

Apartheid's Black Soldiers:
Un-national Wars and Militaries in Southern Africa

Lennart Bolliger

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Review by Lance Siddert

It is the fate of the numberless legions of black soldiers in the employ of European imperial and settler states in southern Africa over the past two centuries to be forgotten. Their employers, for whom they were always and only cheap and expendable labour, feared post-war claims for the rights exclusively reserved for whites by the various imperial/settler regimes, while their adversaries, when they finally inherited the imperial/settler states, reviled them as collaborators undeserving of these rights that had been so hard won for all the people by the liberation struggles.

The effect of this erasure has been to privilege the imperial/settler experience of the myriad wars fought across the subcontinent to establish and maintain the *pax colonus*. Thus the post-independence historiography of the apartheid state's so-called "border war" fought in its Namibian colony and surrounding colonies-cum-states in the final third of the twentieth century against an ensemble of black liberation movements and their allies continues, a generation on from its end, to still be written overwhelmingly from a settler perspective (see for example Baines and Vale, 2008; Baines, 2015; Van der Waag and Grundlingh, 2019).

Lennart Bolliger's book is thus a long overdue corrective to "the enormous condescension of posterity" to black soldiers in the imperial/settler state armies of southern Africa that promises to explain how and why black southern Africans joined the apartheid army and police and the post-war legacies of their doing so. According to Bolliger black soldiers comprised 70% of the apartheid state's South West African Territorial Force (SWATF) in 1990 (they also made up 53% of the South African Defence Force [SADF] permanent force in 1994) (See Mashike, 2007).¹

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The book focuses on three all-male units consisting of predominantly black troops with white officers that were at the sharp end of the war in Namibia/Angola: the SWATF's 101 ("Ovambo") battalion; the SADF's 32 battalion; and the South African Police's paramilitary counterinsurgency unit, Koevoet.

The book is a reworked Oxford doctoral thesis and comprises six chapters bookended by an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter provides a potted history of the Namibian colony to independence; the second deals with black recruits to 101 battalion and Koevoet; the third with black recruits (many of them "Angolan") to 32 battalion; the fourth with the different cultures of the three forces; the fifth with the post-war experience of these black recruits in Namibia; and the sixth with the post-war experience of the black recruits who relocated to South Africa in 1990 (mainly from 32 battalion and Koevoet).

Thus chapters two and three address Bollinger's how and why question and chapters five and six the legacies question.

Given the value of this oral history archive and its centrality to the book we are told surprisingly little about either these informants or their interviews. Other than all coming from northern Namibia and being overwhelmingly male (just 6.2% female) we are given no basic demographic data on the informants either individually or in aggregate, e.g. age, education, marital status, children, post-war employment, etc., nor does Bollinger appear to attach any importance to such data in the analysis. The claim that informants' names were "anonymized" owing to "continued political sensitivity" (p.239) also appears to be contradicted by the use of informant names throughout the book.

There is a similar seeming contradiction between the statement in the book that San veterans took a collective decision not to speak to Bollinger and the appearance of six San veteran informants in the above table of interviews.

There is a similar dearth of information about the interview process itself and no indication of if and how the interviews were recorded, what languages were used, if and how they were translated, whether they were transcribed or where the interview records are archived?

A half page "Note on Interviews Conducted by the Author" is buried at the back of the book. However, in the Introduction we learn that the interviews were not "conducted by the author" alone, but that the research process was appropriated by the Namibian veterans in their ongoing battle with the post-independence South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) government for recognition and benefits. Thus two veterans of SWATF's 101 battalion and former leaders of the leading SWATF/Koevoet veterans organisation, NAMVET, "took a personal interest in my research and became good friends. ... They arranged all interviews with former soldiers. ... In Namibia the interpreters were all former soldiers. In South Africa, the interpreters were young family members of former soldiers" (pp. 48-49). Bollinger doggedly insists that this in no way impacted either the interview data or its analysis, but the book's own silences/evasions strongly suggest otherwise.

There are two main silences/ evasions which are related to one another. The first concerns what the informants did during the war and the second, the economics of the war. Bollinger excuses the first on the grounds of trauma and his own lack of qualification to deal with it and the second on grounds that there is already a scholarship on black soldiers' economic reasons for enlisting in the apartheid state army, though the examples they give amount to no more than a handful of partisan wartime texts dutifully toeing the SWAPO party line.

Instead, Bollinger argues that their informants enlisted primarily for non-economic reasons, more specifically obedience to chiefs, fear of SWAPO violence and SADF propaganda (all of which coincidentally also conveniently displace culpability for enlistment onto others [chiefs, SWAPO, the apartheid state]). Strangely, the author's argument is completely at variance with their own informants quoted in the book, who repeatedly explicitly assert economic need as their primary reason for enlisting.

Thus a Koevoet recruit tells Bolliger that, “many young men enlisted in SWATF or Koevoet ‘for money’” (p. 5). Another relates that, “no one in my family worked so I decided to be the breadwinner ... I only joined Koevoet for money. ... I decided to join because my family was living in poverty and there was no one who was going to help us” (p. 48). A SWATF recruit explained, “there were no jobs. The only jobs were to be a doctor or a teacher or a soldier. ... Now I was not educated enough to be a teacher or to be a nurse. ... I only got standard five and then my only option was to be a soldier so that I can get money” (p. 48). A headman recruiter targeted, “especially ... young men who were unemployed and ‘would take any opportunity they get’” (p.54) when seeking new men for training in violence work.

An Angolan informant enlisted in 32 battalion “only to get a job” and another because he “had no money and no food” and “to make a living” (p. 87 and p. 89). A third’s soldiering journey started in Angola, where he “had a good time” in the FNLA because he “received a salary every month”, which was “the reason why everyone wanted to join the FNLA” (p. 90). Black recruits’ primary economic motivation was also apparent to their new employer, the apartheid state, which quickly weaponised it by paying these three units alone “kopgeld” (literally “head money”) for confirmed enemy kills (see pp. 99-101 and p. 106). If Bolliger’s answer to the why question fails to convince, chapters five and six on the legacies of black soldiers who enlisted in the apartheid state army are more plausible, providing a useful if pedestrian introduction to the post-war politics of black apartheid army veterans on both sides of the Gariep from the perspective of NAMVET.

Bolliger makes far too much of the transnational/un-national nature of some of the black recruits to the apartheid state’s armies, forgetting that this was equally true of its white recruits (and also of all national liberation struggles) and also without following the transnational/un-national black veterans of 32 battalion who relocated to South Africa and skilfully exploited their status as “lost people” to continue to ply their trade on the global violence market created by the post-war neoliberal new world order. But then such veterans are unlikely to be part of NAMVET’s network.

The book rests on a unique archive of 145 interviews conducted in Namibia in July-August 2014 and February-November 2016 with veterans of the three subject apartheid army battalions/ units, as follows:

Force	Battalion	Number of Interviews	Percentage
SADF	32	47	32.4
SAP	Koevoet	32	22.1
SWATF	101 (Ovambo)	25	17.2
	102	10	6.9

	(Kaokoland)		
	201/3 (San)	6	4.1
	202 (Kavangoland)	5	3.5
	Multiple	6	4.1
Others		14 (5 whites and 9 women)	9.7

REFERENCES

- Baines, G. 2015. *South Africa's 'Border War': Contested Narratives and Conflicting Memories*, London: Bloomsbury.
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- Van der Waag, I. and Grundlingh, A. (eds.). 2019. *In Different Times: The War for Southern Africa 1966-1989*, Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

ENDNOTE

- 1 If the Bantustan armies of the so-called TBVC states (Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei) are included then the white share of the SADF permanent force falls to just 40.4%.