adds nothing of significance to the original Afrikaans text, although of course making it accessible to a far wider audience.

- S Ellis and T Sechaba 1992. *Comrades against Apartheid, the ANC and South African Communist Party in Exile* (London).
- F Toase 1985. "The South African Army: the campaign in South West Africa/Namibia since 1966", in *Armed forces and modern counter-insurgency* (London).

Several controversial events, as may be expected, loom large in the historiography. These include the raid on Cassinga (1978)⁵¹ and the battles at Cuito Cuanavale (1987-88).⁵² The recent appearance of a Freedom Park Trust publication produced by Jabulani Sithole and titled *An epic tale of selfless sacrifices; Cuba's internationalism in Africa, 1962-1991* is a clear reflection on the levels of contention.⁵³ With his conclusion embedded in his title, this work, which is unfortunately largely a simple mining of Gleijeses' work, is subjective and one-sided, but does make a contribution, if superficial, in elucidating diverging viewpoints. Typical has been a recent exchange in the *Sunday Independent*, a Johannesburg-based newspaper. Ronnie Kasrils, a former MK intelligence chief and a former minister for intelligence services in the Mbeki government, was at its centre. He argued that, while former SADF generals claim victory, Cuito Cuanavale marked a turning point; throughout the SADF failed to seize the initiative, they confused military power with national strategy, and a crucial victory at the town, with the help of Cuban forces, led eventually to the liberation of South Africa.⁵⁴ Needless to say, these ideas, which ignore the international setting quite entirely, were not left unchallenged. McWilliams describes this as a "yearning ... for any kind of military credential",⁵⁵ while Warwick dismissed the Kasrils article as a desperate "attempt by a communist party veteran to try and salvage some small historical glories from the ideological desolation left to those still believing anything worthwhile ever came from Soviet and Cuban military adventures".⁵⁶ Much more has, of course, appeared abroad; all contributing to a debate that remains emotive.

⁵¹ See SL Barnard, "Die Suid-Afrikaanse 'Grensoorlog', 1966 tot 1989"; J Geldenhuys, *A general's story from an era of war and peace* (Johannesburg, 1995), pp. 92-94; and M Malan, *My lewe saam met die SA Weermag* (Pretoria, 2006). Colonel Jan Breytenbach's autobiographical work *Eagle strike* will be released to coincide with the 30th commemoration of the Battle of Cassinga (4 May 1978).

⁵² L Scholtz, "Cuito Cuanavale: Wie het werklik gewen?", *Scientia Militaria* 28(1), 1998; chapter 5 of Hilton Hamann, *Days of the generals; The untold story of South Africa's apartheid-era military generals* (Cape Town, 2001); as well as G Mills and D Williams, "Cuito Cuanavale, 1987-88: Every cause needs a victory", in G Mills and D Williams, *7 Battles that shaped South Africa* (Cape Town, 2006) and portions of the autobiographies of SADF generals Jannie Geldenhuys and Magnus Malan.

⁵³ J Sithole, *An epic tale of selfless sacrifices; Cuba's internationalism in Africa, 1962-1991* (The Freedom Park Trust, Pretoria, c. 2008).

⁵⁴ Ronnie Kasrils, "Turning point at Cuito Cuanavale", *The Sunday Independent*, 23 March 2008, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Mike McWilliams, "Nice try, MK Ronnie, but alas, no (Cuban) cigar", Letters to the editor, *The Sunday Independent*, 30 March 2008, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Rodney Warwick, "Kasrils's hero worship wears thin on the ground", Letters to the editor, *The Sunday Independent*, 30 March 2008, p. 7.

The story of Cuito Cuanavale was, moreover, discovered by writers of a genre that has gained much popularity in South Africa and elsewhere over the last few years.⁵⁷ This is the battlefield guide. In a 2006 work by Mills and Williams, Cuito Cuanavale is billed as one of seven *Battles that shaped South Africa*; the other battles addressed are Blood River, Isandlwana, Majuba, Colenso, Delville Wood and El Alamein.⁵⁸ However, as may be expected in a work of this nature, the chapter on Cuito Cuanavale contains no major revelations or significant new facts, despite the claim on the cover that it includes “new information” on this Bush-War battle. Moreover, although they do place the battle in its strategic context, few useful tactical details are given and, in contrast to the other chapters, the Cuito Cuanavale piece fails as a battlefield guide, for it provides merely a web address of a tourism site and a warning that the battlefield is rather inaccessible due to infrequent and inconsistent flights and, more ominously, of the danger of landmines around the battlefield. Mills and Williams do include a number of interesting anecdotes, which, although perhaps not always directly relevant to the topic, provide some entertaining reading. During the peace talks, for example, Castro’s sexy interpreter would slowly cross and uncross her legs to divert attention from Castro when he needed time to ponder over a more difficult question posed by the South African representative, Neil van Heerden.⁵⁹

The operations that have already been addressed through publication are largely the more important, but not, by far, the only operations conducted by the SADF in SWA/Namibia and Angola. In fact, a large number of area and cross-border operations still await attention and, as Louise Jooste noted, the SADF’s withdrawal from SWA/Namibia, “’n aksie wat fyn beplanning en noukeurige uitvoering geverg het” (Eng: an action that demanded fine planning and careful execution), is in itself an important subject for research.⁶⁰

Moreover, most of the South African publications that appeared as either campaign and battle histories or indeed regimental histories are of the traditional military history or “drum-and-trumpet” type, with a strong focus on the operational and, at times, tactical levels. This resulted in several gaps in the historiography. In particular, there is little after the fashion of John Keegan’s *Face of battle*, which appeared in 1976 and set the mark for military historians; this was military history from the battlefield. Breaking with the stylized format of battle descriptions, Keegan conveyed the experience of combat and what this meant for the combatants.⁶¹

One of the few works to cross into the so-called “new military history” is Sophia du Preez’s *Avontuur in Angola* (Eng: Adventure in Angola), the second of the

⁵⁷ Black, p. 34.

⁵⁸ Mills and Williams, “Cuito Cuanavale...”.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁶⁰ Jooste, “Die stand van Suid-Afrikaanse militêre geskiedskrywing...”, p. 14.

⁶¹ John Keegan, *The face of battle* (London, 1976, London, 1978).

two books on Savannah to appear in 1989.⁶² She recreates the combat experiences of the South African soldier against the background of Operation Savannah, touching on the deprivations, endurance, bravery and humour. Although disparaged in some quarters⁶³ (certainly the dust cover and outward presentation deserved more attention), this work was a major step forward and remains in approach the most original work to appear in South Africa on the war to date.

However, there are no scholarly works on SADF activity away from the battlefield; on the civil affairs actions, medical assistance and the creation and development of military communities. And, perhaps most of all, there has been no attempt to explain the reasons for the sacrifices so many young South Africans were called to make.

5. REGIMENTAL HISTORY

The MIB and its successor, the Documentation Service Directorate, produced as part of the Black Publications series a range of regimental and corps histories, each of which covered in varying degree the period of our interest. Yet, in view of the policy constraints, very little appeared in each of these volumes on the role of the particular outfit in the Angolan War.

The first three unit histories of this series appeared before the magic year of 1983 and contain very little post-World War II history.⁶⁴ Otto's history of the Special Service Battalion appeared in 1973, before large-scale military commitment, and for this reason alone would contain little of the Angolan War. It is, however, in the genre of the worst unit history; it is a cut-and-paste from parade programmes, speeches and reports. Jacobs's history of the Signal Corps (1975) ends in essence in 1945; the chapter on the period from 1945-1974, written by General George Meiring, then Director of the SA Corps of Signals, is little more than a conclusion ending with an emotive appeal for all signallers "to remain true to their 'Jimmy'" or Mercurius.⁶⁵ Bouch's *Infantry in South Africa* (1977), a publication of greater depth and insight too, ends in 1945; however, there is a useful guide to all of the infantry regiments and battalions of the SADF at the back, covering the period since 1945.⁶⁶

⁶² Sophia du Preez, *Avontuur in Angola Die verhaal van Suid-Afrika se soldate in Angola, 1975-1976* (Pretoria, 1989). It is still only available in Afrikaans.

⁶³ Jooste describes it as being "scarcely classifiable as history". See Jooste, "Die stand van Suid-Afrikaanse militêre geskiedskrywing...", p. 15.

⁶⁴ J Ploeger, *The fortification of Pretoria Yesterday and today* (Publication 1, 1968); W Otto, *Die Spesiale Diensbataljon, 1933-1973* (Publication 2, 1973); CM Bakkes, *Die Britse deurbraak aan die Benede-Tugela op Majubadag 1900* (Publication 3, 1973).

⁶⁵ FJ Jacobs *et al.*, *South African Corps of Signals* (Publication 4, 1975).

⁶⁶ RJ Bouch (ed.), *Infantry in South Africa, 1652-1976* (Publication 5, 1977). The following publication in the series concerned the Second Anglo-Boer War: JE Rabie, *Generaal CR de Wet se krygsleiding by Sannaspos en Groenkop* (Publication 6, 1980).

It was not until 1983 and the publication of the history of the South African Medical Corps, which appeared just as the policy on the writing of the history of the SADF's bush operations was thawing, that we get the first glimpses in the Black Publications series of the conflict in Angola. Neels Nöthling, who contributed chapter 9 ("Jare van groei en ontwikkeling 1961-1982"; English: Years of growth and development 1961-1982), included a discussion on the deployment of the Medical Services during Operation Savannah.⁶⁷ A further two followed in the series, which contain brief chapters on the operational deployment of the artillery and the outfit meant to supply the troops with canteen facilities and basic necessities.⁶⁸ These writers, allowed to address the war after 1983, were still constrained by severe access restrictions to sources. Contrary to public perception, even official historians are not able to see everything.

The historians of the citizen force regiments – unofficial in many respects – were key figures in the production of regimental history in South Africa. Their work, independent from the SADF since their brush with Frans Erasmus, has been ongoing and of varying quality. At times university or museum-based historians, perhaps associated with a more fortunate regiment, produced these accounts. The latest history of the Witwatersrand Rifles, published in 1989⁶⁹ and written by Stan Monick of the South African National Museum for Military History in Johannesburg, is a case in point. Monick succeeded in adopting what he claimed to be “a unique and refreshingly original approach to regimental history specifically, and South African military history in general”. He departed from both traditional approaches to the writing of regimental history; he claims to be neither an analyst, a mere compiler of the so-called facts, nor a parochial chronicler, that is someone who cannot conceive the regiment's history beyond the narrow confines of the regiment itself. Monick, adopting something of a sociological approach, rather attempted to “capture the rhythms” of the regiment as a social organism.

“[He] adopts as his model an extended family. It is discussed in terms of a body in which authority is vested in a group of seniors; in which personalities may drastically affect its fortunes – for good or ill – and in which the rejuvenating power of life streams from other ‘families’ is crucial; and, above all, which is powerfully moulded by a changing political-social-economic environment.”⁷⁰

These themes – the role of personalities, the political-social context and the role of regenerating life streams, set in a non-parochial narrative – are explored

⁶⁷ AE van Jaarsveldt *et al.*, *Militêre geneeskunde in Suid-Afrika, 1913-1983* (Publication 7, 1983).

⁶⁸ CJ Nöthling (ed.), *Ultima Ratio Regum; Artillery history of South Africa* (Publication 8, 1987); and IJ van der Waag, *A history of the South African Defence Force Institute (SADFI), 1914-1990* (Publication 9, 1991).

⁶⁹ S Monick, *A bugle calls; The story of the Witwatersrand Rifles and its predecessors, 1899-1987* (Witwatersrand Rifles Regimental Council: Germiston 1989).

⁷⁰ S Monick, "An original approach to regimental history: The story of the Witwatersrand Rifles", *Militaria* 19(4), 1989, pp. 4-14.

in depth as the book develops. However, not all units have access to such human resources and in many cases this work was left to an officer or a warrant officer with much vigour but without historical training.

As is the case with controversial battles and campaigns the world over, the roles and experiences of élite units in battle are addressed repeatedly by various authors, often members or former members of the outfits in question. Two South African units – 31 Battalion and 32 Battalion – are cases in point; however, it should be noted that the coverage and treatment is uneven and for various reasons. 32 Battalion, South Africa's so-called Foreign Legion, established mostly from Angolan refugees entering South West Africa (now Namibia) after South Africa's initial intervention in the Angolan Civil War in 1975-76, was particularly well-served by three former members: the legendary Colonel Jan Breytenbach, founder and first commander of the unit; the second, Piet Nortjé,⁷¹ who served in 32 Battalion for many years, and, thirdly, by Louis Bothma,⁷² a conscript junior officer in 32 Battalion from 1977-1979. Whereas 31 Battalion (the so-called Bushman Battalion) did not have a professional historian or an insightful former commander, a Breytenbach, the history was contracted to Ian Uys, an accountant by profession.⁷³ Moreover, the only attempt at a collective history of the former SADF élite forces in the Bush War was written by an amateur and popular writer, Paul J Els; his *We fear naught but God; the story of the South African Special Forces* appeared in 2000.⁷⁴ This was slated, and rightly so, for "not doing proper justice to the story of a select band of warriors, some of whom were amongst the finest soldiers that South Africa has ever produced ... they deserve an objective and professional record ... not an exercise in backslapping self-congratulation".⁷⁵

Secondly, with little exception, these books do not rest upon sound, historical research. Most regimental and unit historians were constrained by sources, not enjoying unrestricted access to the military archives (few historians do) or, for personal reasons and lack of adequate historical training, avoiding the use of primary material. Some interviews were conducted, drawing much useful anecdotal material; but few trawled the servicemen's magazines of the time.⁷⁶ All, of course, did not have access to private letters and diaries; sadly, there has never been a strong literary tradition in the South African military. Breytenbach, who produced *Forged in battle* (1986) and then *They lived by the sword* (1990), used sources that at best may be described as often

⁷¹ Piet Nortjé, *32 Battalion The inside story of South Africa's élite fighting unit* (Cape Town, 2004).

⁷² For reviews on Bothma's book, see L Scholtz, "Goeie bydrae tot boeke oor Grensoorlog", *Die Burger*, 18 Junie 2007; and A Esterhuysen, Book Review, *Scientia Militaria* 35(1), 2007, pp. 135-137.

⁷³ I Uys, *Bushman soldiers their Alpha and Omega* (Germiston, 1993).

⁷⁴ Paul J Els, *We fear naught but God; The story of the South African Special Forces* (Johannesburg, 2000).

⁷⁵ Brigadier McGill Alexander, Book Review, *Scientia Militaria* 30(2), 2000, p. 332.

⁷⁶ These include *Commando* (later *Paratus*), *Warrior*, *Ad Astra*, *Navy News* and *Milmed*.

vague.⁷⁷ Surprisingly, military officers, after a lifetime of familiarity with military documentation, utilise little more than the regulations and orders associated with their expertise and are put off by the vastness of the archival holdings.

Conversely, Piet Nortjé based his book – *32 Battalion: The inside story of South Africa's elite fighting unit* – primarily on official, archival sources⁷⁸ and Bothma – *Die buffel struikel: 'n storie van 32 Bataljon en sy mense* [Eng: *The Buffalo stumbles: A story of 32 Battalion and its people*]⁷⁹ – made a thorough study of the available published material on 32 Battalion, consulted all official documentation he could lay his hand on in the SANDF Archives (some documents are still classified and therefore inaccessible) and conducted numerous interviews with former members of the battalion. Bothma's painstaking research and comparatively honest account of the sometimes very gruesome experiences of the men from this élite unit make his work a very valuable addition to the growing discourse on South Africa's controversial Bush War and the history of 32 Battalion. He succeeds in striking a fairly good balance between his personal experience of the war, the politico-strategic context of the conflict and the operational and tactical direction of the war.⁸⁰ As is the case with most regimental histories, particularly élite forces, Bothma emphasises the courage and skills of his comrades, but also does not hesitate to indicate where Swapo's guerrilla forces had the initiative and dictated the terms of the war to them.⁸¹ A weakness of the work is that it covers, understandably, mostly the two years that Bothma himself served in the unit. Both the Nortjé and Bothma accounts on 32 Battalion are much more than ordinary regimental history. These are their Bush War memoirs almost in the Keeganesque, *Face of battle* tradition, and will again be addressed under the section on biography and autobiography below.

6. BIOGRAPHY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND PROSOPOGRAPHY

Many unit historians, including Breytenbach, Bothma and Nortjé, served with the outfit, making, in a sense, their accounts first-hand. However, most of their work suffers from the problems typical to writing too close to the events. Even so, the dearth of good, first-hand sources together with the role played by leadership in warfare, endows autobiography with particular importance. In the preface to his history of the Burma campaign, Field Marshal Lord Slim takes up a similar argument, which, although pertaining to another era and another war, may be used to inform general experience. "A general who has taken part in a campaign", he says, "is by

⁷⁷ Jan Breytenbach, *Forged in battle* (Cape Town, 1986); and Breytenbach, *They lived by the sword 32 Buffalo Battalion – South Africa's Foreign Legion* (Alberton, 1990).

⁷⁸ Scholtz, "Goeie bydrae tot boeke oor Grensoorlog", *Die Burger*, 18 Junie 2007.

⁷⁹ LJ Bothma, *Die buffel struikel 'n storie van 32 Bataljon en sy mense* (Bloemfontein, 2006).

⁸⁰ Esterhuyse, Book Review, p. 136.

⁸¹ Scholtz, *Die Burger*, 18 June 2007.

no means best fitted to write its history. That, if it is to be complete and unbiased, should be the work of someone less personally involved. Yet such a general might write something of value. He might, as honestly as he could, tell of the problems he faced, why he took the decisions he did, what helped, what hindered, the luck he had, and the mistakes he made. He might, by showing how one man attempted the art of command, be of use to those who later may themselves have to exercise it. He might even give, to those who have not experienced it, some impression of what it feels like to shoulder a commander's responsibilities in war."⁸²

"History", moreover, as Philips notes rather ominously, "is not (necessarily) written by the winners ... history is written by survivors ... and in the long run we are all dead"⁸³ Whatever the dangers of autobiography – of one-sidedness, subjectivity, self-justification, deliberate omissions and other distortions – autobiographies, as records of the past, are unique and important sources for the actors report first-hand on events in which they participated or which they witnessed. In fact, one might even argue that the value of autobiographical work lies precisely in the distorted picture painted, revealing emphasis and bias, ignorance, and other weaknesses. Two decades after the termination of the Bush War, its survivors, and especially those who occupied the top posts during the conflict, are becoming fewer and it is truly a pity that so few autobiographies pertaining to the Angolan conflict were produced. For this reason alone, each new autobiography that appears while the sand runs out is most welcome.⁸⁴

Very few autobiographies have emerged from those who occupied the top ranks in the former SANDF and the liberation armies during the Bush War. Ronnie Kasrils' *Armed and dangerous* (1993)⁸⁵ stands out as a near solitary example in the case of the latter, while to date two erstwhile chiefs of the SA Army and subsequently of the SADF, Generals JJ Geldenhuys (1993/1995)⁸⁶ and MA de M Malan (2007)⁸⁷ wrote their memoirs. The three were involved directly and intimately in the Angolan conflict (Kasrils perhaps less so than the other two) and all were in a position to provide first-hand information and insights about the events. However, all also had the benefit of hindsight, having not only witnessed the culmination of

⁸² Preface to Field Marshal Viscount Slim, *Defeat into victory* (London, 1999).

⁸³ JE Philips, "What is African history?", in JE Philips (ed.), *Writing African history* (Rochester, 2005), p. 26.

⁸⁴ The Cuban leader's autobiography has appeared recently. See Fidel Castro, *My life* (London, 2007).

⁸⁵ R Kasrils, *Armed and dangerous My undercover struggle against apartheid* (Oxford, etc., 1993).

⁸⁶ J Geldenhuys, *Die wat wen* (Pretoria, 1993) / J Geldenhuys, *A general's story from an era of war and peace* (Johannesburg, 1995). A new edition of Geldenhuys's work has appeared recently under the title *Die wat gewen het Feite en fabels van die Bosoerlog* (Pretoria, 2007). The text of the original work was not revised; the author merely added a new foreword and final chapter (epilogue), an expanded index, a name list of all persons who died in the service of the SADF (all causes) between 1962 and 1990, a chronology of the Cold War in southwestern Africa, 1975-1990 and an alphabetical list of the various SADF operations during the Bush War.

⁸⁷ MA de M Malan, *My lewe saam met die SA Weermag* (Pretoria, 2006).

the political revolutions in southern Africa and the former Soviet Union, but had the opportunity to read the reflections of others. What is more, all to a lesser or greater extent anticipated the unwinding of future events under the long shadows cast by the past. The publication of the works of Kasril and Geldenhuys coincided with the 1994 elections and political transition in South Africa; while Malan's work was published in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings. These events undeniably coloured the vision of these men; all three potentially had reason to protect themselves and their comrades. Moreover, both Kasrils and Malan are politicians. In assessing their memoirs, it is almost equally important to analyse what they are disclosing and what they are withholding. Yet, Kasrils, Geldenhuys and Malan, whatever the shortcomings of their contributions, added to the existing primary sources on the Angolan conflict.

Kasrils' book deals by and large with his role in the ANC/MK's liberation struggle, but also devotes some attention to the ANC/MK's involvement in Angola, *inter alia* his own employment (1976) "to teach politics"⁸⁸ in the ANC camps in that country. Though the work is not too objective and does not contain too much information on the Angolan conflict itself, it does cast some light on the interaction of liberation forces in southern Africa in general and in Angola in particular. M Twala and E Benard's *Mbokodo inside MK; Mwezi Twala – A soldier's story*,⁸⁹ published shortly after Kasrils' book, tells a very different story, dealing with, *inter alia*, his suffering in the ANC's penal camps in Angola. Having an axe to grind with the MK leadership, Twala's work is not quite objective either, but definitely makes a contribution to the history of the ANC/MK's actions in Angola. Needless to say, much work on the ANC and its campaigning in Angola has also yet to be done.

The position of Malan and Geldenhuys is of particular significance from an academic perspective in that they were amongst the first graduates of the South African Military Academy (established in 1950 to enhance the intellectual capacity of the officers corps) to occupy the top posts in the former SADF. Three Academy graduates, Magnus Malan (1976–1980), Constand Viljoen (1980–1985) and Jannie Geldenhuys (1985–1990), became Chief of the SADF in succession – after having also occupied the position of Chief of the Army in succession since 1973. Malan, furthermore, became Minister for Defence in 1980, a position he held until 1990. Military Academy graduates thus dominated the top hierarchy of the SADF virtually from the commencement of the RSA's involvement in Angola in the mid-1970s.⁹⁰

Not only did Malan and Geldenhuys have a university education to enhance their understanding of their politico-military environment and bolster their

⁸⁸ Kasrils, p. 136.

⁸⁹ M Twala and E Benard, *Mbokodo inside MK; Mwezi Twala – A soldier's story* (Johannesburg, 1994).

⁹⁰ GE Visser, *Die geskiedenis van die Suid-Afrikaanse Militêre Akademie, 1950-1990* (DPhil dissertation, Stellenbosch University, 2000), p. 504.

writing skills, but they both attached much value to the study of military history throughout their careers in the SADF. Malan regarded the study of military history as fundamental to officer development and it became a compulsory subject, at his insistence, during his term of office as commanding officer of the Military Academy (1967-71). Geldenhuys, who lists military history first among the subjects that he “liked most” as a student and which later stood him “in good stead”,⁹¹ made an effort (1990) to make military history compulsory for all students once again when he was Chief of the SADF.⁹² The value they attach to history probably prompted them to tell their stories and might, perhaps, have assisted them in producing useful accounts of their military careers.

Geldenhuys occupied, *inter alia*, the posts of commanding officer of the former South West Africa Command, Chief of the SA Army and Chief of the SADF during the Bush War and is thus in a position to express an authoritative view on the conduct of that conflict. He provides a good overview of the SADF’s conduct of the war and the assumptions and philosophy underlying its actions. As Chief of the SADF he was also involved in the peace process, adding further value to his perspective. However, as Scholtz observes,⁹³ there are no sensational revelations in Geldenhuys’s book.

Malan’s book, which appeared in 2006, 14 years after the first appearance of the Geldenhuys autobiography, focusses on the role of the SADF, and his role as SADF officer and later Minister of Defence, in southern Africa from about 1960 to 1994, but also addresses a wide range of events which, in Malan’s view, formed part of the context within which the SADF operated.⁹⁴ His work boasts a substantial source list, which includes some primary sources, but mostly consists of secondary sources. The great weakness of his work is that there is no systematic engagement of official archives (civilian and military) to support these sources and his own memory. Scholtz points out⁹⁵ that he presents certain matters as facts, but all too often offers mostly his own speeches in Parliament in support – and all politician’s speeches should be taken with a pinch of salt!

As Malan points out,⁹⁶ given the scope of his book, it was impossible to cover the SADF’s role in the Angolan conflict in detail. On the other hand, he states that “in many cases there are good reasons why everything could not be included in the book”.⁹⁷ But his work gives the reader an invaluable insight into his own (and to

⁹¹ Geldenhuys, *A general's story...*, p. 22.

⁹² Visser, pp. 290, 315-331, 495-497.

⁹³ Scholtz, "Generaal se oorlogstorie: Geldenhuys se intelligente persoonlike oorsig", *Die Burger*, 25 Januarie 1994.

⁹⁴ Malan, p. 9.

⁹⁵ Scholtz, "Eensydigheid knou geloofwaardigheid", *Die Burger*, 16 October 2006.

⁹⁶ Malan, p. 10.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* (authors' translation).

a large extent the former National Party government's⁹⁸) understanding and interpretation, for strategic, operational and eventually political purposes, of the conflict in Angola and South Africa and the SANDF's involvement in it from a domestic, regional and global, particularly Cold War, perspective. When the first shots were fired in the counterinsurgency war in 1966, Malan was the commander of the erstwhile South West Africa Command; when South Africa intervened in Angola in 1975, he was Chief of the SA Army; during the escalation of the counterinsurgency operations in northern Namibia and southern Angola he was the Chief of the SADF; at the height of the SADF's cross-border operations he became Minister of Defence, a position that he still held when the last shots were fired in Angola and South Africa, Cuba and Angola finally made peace after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Gray claims *inter alia*:

“One of the genuine revelations of recent scholarship on the Cold War is the extent to which both superpowers were manipulated by their allies... Despite its increasingly parlous economic conditions from the 1960s to the 1980s, the Soviet Union devoted substantial scarce resources to supporting unpromising clients in Asia and Africa... the protracted Cuban adventure in Angola in the mid-1970s was an especially unwelcome draw on Soviet resources that Moscow had little option other than to suffer. To policy-makers in the West, Soviet intervention in Ethiopia in 1977... and Angola in 1976 was not interpreted as it should have been – as a reluctant bowing to Cuban pressure – but rather as bold Soviet geopolitical moves.”⁹⁹

Though Gray's claim might be a bit wide, it is important to take note of new interpretations of the Cold War and the Soviet Union's actions and intentions in that era. Scholtz¹⁰⁰ accuses Malan, not without justification, if one compares his book with the *White Papers on Defence*¹⁰¹ of the time, of repeating the apartheid government's view of the USSR's policy towards South Africa and the ANC as “the full truth”. Malan, on the other hand, points out, also with some justification, that “people today often look back at the ‘struggle’ period [and the actions of the Defence Force] without really taking the circumstances of the time into consideration. It is easy to judge events in retrospect according to reality as it changed after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, and thus within the context of the disappearance of the Soviet Union's world wide communist-imperialist onslaught.”¹⁰² Quite obviously, the refusal of the Nationalist Party to see the black liberation struggles in southern Africa in general and South Africa in particular, for what they were and instead portray them as part

⁹⁸ See, e.g., FW de Klerk, *F.W. de Klerk Die laaste trek – 'n nuwe begin Die outobiografie* (Pretoria, 2006), pp. 77-78, 177-178 on the USSR and the communist threat against South Africa.

⁹⁹ CS Gray, *War, peace and international relations An introduction to strategic history* (London, and New York, 2007), p. 195.

¹⁰⁰ Scholtz, *Die Burger*, 16 October 2006.

¹⁰¹ Compare Malan, pp. 67-68, 72, 76-83, 113-144, 152, 160, 174-175, 189-194 with Republic of South Africa, *Review of Defence and Armaments Production Period 1960 to 1970*, Republic of South Africa, *White Paper on Defence and Armaments Supply, 1984*; see also De Klerk, pp. 132-133.

¹⁰² Malan, p. 11 (authors' translation).

of the USSR's quest for world domination to suit South Africa's racial policies, was a fundamental flaw.

Contemporary readers should also bear the old truism in mind that in the eyes of the "beholder", perceptions in the Cold War era, however distorted they might have been to fit the arguments of the various stakeholders, were as good as facts. Whatever biases and flaws Malan's work might suffer from, his position as Pretoria's chief praetorian for the duration of the war, makes his autobiography compulsory reading for whoever wants to understand South Africa and the SANDF's involvement in the protracted Angolan conflict. Without making major revelations, he states the facts and perceptions that underpinned military decision making as he saw them and in the process counters some of the unfounded and propagandistic claims of some of his critics.

However, an even greater dearth of autobiography exists below the level of supreme command. One of the few memoirs produced by a unit commander is Colonel Jan Breytenbach's *Eagle strike*, which was released to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the Battle of Cassinga. As Breytenbach was involved in the planning of the SADF's largest airborne operation during the Bush War, culminating in the battle at Cassinga on 4 May 1978, jumped with the South African paratroopers and personally led them into battle, his book will be, no doubt, a useful contribution to the Cassinga debate.

Tens of thousands of young South Africans, of all races, fought with or against one another during the Angolan War. Whether SADF troop or ANC cadre, there, along the Cunene River or deeper in Angola, they formed notions and held hopes for a "better world". Although the experiences of these ordinary men and women were variegated, they did, at times, share expectations and life encounters, which undoubtedly shaped them, both as individuals and as groups. This theme, which is rather neglected, touches the reciprocal impacts between the war and the belligerent societies. It would have to be based necessarily on an array of sources, which are at once scarce and also difficult to assess. The service newspapers (*Paratus*, *Uniform* and the others) and liberation leaflets were both receptacles of these shared experiences as well as vehicles for the propagation of ideas and the (further) development of notions concerning the war in Angola, its place within the wider Cold War, and, very importantly, the development of a common South Africanism. However, it is the private letters and papers, essential for this kind of war and society work, which create the largest problems. A poor literary tradition in South Africa's armed forces, aggravated and to some extent caused by official policy (disclosure of information, the moratorium on cameras and diaries, and the censoring of mail) sadly produced a poor number of personal narratives (memoirs, diaries, letters).

Keegan's acclaimed *Face of battle* (1976) gave significant momentum to war memoirs as an important variant of military history, as the experience of the

individual, especially of ordinary soldiers, “are given particular force when written by veterans”.¹⁰³ Hundreds of thousands of young South Africans served as national servicemen from 1968, when conscription was introduced, to 1994. Until that year, all white males were required by law to render national service in the year they turned 18. Those registered for study at a university received deferment. But all had to serve or suffer a prison sentence. Once in the military system, most went through a period of intense training and were then sent to fight on the border between SWA/Namibia and Angola. Their historical voices have largely been silent. Barry Fowler, with his *Pro Patria*, made one of the first attempts to tell the human side of South Africa’s Border War of 1966–1989 with a prosopographical study of a group of servicemen in the South African Medical Service.¹⁰⁴ Fowler, although not an historian but a trained clinical psychologist who debriefed South African soldiers returning from the border, was perhaps in a comparatively good position to comment on how South African soldiers experienced this war. His book, which undoubtedly showed the way, was followed in 2005 by the reminiscences of Clive Holt, a former conscript soldier, which appeared as *At thy call we did not falter* and covered his experience of the final phase (1988) of the South African involvement in Angola. With his “Angolan War diary” close at hand, Holt narrates his personal, day-to-day experiences on the battlefield, his fears and frustrations, to produce “a first-hand account of what it was like to fight in the war”.¹⁰⁵ He tells too of his suffering from severe post-traumatic stress and of his struggle to overcome its consequences; in fact, his writing this book and the revisitation of his war experiences was part of his rehabilitation, his emotional and psychological healing.

The perspective from the conscripts and their participation in the Bush War was taken further in 2006 with the publication of JH Thompson’s *An unpopular war*. Thompson interviewed more than 40 former national servicemen representative of all of the services. She recorded their individual memories and collated these in the book, which she describes as “a collection of mental snapshots from their time as SADF conscripts: an inspection, the routine of camp life, the monotony and dread of patrols, the terror of a battle”.¹⁰⁶

Another recent publication of this nature, from the lower rank levels of the former SADF, is Bothma’s aforementioned *Die buffel struikel*. Bothma’s declared objective is to help the parents, wives and children of soldiers who fought and died in the Bush War, as well as people who had not lived through or understood South Africa’s counterinsurgency war in northern SWA/Namibia and southern Angola, to make sense of those events and of the woes of a soldier in 32 Battalion. His account

¹⁰³ Black, pp. 35–37, 45.

¹⁰⁴ Barry Fowler, *Pro Patria* (Halifax UK, 1995).

¹⁰⁵ C Holt, *At thy call we did not falter* (Cape Town, 2005), p. 185.

¹⁰⁶ JH Thompson, *An unpopular war; From afkak to bosbefok voices of South African National Servicemen* (Cape Town, 2006), p. vii.

of 32 Battalion's operations and daily toil succeeds in articulating the tremendous physical and emotional hardships suffered by its members and the strong emotional bonds and brotherhood forged between them across racial and nationality divides through daily exposure to death and danger. It also brings out the disillusionment of regular and conscript soldiers and their families, particularly in retrospect, with a war of which the rationale was not always clear and the way in which politicians "messed with and wasted" peoples' lives, particularly the lives of young, naïve national servicemen.¹⁰⁷ It is, however, given the position of the author, mostly the story of 32 Battalion's white leadership at platoon level, not the story of the black troops of the unit. Their story has still to be told.

A particularly useful South African contribution to the literature on the nature and the legacy of the protracted military conflict in Angola is Pearce's *An outbreak of peace; Angola's situation of confusion* published in 2005.¹⁰⁸ Sympathising with conscientious objectors, Pearce avoided conscription and possible military service in Angola during the final phase of the war by deliberately extending his studies at the University of Cape Town. He subsequently served as a BBC correspondent in Angola for several years from 2001. He travelled far and wide in that war-torn country, witnessing and recording the last spasms of the bitter, drawn-out civil war and, after Savimbi's death in February 2002 and the subsequent end of the internal war, took stock of the MPLA victory and touches upon the daunting task of social and economic reconstruction amidst continued political division, the broken infrastructure and widespread poverty.

As is the case with most wars, the biographical writings on the Bush War also include accounts of individual bravery and heroism. On the side of the former SADF, historian At van Wyk produced two editions of *Honoris Crux; ons dapperes*.¹⁰⁹ His latest work, *Die roem en die rou; stories agter Honoris Crux* (Eng: *The fame and the grief - stories behind Honoris Crux*) should have appeared in 2008. *Cross of honour* by Ian Uys covers the same territory in English, but in far poorer fashion.¹¹⁰

Prosopographical studies of the SADF generals are also rare. Hilton Hamann, a former national service conscript, produced an illuminating account of the South African high command, for which he interviewed a range of former SADF generals in his quest to understand what happened in Angola. His interviewees, sometimes quoted at length, are surprisingly frank. Not only did they not see eye to eye with the politicians, but, in many instances, did not see eye to eye with each other. Despite the merits of this book, a good study of the politics of command is still lacking.

¹⁰⁷ See Scholtz, "Goeie bydrae tot boeke oor Grensoorlog", and Esterhuyse, Book Review, pp. 135-137.

¹⁰⁸ J Pearce, *An outbreak of peace; Angola's situation of confusion* (Cape Town, 2005).

¹⁰⁹ At van Wyk, *Honoris Crux; ons dapperes* (Cape Town, 1982) and *Honoris Crux II; ons dapperes* (Cape Town, 1985).

¹¹⁰ Ian Uys, *Cross of Honour* (Germiston, 1992).

Without doubt, whatever problems are associated with autobiographical writing, military memoirs remain unique contributions to the study of military history of any era. As Yuval Noah Harari showed, they have particular relevance to the study of military command, of military culture and of the experience of war.¹¹¹ The only soldier to publish a study, one at a theoretical level, on warfare in southern Africa was Roland de Vries.¹¹²

7. CONCLUSION

The history of the Bush War, or Border War, the Angolan conflict, call it what you will, remains unwritten. Too little time has lapsed, emotions run high and wounds inflicted are painful, exposed, and they refuse to heal. Moreover, the memories of the war were mobilised to political ends. As Edward Said contended so eloquently:

“Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussions – about influence, about blame and judgement, about present actualities and future priorities.”¹¹³

The war cut deeply into the fabric of South African society. Yet, for a long time, South African historians left this history largely untouched. Due to a spectrum of material and less measurable factors, the first accounts of the war were produced by foreign journalists and popular writers. They were followed, gradually at first, by South African journalists and then more recently by politicians, veterans and professional historians.

This project, as it develops, aspires to explain the way in which the combatant societies in southern Africa “historicised” and thus explained the conflict that tore the subcontinent for much of the latter half of the twentieth century. These explanations varied, between the states, but the explanations they offered also changed from time to time. In South Africa, the initial traumatic effect of the conflict was to “freeze time” and thus to provide in time a simple historical explanation about what had happened. The thaw came in the mid-1980s, when the first attempts were made at deeper, more nuanced explanation. The strange void in the historiography was now probed for the first time by historians, albeit at the behest of the state. These official histories, useful first studies, were certainly not the last word. They not only give insight into what might be called “the official mind”, but they also provided a good

¹¹¹ Yuval Noah Harari, "Military memoirs: A historical overview of the genre from the Middle Ages to the late modern era", *War in history* 14(3), 2007, pp. 289-309.

¹¹² Colonel Roland de Vries, *Mobiele oorlogvoering: 'n Perspektief vir Suider-Afrika* (Menlopark, 1987).

¹¹³ Said, p. 1.

foundation for the studies that followed, produced by journalists and popular writers, politicians, veterans and professional historians.

However, any attempt to move beyond the narrow, political-serving history, will require vigorous engagement with the archival sources of South Africa, the Soviet Union, Cuba, Angola, the USA and even Portugal. Only then will we be able to attempt to expose the “truth” and pass judgement on the perceptions and writings of Malan and other “establishment” figures, on the one hand, and on those of the other sides of the conflict on the other. Such extensive research, culminating in a comprehensive history of the Angolan conflict, will be an enormous undertaking and would best be done by an international, interdisciplinary team, preferably with differing intellectual genealogy, and collaborating very closely and becoming involved in what GR Elton called a broad-fronted attack on the sources.

Such an approach, rooted firmly in the “new military history” tradition, with its emphasis on the cultural dimensions of war and catering for multicausality and the recognition of interconnections, embracing the perceptions of all of the warring parties, a discussion of military conduct, of defeat and of victory, and of the casualties, will allow historians to debate meaningfully, a debate that we all hope will culminate in a publication, which is detached and reasonably objective, and set within the regional and global political-strategic context.