

THE SOUTH AFRICAN ‘WAR RESISTANCE’ MOVEMENT 1974–1994

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Abstract

From the mid-1970s until the onset of negotiations to end apartheid in 1990, escalating military conflict in the Southern African region was accompanied by a steady increase of conscription dependent on the white male population in South Africa. This was compounded by a process of militarisation in the white community, under the apartheid regime’s ‘total national security strategy’.¹ In turn, this provoked a counter-reaction in the form a movement of resistance to conscription and more generally to the various internal and external conflicts. Resistance was initially led by exiled self-styled ‘war resisters’ who set up a number of support organisations. After some political contestation, one such organisation, the Committee on South African War Resistance (COSAWR) emerged as the leading force and aligned itself openly with the African National Congress (ANC). This paper is the first academic contribution to focus on COSAWR and touches on its legacy in terms of its influence on the ANC and the policy frameworks it helped establish for post-apartheid security policy.

Introduction: the impact of conflict on conscripts

‘Universal’ military conscription has been all but abandoned in established liberal democracies, with the principal exception of Austria, some of the Scandinavian countries and some young Eastern European democracies. There are many reasons for the changeover to professional armed forces, the main one of which is usually cited as the need for more flexible, lighter forces suited for force projection and rapid deployment. This may have changed due to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – indeed the extensive call-up of reservists in the USA is a form of selective conscription. However, another factor is almost certainly the

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perceived social and political costs and consequences of conscription – not least the effect of domestic anti-war and anti-militarist movements and the potential for reluctant conscripts to undermine the morale and fighting

capacity of armed forces, perhaps even to threaten their internal cohesion.

The focus of this article is on the political consequences of conscription in South Africa's between 1974 and 1994, concentrating on the growth of a resistance movement known variously as 'war resistance', 'anti-conscription' and 'conscientious objection'. However, the South African movement borrowed some of its strategies and tactics from two specific cases where mass conscription, coupled with increasingly unpopular external wars, led to resistance phenomena: the anti-Vietnam war and the draft resistance movement in the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s. The latter arguably eventually contributed significantly to the defeat of the United States in Vietnam. Forms of resistance to conscription also played a role to end Portugal's colonial wars in Africa (Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau) from the early 1960s to the military coup in Lisbon in April 1974.²

These two movements were different in nature. The anti-Vietnam war movement was essentially a broad-based mass movement of citizens and veterans against the war, with little ideological coherence (except perhaps 'counter-culture') and which practiced the politics of mass protest and popular theatre, while the Portuguese movement was to a large extent rooted inside the military itself – involving both professional officers (many of them fairly young) and conscripts – and which was eventually structured as a cohesive underground force, the Armed Forces Movement (MFA). The MFA was strongly influenced by the Portuguese Communist Party and staged the coup leading to Portugal's withdrawal from its colonies. In the latter activities, the influence of a book by a veteran officer of Portugal's colonial wars, General de Spínola, *Portugal e Futuro*, played an important role. Both modes of resistance to some extent, informed the South African war resistance movement, especially the Committee on South African War Resistance (COSAWR).

There are of course, some other examples of conscript-based resistance movements, either organised or unorganised, perhaps the most notable example of the latter being the resistance of Soviet conscripts after the occupation of Afghanistan following the invasion of December 1979.

Background

April 1974 is the point of departure for this narrative. Prior to the military coup or the 'carnation revolution' in Portugal, apartheid South Africa had been relatively secure in geo-strategic terms, protected from the forces of black majority rule in the north in settler-colonial Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, and South West Africa (now Namibia), which

was under South African occupation. April 1974 changed all that. Very quickly, the 'cordon sanitaire' was lost, as Mozambique and Angola teetered violently towards independence and new fronts in the armed liberation struggle were opened on the borders of Rhodesia, South West Africa and South Africa itself. A little over two years later, the crisis facing the apartheid regime was compounded by the black uprisings, mostly led by schoolchildren, that began in Soweto in June 1976, and which rapidly engulfed large parts of mainly urban South Africa in a cycle of protest and violent repression.³

These two events had an immediate effect on conscription for white males. Prior to 1974, conscription had been something of a fun rite of passage for white men. At around 18 years old (sometimes earlier – technically making them in today's terms child soldiers), they were obliged to perform military service for nine months (rising to 12 months in 1972). The only ones who refused were Jehovah's Witnesses, who try not to 'render unto Caesar' in any capacity. Following the 'carnation revolution', in 1975, three-month operational tours of duty were introduced. South Africa invaded Angola that year, while fighters from the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) used post-colonial Angola as a base for operations in Namibia. For the first time, real combat was on the cards. In 1977 after the Soweto uprisings, the initial period of military service was increased to 24 months, followed by part-time (usually operational) periods of 30 days a year for eight years.⁴ Later, the burden was increased ever further, so that the more than one million white males aged between 18 and 45 (about one out of every 30 of the population) faced almost a lifetime of intermittent military service.⁵

This new intensity levels of conscription quickly had effects as conscripts and deserters began to go into exile. The most common routes were international flights to London, followed by Amsterdam and New York, although others (often deserters who were unable to leave legitimately) illegally crossed to neighbouring countries – most commonly Botswana. It would be a while before conscientious objectors would be prepared to take a stand inside South Africa and face the penalties involved, which by the mid-1980s involved six years' imprisonment.

The early exiles⁶

The mid-1970s was a period of ferment in South African anti-apartheid and revolutionary politics. The oldest liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC), which was founded in 1912, had suffered a breakaway in the 1950s when the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) had been formed, while both parties had been prohibited, and were driven underground and turned to armed struggle in

the early 1960s. By the time of the Soweto uprisings, a new generation of young black people, strongly influenced by black liberation movements in the United States 'rediscovered' the Africanism of the PAC and launched a Black Consciousness (BC) movement. At this stage, the ANC, by virtue of the rigours of its underground existence and its reliance on the international socialist bloc for political and military support, had become more closely aligned with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and eschewed racial politics in favour of class struggle (although with important caveats).⁷ There was thus a major fault-line in the anti-apartheid forces around the issues of the primacy of race and the role of the Communist Party which focussed on class contradictions.

The early exiled war resisters were subject to this schism, in part because some exiled whites (with varying degrees of anti-communist disposition, although many of them were 'new' Marxists) perceived that there was an opportunity of building a revolutionary 'white consciousness' to match that of BC. In part, no doubt they were driven by the exigencies of their exclusion from the liberation struggle by the BC activists. One of the most important of these exiles, the well-known Afrikaner poet and painter, Breyten Breytenbach, had established a clandestine organisation based mainly in Paris known as Okhela. This organisation, which rapidly collapsed following Breytenbach's imprisonment after an ill-conceived secret mission to South Africa, gave rise indirectly to the South African Liberation Support Committee (SALSCOM) and the South African Military Refugees Aid Fund (SAMRAF). The latter was specifically set up to assist South African war resisters, of which there were by then only a handful, and established a presence in London and New York.

The approach adopted by SAMRAF was deceptively simple: in South Africa, blacks were in the forefront of the struggle, but one of the material bases on which to mobilise whites in support of the black struggle was war resistance. This dovetailed with a strong tendency in liberal-radical circles in the United States in that period, which saw the black struggle as the leading 'anti-imperialist' force, to which whites could only offer support. It sat uneasily with the ANC's non-racialism and de facto alliance with international socialism, which was a position shared to a large degree by most of the European anti-apartheid movements, many of whom were strongly influenced by trade unions and labour or communist parties.

The formation of COSAWR and the early years

At the same time, there were reportedly a growing number of young South Africans leaving the country to avoid conscription, some of them as a result of their

experience in the radical student movement in South Africa (itself strongly inflected by radical student movements in the United States and Europe) and some of whom sympathised with the ANC. Others supported the Communist Party or were Marxists. With support from the ANC and the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), they set up the Committee on South African War Resistance (COSAWR) in London in November 1978⁸ and incorporated most of the London-based members of SAMRAF. The cumbersome name is instructive: it was not meant to be a grouping *of* war resisters, nor a membership movement, but merely a committee working *on* war resistance. In this sense, it stood in opposition to SAMRAF's concept that a 'movement' of whites could be formed. It openly aligned itself with the ANC and the Namibian liberation movement, SWAPO, the latter which was in the fortunate position of being recognised by the UN General Assembly as "the sole authentic representative" of the Namibian population.

Some years later, COSAWR was to explain:

COSAWR has never claimed to represent the views of every single SA [war] resister ... COSAWR made it clear from its inception that it would work with the liberation movements, the ANC and SWAPO, and with the British Anti-Apartheid Movement and other solidarity groups associated with the AAM. This was because we felt that as white South Africans it was important to place ourselves in the mainstream of the struggle and identify ourselves with the organisations representing the majority of the people of SA and Namibia ... [O]ur work in exile involves accepting the leadership of SWAPO and the ANC with regard to the overall struggle. It also means that we work in consultation with the AAM and the broad international struggle against apartheid.⁹

Although COSAWR supported virtually all war resisters it was determined to align itself with the ANC rather than the BC movements or the PAC, which at that point, were becoming increasingly eclipsed by the older movement, and to work with existing international solidarity movements aligned with the ANC rather than building a new solidarity movement – in contrast to the position of SAMRAF. A further principle was that it would not attempt to construct its own 'internal' (i.e. South African underground) structures as Breyten Breytenbach had attempted to do. COSAWR and would rather work through those of the existing ANC.

COSAWR thus set itself up in effect as a specialist arm of the ANC and the AAM rather than as a movement in its own right. It portrayed itself as a legal campaigning organisation with the aim of building a base in exile in support of

South African war resisters and against South African militarism. Its particular tasks were described as:

- To raise the issue of the increasing militarism of the apartheid state and resistance to it;
- To campaign internationally for the right to asylum for South African (SA) war resisters and to campaign in support of resisters imprisoned or persecuted in South Africa;
- To research into the SA military and resistance;¹⁰
- To produce publications in this field;
- To assist SA war resisters with asylum, etc.; and
- To involve war resisters in Britain in study classes, public meetings etc. and in general anti-apartheid work.¹¹

To this end, the committee (which retained a small membership) spent much time raising funds, carrying out campaigning activities, organising exiled war resisters (mainly in London), meeting with newly exiled individuals, assessing them and assisting them with applying for refugee status, and producing publications.

This need not detain the reader too much, but some points are worth mentioning.

Obtaining refugee status for South African war resisters was not an easy matter. In the United Kingdom, most of the first war resisters had been threatened with deportation, but an AAM delegation managed to secure some concessions from the then Labour Government. The situation became more complicated with the electoral victory in 1979 of Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives (who were better disposed to, if not supportive, of the South African regime). A number of cases resulted in which war resisters had to test the system to its limits. In the end, most resisters were given 'exceptional leave to remain' and no genuine cases were deported.¹² The resisters often had to live for many years in legal limbo, working illegally in poorly paid jobs. They were in any case a mixed lot. COSAWR attempted to portray the image of the 'noble resister', leaving the country purely because of resistance to apartheid, but many of them had other motivations. Some had personal or drug problems; others were merely seeking better opportunities. But COSAWR took the position that any war resister was one gun less facing the liberation movement, and along the lines of the anti-Vietnam war protesters in the United States, encouraged any form of resistance and supported all those who arrived in exile unless they were aligned with the apartheid regime (and even then, if they were useful sources of information, they might have been supported). They

were given basic support, and the committee worked closely with British refugee organisations, both official and unofficial.

Many exiled resisters were gay, escaping persecution for their sexual orientation (homosexuality was then banned in South Africa) and abuse within the SADF. Gay conscripts were treated in a similar way to drug addicts or those with psychological problems – sent off to a forced-labour camp on the Zimbabwean border called Greefswald or confined to Ward 22 (later Ward 24) at 1 Military Hospital in Pretoria where they were ‘treated’ (at least until 1978) by being subjected to electro-convulsive aversion therapy, sometimes subjected to painful electric shocks if they were stimulated by pictures of naked men.¹³

The situation was further complicated by the fact that around 1,5 million of South Africa’s then five million white population had access to or were eligible for a passport of a European Union country.¹⁴ This meant that many war resisters did not need to apply for asylum and could simply use their privileged European status to remain in Britain or elsewhere on the continent. Again, COSAWR did not discriminate. This gave rise to the question: how many war resisters were there? It was impossible to tell. Only a small minority needed to apply for refugee status, and even though COSAWR had arrangements with the UK refugee agency, some passed by the organisation. COSWAR had records of about 500 exiled war resisters,¹⁵ and estimated that the total number (worldwide) was at least ten times that.

The non-discrimination policy was vexed. Many countries were loath to give political asylum or refugee status to conscientious objectors on the grounds that they or allied countries (within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] notably) practiced conscription and this could open the floodgates for resisters in general. COSAWR thus took a stand of ‘exceptionalism’ – it was resistance *against apartheid*, recognised by the UN General Assembly as a crime against humanity that counted. This did not stop the organisation from working quite closely with War Resisters International (WRI), nor did it stop WRI fully supporting COSAWR even though the organisation broke one of the fundamental tenets of WRI – non-violence – by supporting the ANC’s armed struggle.

COSAWR’s campaigning work was not restricted to the United Kingdom. A semi-autonomous branch was established in the Netherlands and the organisation spent a lot of time building an international profile and support for South African war resistance. Speaking tours were arranged (Canada, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, for example), international conferences were attended and the United Nations was lobbied (for example a UN General Assembly resolution urging

member states to grant asylum to South African war resisters was adopted in December 1978).

It might seem odd at first that the only other COSAWR structure should have been in the Netherlands. However, many white South Africans are of Dutch ancestry and many of those have access to Dutch citizenship. As a result, at the same time that war resisters began to arrive in the United Kingdom, some went to Holland, where they set up a small grouping with support of one of the main anti-apartheid movements, the Komitee Zuidelike Afrika (KZA).¹⁶ They learned Dutch relatively easy since they knew Afrikaans (derived from Dutch), made contact with black South African exiles and engaged in solidarity activities.

By this stage in South African revolutionary politics, a new division had emerged within the broad Marxist-influenced consensus, between 'workerists' and the more mainstream liberation movement that mainly worked itself out in the putative black trade union movement: a division sometimes incorrectly posited as 'Trotskyites' vs. 'Stalinists' (although some strands of that old schism were evident).¹⁷ COSAWR-Netherlands, as it became known, was deemed by the ANC to have been infiltrated by the 'workerists' and certain individuals were therefore necessarily to be excluded if the organisation was to become part of the mainstream. The 'Purge of Krasnapolski' (named after one of the main hotels on Dam Square where the event took place) therefore ensued, with a few of the already tiny group of war resisters being expelled by the ANC's chief representative in London who flew over to the Netherlands for the purpose.

The United States, where SAMRAF retained its only presence after its UK-based members defected to COSAWR, raised further political challenges. Making claims to only a tiny number of war resisters, SAMRAF had set itself up as solidarity movement, with the aim (at least initially) of building a white resistance movement inside South Africa. The organisation developed an underground newsletter, *Omkeer* ('about turn' in Afrikaans), which it circulated with some success inside South Africa¹⁸ and made links with black liberation as well as anti-apartheid organisations in the United States. Much of this was done on a local basis through its presence in Brooklyn and San Francisco.¹⁹ Although SAMRAF moved much closer to the ANC as the balance of power internationally and within South Africa shifted, the crunch came in 1981 when one of the war resisters working with them defected back to South Africa (with attendant media publicity) and the ANC formally broke off relations. SAMRAF faded away during the second half of the 1980s.²⁰

The research and publicity work COSAWR carried out were largely showcased in its bi-monthly journal *Resister*, which, according to the book which was based on it, ran for over 11 years to 67 issues, and put out 750 000 words²¹ The journal, perhaps better described as a magazine or newsletter, was distributed internationally, largely through the extensive Southern African solidarity movement, and was also widely read in the military camps of the ANC's armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), where it was understandably popular, demonstrating to the young comrades that enemy morale was suspect, and carrying out analyses and reporting on the South African Defence Force (SADF) and its activities. From an initial print run of 300 for the first issue, circulation rose to around 3 000.

It was also circulated inside South Africa, clandestinely as anyone caught in possession of a copy could face a stiff prison sentence. In part, distribution was done through the normal postal services although many copies were of course intercepted in the extensive postal monitoring system the South African regime operated. Some use was made of the ANC's propaganda and information distribution systems. The publication combined information with campaigning – for example in support of individual resisters, or in support of the international arms embargo against South Africa. It is unclear how effective it was. As time went on the journal tended to lose its originality and came to be seen more as part of the ANC's conventional propaganda 'line', preaching to the converted.

The committee also generated other material, such as posters, pamphlets and stickers, which were distributed through ANC underground structures, promoting slogans such as 'Resist Apartheid War' or 'Troops out of Namibia and Angola'.

COSAWR's links to the liberation movement and its secret work

Throughout its existence, COSAWR was at risk of infiltration from the SA security structures, which regarded efforts to undermine the morale and cohesion of its armed forces as a significant threat. A number of agents – mostly low level – working for military intelligence or the security police were uncovered over the course of the years, and a few war resisters returned to South Africa (after appropriate inducements or threats against their families) to reveal usually lurid details of the horrors of exile and communist manipulation of the war resistance movement. This disinformation was faithfully reproduced by the supposedly 'liberal opposition' press – the largest circulation paper in South Africa, the *Sunday Times*, for example ran a banner headline on 12 October 1980 headed 'Red Net Traps Deserters'. There was in effect an ongoing propaganda war between the SADF and

COSAWR, which was sometimes described as ‘the South African Communist Party/ANC/COSAWR alliance’.²²

In part to guard against infiltration and in part reflecting its rather undemocratic ethos and its determination not to become a membership organisation, the main structure of COSAWR remained a committee, the membership of which was usually obscure and self-appointed. Exiles and activists were involved in a set of sub-committees through which campaigns were run and literature generated and which were often only vaguely aware of the main committee, which met in secret. The committee was also responsible for maintaining links – usually kept discreet – with the ANC. There was a constant tension between the need for COSAWR to project itself as a broad-based structure and the need to maintain ‘the line’ put out by the ANC. This was never really satisfactorily resolved. Another problem also developed, in that some in the ANC leadership started to think automatically of all exiled or anti-apartheid whites as ‘war resisters’ and sent them to COSAWR. Some leading COSAWR members in turn, however, joined MK, and were sent for training at the ANC’s camps in Angola or elsewhere and in some cases were deployed on clandestine missions inside South Africa - not with particularly successful results.

COSAWR also welcomed into its so-called central committee or sub-structures women who had arrived in exile either as partners of conscripts or who had come into exile for other reasons but had an interest in working against apartheid militarism. While some attention was given to issues of gender – for example analysing the limited role of the small number of women in the SADF – it cannot be said that gender analysis and practice was a strong point of the organisation.²³

Activities inside South Africa were not carried out autonomously. Rather a sub-committee of the ANC on which war resisters and ANC officials sat and was understandably an even more secret structure. It went by the designation CRAW – ‘Conscripts Resist Apartheid War’. This sub-committee monitored the activities of the white anti-apartheid movement inside the country, met clandestinely with activists and sometimes recruited them to ANC underground structures.

Perhaps the most covert of all the activities of the committee was intelligence, which was disguised as research. While COSAWR maintained a legitimate research function funded in part by largely church donors – for example, explaining that it was analysing the militarisation of South Africa and war resistance, and passing the information on to the international anti-apartheid movement, religious organisations and other structures including the United Nations - it also maintained a secret strategic and operational intelligence-gathering function.

Initially, this was set up in London, but in the mid-1980s, it was transferred to the ANC's headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia where it became part of ANC military intelligence.

The intelligence involved both covert and overt methods. While the SADF maintained a strict information control regime, at the same time it produced a number of information and propaganda publications, such as the magazine *Paratus* which contributed to the socialisation of white citizens in favour of the apartheid status quo. Apparently innocuous information in these publications, for example reports on unit days, citizen force activities, commandos (home-bound or territorial defence units) and even military sports events, when put together, could assist in building up a picture of structures, units, order of battle and so on. International military publications were also scoured and analysed. More covert information was generated by interviewing deserters (for example, about the location and strength of military units) and by sourcing information from covert operatives inside the defence force. Even military mobilisation papers (known as 'call-ups') could be a source of information. For example if a signals unit was called-up then it was a reasonably safe assumption that the entire unit to which it was attached was being mobilised for an operation. This information could be passed on to the ANC and its Angolan and Cuban allies. In this way, COSAWR gained a reasonably accurate picture of South African military structures and strengths – far more accurate than usually "reputable" sources such as *The Military Balance* or the various *Jane's* publications, which tended to rely on South African propaganda and disinformation. This knowledge became particularly useful when the ANC had to enter negotiations with the defence force about the integration of military forces

A further strand of covert work was the attempt to build resistance within the SADF. This was sensitive work and was left to the ANC's underground structures. By 1990, it had borne considerable fruit, although almost entirely in South Africa's homelands or Bantustans, and not by white conscripts but by black 'volunteer' soldiers. The four nominally 'independent' homelands or Bantustans, Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei (so called TBVC states), all had their own armies which were clones or subsidiaries of the SADF. Each was infiltrated to varying extents by the ANC and engaged in mutinies and military coups aimed at prizing the homelands from the grip of apartheid, although the attempted Bophuthatswana and Ciskei ones were quelled.²⁴ Post-coup Transkei allowed MK to operate on its territory and the coup leader, Bantu Holomisa, went on to play a leading role in the ANC before establishing his own political party some years later. MK's first conference in South Africa was held in Venda. And on the eve of the 1994 national elections, the defection of the Bophuthatswana defence force, and its

attacks on white supremacist para-military forces that were attempting to shore up the Bophuthatswana regime, proved decisive in psychologically breaking the resistance of both Bantustan and right-wing armed groups.²⁵

The rift over exile

In the 1980s, war resisters continued to go into exile in increasing numbers. As many did not need to apply for asylum, it is impossible to give accurate figures. However, this was not without its tensions. Within the white radical student movement, for example, there were many who argued that exile was a debilitating experience and that it was preferable for activists to remain inside the country and contribute to the domestic struggle, even if this meant undergoing military service albeit trying to ensure that this was in a non-combat role. Two positions thus emerged (and these were replicated within the ANC). According to the introduction to a book based on compilations from *Resister*:

The former group wanted to help build a non-racial resistance movement inside the country in which white democrats would play a role. They felt that taking a prescriptive position on the issue of military service would narrow the role of white democrats to that of resisting the draft. Thousands would be condemned to prison, a twilight existence of evading the military police, or forced into exile, choices which would deplete the democratic movement of internal activists. The latter group wanted to build a mass draft-resistance movement along the lines of the movement that opposed US involvement in Vietnam and so provoke a crisis of control within the white establishment.²⁶

COSAWR wanted both to build a mass war resistance movement *and* an internal resistance within the SADF. While it sympathised with those who wanted to retain activists within the country, it felt that participation in the defence force would drive a wedge between black and white democrats rather than uniting them. It therefore persuaded the ANC and its allies to issue a general call to ‘resist apartheid war’ but to allow some leeway in terms of how conscripts interpreted this, and of course, to make exceptions of the small number of individuals secretly deployed into the defence force to gather intelligence. This debate was eventually resolved when large numbers of conscripts began to take a stand against conscription, thus ready to go to prison if necessary, and the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) was launched as a new channel of resistance.

Support for conscientious objectors

Between 1979 and 1982, some 15 conscientious objectors took the route of taking a public stand against military service, and indicated their preparedness to serve prison time – the penalties were progressively increased through legislation to six years' imprisonment. Most of the objectors were Christians of different denominations and based their objection on their faith. Small conscientious objector support groups (COSGs) sprang up, mostly initially on a denominational basis, with the aim of giving pastoral support to the individuals involved, publicising their cause, mobilising domestic and international support and pressurising the authorities.²⁷ Although COSAWR had no overt links with the COSGs, it sought to gain international support for them and co-ordinated international campaigns in support of the most high-profile (and most anti-apartheid) resisters such as Peter Moll, Richard Steele, Charles Yeats and later David Bruce and Ivan Toms. Much of this support was raised from religious organisations, both in South Africa and internationally, and some of it was quite extensive involving, for example, the distribution of tens of thousands of leaflets and the generation of petitions with tens of thousands of signatories. Some imprisoned war resisters were also adopted as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International, and War Resisters International offered unqualified support.

These early individual stands were followed by collective stands: first a group of 23, then 143, then, by 1989, 771. After this, the floodgates opened and a national register of conscientious objectors was established, supported by an international one of exiles under the auspices of Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, a bastion of the global anti-apartheid movement.²⁸

The End Conscription Campaign

The political crisis around apartheid deepened in the mid-1980s, both within South Africa and in the wider region. A new insurrection, much deeper, more violent and more widespread than that of 1976, swept the country in 1984. The SADF was for the first time deployed in townships, fuelling resistance to conscription: many conscripts were beginning to suspect that they were used in a civil war. At the same time, the domestic anti-apartheid movement was able to open political space and the mass-based United Democratic Front (UDF), an alliance of hundreds of community organisations, churches, trade unions, student groups and pressure groups, was established and fairly openly aligned itself with the ANC.²⁹

In 1984, in response to the growing resistance to conscription and the civil war, the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) was formed, in part on the

organisational basis of the COSGs, which had established a national framework. This was a deft strategy: rather than arguing for conscientious objection or war resistance, which was illegal, it would argue for an end to conscription, which was merely requesting a change in the law, and which it was hoped would secure widespread support from those opposed to troop deployments in the townships and increasing militarisation.³⁰ The ECC in fact set itself wider objectives than ending conscription, including campaigning for peace and justice, and raising opposition to militarisation and the SADF's role in the occupation of Namibia and parts of Angola.

ECC branches, consisting of coalitions of student, religious and other organisations, were set up around South Africa and it was able to draw on the support of 50 member organisations as well as thousands of individual members³¹. A semi-official history of the war resistance movement inside South Africa remarked:

ECC activists were generally middle-class English-speaking young people who had been politicised in church or student organisations. Within this group there were diverse political and theological perspectives: liberal and radical, religious and secular, opposition to participation in all wars and opposition to service specifically in the SADF. As the campaign developed, ECC expanded to include parents and professionals, school pupils and teachers, and Afrikaans-speaking people ... Half of ECC's membership was female.³²

The ECC aligned itself with the UDF, and in 1985 began a 'Troops Out of the Townships' campaign, which gained it much popular support from black communities. After a 'troops out' rally, one 'liberal' newspaper commented:

On Monday night some 4,000 people of all races, colours and creeds packed the Cape Town city hall to demand the removal of troops from the townships ... [D]ivided communities came together – black and coloured people who are subject to police and military action, white potential conscripts, their parents and families.³³

The ECC adopted innovative ways of campaigning, reflecting its youth base, such as rock concerts, writing workshops, art and poster exhibitions, music records and film festivals – presaging perhaps the strategies of the 'velvet revolutions' that would sweep Eastern and Central Europe a few years later.

COSAWR was not directly involved in the formation of the ECC, although it had long worked towards the objective of building a mass war resistance

movement, and had assisted ANC underground structures in working towards this objective, largely through the student movement. Through building awareness about military issues it had also opened up political space and created a supportive environment internationally, thus making a considerable contribution to establishing the conditions under which the ECC might emerge. It immediately threw itself into the task of building international support for the ECC, in which it was buttressed by religious organisations and old allies like WRI.

Of course this could not last. The state went on the offensive, first through a concerted propaganda campaign, in which it labelled the ECC in terms such as a “vast Soviet active measures apparatus” and a “foreign-subsidised, tele-guided psychological warfare weapon aimed at gutting our defences and delivering us bound, to our foe”.³⁴ Fanciful organograms linked the ECC via a global network of ‘communist-front’ organisations through the KGB to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Government also set up its own counter-organisations such as Veterans for Victory. In 1986, government again declared a nationwide state of emergency and began rounding up ECC activists, many of whom endured long periods of detention in solitary confinement or were obliged to go underground, moving from one safe house to the next. In August 1988, the organisation was banned, effectively suppressing its activities. Within a year, however, the government’s grip on the country had weakened to such an extent that along with some other proscribed organisations, the ECC unilaterally declared that it considered itself ‘unbanned’ and openly resumed activities, although its activists continued to be harassed.³⁵

The endgame

The beginning of the end came in February 1990, when, faced with the total collapse of the apartheid state or a slide into full-scale civil war, then president FW de Klerk surprised the world by unbanning the ANC, the Communist Party, PAC and all other proscribed organisations, and began the process of amnestying activists and exiles, freeing political prisoners and negotiating an end to apartheid with the ANC leadership. The remaining imprisoned war resisters were set at liberty, and a de facto moratorium was placed on objector trials from the middle of 1991. With its *raison d’être* gone, the ECC dissolved and conscripts widely ignored their call-ups.

Although it had had only a brief existence, the ECC’s flame burnt brightly. Interestingly, the only white anti-apartheid movements that gained similar levels of support in South Africa also arose from war, perhaps because war has posed one of the few material threats to a historical elite and because it can heighten conflict, thus

threatening both the material and ideological comfort zones of the elite. In the early 1940s, at the height of World War II, the Springbok Legion was formed by soldiers fighting against fascism, who concluded that a similar struggle needed to take place against racism in South Africa. The Springbok Legion combined welfare work for servicemen with pro-democracy politics and by the end of the war, had a membership of over 50 000.³⁶ The Legion promoted non-racial politics and took a stand against the National Party but eventually faded away, although many of its leaders went on to play important roles in the liberation struggle, especially in the white Congress of Democrats which was allied with the ANC. Then in the early 1950s, the Torch Commando arose, mainly with an ex-service membership, spurred by the National Party's efforts to remove coloured voters from the Cape voters' role. It mobilised demonstrations of tens of thousands, but its politics gradually became more paternalistic and in the end, it was unable to withstand the Nationalists.³⁷

During 1990, both the ECC and COSAWR increasingly turned their attentions to the challenges faced in transforming the SADF, integrating the SADF with the homeland forces and the liberation armies to create a new national defence force, demilitarising society, establishing democratic control over the security services and creating a region of peace in Southern Africa. Both organisations³⁸ attended a seminal conference in Lusaka, Zambia, in May 1990, in which SADF personnel, MK leadership, church leaders, academics and others – from both exile and inside South Africa – met together for the first time and set out a framework for the issues listed above.³⁹

In December 1990, COSAWR took the decision to close down and for exiled resisters to return home, its job done. The last issue of *Resister* carried the epitaph:

In the early years it seemed as we were struggling against impossible odds ... we were virtually the only group specifically campaigning against the SADF, an organised force of hundreds of thousands.

... the [South African] regime greatly over-estimated the threat of COSAWR. By the early 1980s government spokesmen ... had elevated COSAWR to a 'white wing of the ANC' and even talked of 'the South African Communist Party/ANC/COSAWR alliance'.

We would not make such extravagant claims! Nevertheless, struggles are often about taking terrain, opening up political space ... Exile gave us a secure base. Protected from detentions and bans and free from state censorship, we could take a long view, develop and inject ideas, create international support and lay the basis for wider

action. Our links with the broad anti-apartheid movement and the ANC were crucial in all this.⁴⁰

During the period of negotiations (1990–1994) and immediately after, members of the ECC and COSAWR, along with ANC and MK officials, set up a policy think-tank based in Johannesburg, the Military Research Group (MRG). Although purporting to be independent, it was in fact closely aligned with the ANC and was influential in establishing a framework for a post-apartheid security and defence policy. To replace ‘total strategy’, the MRG introduced into South African policy circles (first in the ANC and after 1994, in parliament and government) the concept of human security, which remains the bedrock of South African security policy today – although unfortunately more in theory than in practice. It also advocated principles of common or collaborative security in the Southern African region and helped to set up a framework for the integration and downsizing of the military, and for establishing democratic political control over the security forces and demilitarising society.⁴¹ In that sense, the anti-militarist work of the ECC and COSAWR continued to bear fruit, although many hold that the country is at present in danger of re-militarising.⁴² This argument is in particular made by a rump of the more pacifist-inclined members of the former ECC who set up an organisation called Ceasefire, which campaigns against war generally and in particular against South Africa’s rearmament since 1994.⁴³ MRG members went on to establish academic programmes in security studies (both in South Africa and more widely in the region), integrated as senior officers in the new defence force or intelligence organisations, or came to play leading roles in the new civil oversight structures for defence.

Conclusion

This article has traced the history of the war resistance movement in South Africa over a period of 20 years, largely seen through the lens of the main exiled resistance movement, COSAWR. It has demonstrated how a relatively small group of individuals, using exile as a base, a not uncommon feature of national liberation struggles, was able to exert significant political influence, through combining research, activism, mobilisation and lobbying, public and covert activities, and through working with an existing liberation movement and an increasingly influential international solidarity network. This in turn helped to create the conditions within which a domestic resistance movement, one of the largest ever amongst white South Africans, was able to emerge and play an important role in laying the basis for a non-racial South Africa.

Endnotes

- ¹ De Wet, F and Liebenberg, I. "Militarised politics, economic consequences and the implosion of state legitimacy under apartheid". In: Potgieter, T. and Liebenberg, I (eds). *Reflections on War: Preparedness and Consequences*. Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2012, 65-90 and Selfe, J. "The state security apparatus: Implications for covert operations". In Schutte, C, Liebenberg, I, & Minnaar, A (eds). *The Hidden Hand: Covert Operations in South Africa*. Pretoria: HSRC Press. 1998, pp. 127ff.
- ² Notes from a COSAWR study class of 1982 speak approvingly of evidence that between 1961 and 1974 about "110 000 conscripts deserted" from the Portuguese armed forces "while from 1973 there were 50 incidents of opposition inside the army, not only by soldiers but also officers and NCOs". With regard to the US conflict in Vietnam, it noted "draft-card burning, avoidance of service, ... sabotage ... mutiny ... mass demonstrations, meetings and pickets ... and over 300 underground soldiers' newspapers". COSAWR. "War resistance in the USA (Vietnam War), Portugal (MFA) and Israel and the lessons to be learned". Unpublished paper. London: Committee on South African War Resistance, 1982, 1.
- ³ Cawthra, G. *Brutal force: The apartheid war machine*. London: International Defence and Aid Fund, 1986, 23–25.
- ⁴ IDAF. *The apartheid war machine: The strength and deployment of the South African Armed Forces*. London: International Defence and Aid Fund, 1980, 35.
- ⁵ CIIR. *Out of step: War resistance in South Africa*. London: Catholic Institute for International Relations, 1989, 61. See also Du Plessis, T., van der Westhuizen, G. and Liebenberg, I. The willing and the not so willing: Conscription and resistance to compulsory military service in South Africa, 1968-1989. *Journal for Contemporary History*, Vol. 37(2): 21ff.
- ⁶ Much of this section is publicly undocumented and is based on the author's personal experience as one of the founders of the organisation and minutes of COSAWR meetings in the author's possession. Heavily expurgated files related to COSAWR are available in the collection of the same name at the University of Cape Town Library.
- ⁷ The ANC, which had been exclusively black African, opened its ranks to all races at the Morogoro conference in Tanzania in 1969, although what quickly became its armed wing (initially nominally a separate organisation), Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), had always been open to all races since its covert foundation under Nelson Mandela in 1960. The Freedom Charter

declaration at Kliptown in 1955 already included contributions by “white” groups such as the Congress of Democrats (COD). Please see Liebenberg, I, Lortan, F, Nel, FBO & Van der Westhuizen, G (eds). *The Long March: The story of the struggle for liberation in South Africa*, HAUM-Kagiso Press, Pretoria, 1994, 52ff, 65ff, 96ff and 173ff.

- ⁸ COSAWR. “Report of activities during the first six months of existence”. Unpublished paper. London: Committee on South African War Resistance, 1979.
- ⁹ COSAWR. “COSAWR – a brief history and explanation of its position”. Unpublished paper. London: Committee on South African War Resistance, 1982, 1.
- ¹⁰ What was not stated was that this also entailed operational and strategic intelligence, which was passed on to the ANC’s intelligence structures in Lusaka, Zambia, and thence to its operational bases in Angola, Mozambique, and other ‘frontline states’. One of the founders of COSAWR eventually became the chief of intelligence in post-apartheid South Africa. See Gilder, B. *Songs and secrets*. Cape Town: Jacana, 2012.
- ¹¹ COSAWR, “COSAWR – a brief history ...” *op. cit.*
- ¹² COSAWR. *Memorandum from COSAWR to Bob Hughes MP*. London: Committee on South African War Resistance, 1979.
- ¹³ *Resister* first exposed this in 1987 (No 47, January) but the issue continues to attract controversy – see for example *Daily Maverick*. 29 January 2013.
- ¹⁴ Metten, A & Goodison, P. *Fighting for apartheid: A job for life*. Brussels: Association of West European Parliamentarians Against Apartheid, 1988.
- ¹⁵ These records were destroyed when COSAWR disbanded, as they contained confidential information on individuals often gained without their consent.
- ¹⁶ Compare Kairos Werkgroep. *Kerk en bevrijdings-bewegingen*. 1981. Utrecht.
- ¹⁷ For the deep differences and political divide between the standard Marxist-Leninist and Trotskyist interpretations of South Africa’s putative revolution (the latter those in favour of a “one stage revolution”) consult among others chapters by Hirson, B, Legassick, M , & Du Toit, A in Liebenberg, I et al. *The Long March, op. cit.* 52ff, 65ff, 73ff., 96ff.
- ¹⁸ South African intelligence took this so seriously that it produced fake versions of *Omkeer* in which facts and information were grossly exaggerated or distorted in such a fashion as to make the publication appear laughably discreditable.
- ¹⁹ Where Harvey Milk was an early supporter, controversially welcoming an ‘army’ of gay South Africans to San Francisco.

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- ²⁰ Karen Rosenberg, one of the SAMRAF activists in New York and later San Francisco, now living in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, kindly provided me with original SAMRAF documentation although she probably does not agree with my analysis of the organisation.
- ²¹ Rauch, J. "War and Resistance", In Cawthra, G, Kraak, G & O'Sullivan, G (eds), *War and resistance: Southern African reports*, London: Macmillan, 1994.
- ²² *Resister 67*. December 1990.
- ²³ For a more recent analysis, see Conway, D. *Masculinities, militarisation and the end conscription campaign: War resistance in Apartheid South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012.
- ²⁴ *Resister 66*. Third Quarter 1990. 28–31.
- ²⁵ On the weakening of the right wing in South African politics during the transition period see for example Van der Westhuizen, G. "'Die Slag van Mmabatho' Die einde van regse weerstand teen die nuwe Suid-Afrika?". *Journal for Contemporary History* 37/2. 163-177
- ²⁶ Cawthra, G, Kraak, G & O'Sullivan, G. "'Resister and the politics of the war resistance movement'". In Cawthra, G, Kraak, G & O'Sullivan, G (eds), *War and resistance: Southern African reports*, London: Macmillan, 1994, 18.
- ²⁷ See Centre for Intergroup Studies (CIGS). *Conscientious Objection*, Occasional Paper No. 8. 1984 (first edition). 1989 (second edition). Rondebosch. Especially pp.42ff, 64ff and 82ff are relevant.
- ²⁸ Rauch, J. "Introduction". In Cawthra, Kraak & O'Sullivan, *War and resistance ... op. cit.*, pp. 9–12.
- ²⁹ Seekings, J. *The UDF: A history of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983–1991*. Cape Town: David Philip, 2000. See also Gottschalk, K. United Democratic Front in Liebenberg, Van der Westhuizen, G.,I, Lortan, F., Nel FBO (Eds). *The Long March: The Story of the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa*. Pretoria: Kagiso/HAUM, 1994, pp.187-198.
- ³⁰ CIIR *op. cit.*, p. 86.
- ³¹ Philips, M W. *The End Conscription campaign 1983-1988: A study of white extra-parliamentary opposition to apartheid*. MA dissertation (unpublished) 2002. Pretoria: Unisa.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ³³ Editorial. *Cape Times*. 9 October 1985. See also Du Plessis, T., van der Westhuizen, G. and Liebenberg, I. The willing and the not so willing: Conscription and resistance to compulsory military service in South Africa, 1968-1989. *Journal for Contemporary History*, Vol. 37(2): 21ff

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- ³⁴ CIIR *op. cit.*, p. 113.
- ³⁵ State security operatives also proved to be innovative in this period. A favourite tactic was the killing, skinning and hanging of ECC activists' pets.
- ³⁶ Bunting, B. *The rise of the South African Reich*. London: International Defence and Aid Fund, 1986.
- ³⁷ Everatt, D. *The origins of non-racialism: White opposition to apartheid in the 1950s*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009.
- ³⁸ Although the COSAWR members attended as part of the ANC delegation.
- ³⁹ *Joint press statement on the ANC-IDASA Conference on the Future of Security and Defence in South Africa, 23–27 May 1990, Lusaka*.
- ⁴⁰ *Resister 67*. December 1990.
- ⁴¹ A cogent account of the MRG's positions can be found in a special edition of the journal *Work in Progress*. February/March 1994: "Peace and security for all".
- ⁴² There is for example occasional utterances within the ANC for a return to conscription on the basis of nation building, although the resources for this do not remotely exist.
- ⁴³ For an account of rearmament – and associated corruption – after the end of apartheid, see Crawford-Browne, T. *Eye on the money*. Roggebaai: Umuzi, 2007.