



War in Worcester

Youth and the Apartheid State

By Pamela Reynolds, with Nana Charity Khohloloane, Amos Monde Khomba, Eric Ndoysisile Tshandu, Xolile Dyabooi, Paulos Mnyuka, Zandisile Leonard Ntsomi, Mawethu Bikani, Vuyisile Malangeni, Zingisile Yabo, Nation Andile March, Edwin Mnyamana Rasmieni, Isaac Lehlohonolo Tshabile, Sonwabo Sitsili, Ntando Pringle Mrubata

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Reviewed by Gusha X Ngantweni (Directorate for University Teaching and Learning Development, University of South Africa)

Written in collaboration with 14 former youth activists who were based in Zwelethemba township in the town of Worcester, the book is timely. A long list as it would be, I would have preferred the names of the youth activists on the cover; it has been done before and the publisher, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press prides itself on its Africanness.

Juxtaposing the struggles of these youth against the political system of the time, in particular the ruthless security forces, with the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and peppered with cross-references to scholars from a variety of disciplines, the book combines history, ethnography, critique and political commentary. It is thus a balanced scholarly account of an important era in South Africa.

The United Nations declared apartheid a crime against humanity, and anyone who follows the scholarly literature on the Holocaust, for example, will understand why South Africa needs many more books such as this one. The struggles of all those who were killed, those who ended up

in exile or in prison, the many activists who fought it against the odds, and the majority who suffered everyday all made international headlines. Those struggles need to be told and taught across as many platforms.

In many ways, the youth bore the brunt of apartheid's brutality because of the negative way this evil system shaped their futures. As the book shows, the everyday routine of being a black youth in a segregated society was disturbing: school-going children being chased away as from a "whites-only library"; school protests against difficult conditions; being driven at high speed in the back of a police van – the day after having a leg amputated after being shot by the police. As Reynolds writes:

pain was inflicted on them systematically, day after day, over many years, in a patterned way, to great excess, involving gratuitous cruelty, with intentional destruction and damage, on specific targets, drawing on a stock of techniques that ranged from straight physical brutality to intimate intrusion into the orifices of the body and the intricacies of the mind. It was inflicted under state orders from state rulers in cahoots with representatives

of formal institutions in the land, including legal, medical and educational institutions and with the compliance of organizations and individuals at every level of society.

Pamela Reynolds researched the book between 1991 and 2002, spending time with the activists and their families while she was attached to various universities across the world. The appendices, which are primarily about the TRC Report, helpfully remind us of its finding that the apartheid "government, the security forces and the civil services, were in the period 1960–1994 the primary perpetrators of gross violations of human rights against children and youth in South and southern Africa".

War in Worcester reminds me of why the word apartheid should start with a capital letter, in the same way that the "Holocaust" rightly does. It is also a reminder of why the very clear failures of governance by African National Congress administrations in national, provincial and local governments are an insult to the struggles of young people who suffered and died under apartheid. [NA](#)