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Betrayed – southern Africa's discarded soldiers

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Body

A SURVEY of most conflicts since antiquity reveals a disturbing phenomenon of how those who ascend to power often discard the foot soldiers who help them assume it.

History is replete with stories of soldiers on all sides of conflicts who get left behind by the established and emerging elites, who enter into pacts to share the spoils of war. Such is the manifestation of self-interest as the heartbeat of elite politics.

The recent protest by a group of former liberation movement guerrilla fighters – who now stand accused of kidnapping three government ministers, and may even be charged with treason – has brought into sharp focus the plight of combatants who gave up their dreams and youth to fight for their country.

They share the pain of poverty and a lack of medical care, while former soldiers of the murderous South African Defence Force (SADF) continue to enjoy many of the benefits provided to military veterans.

Contrast the plight of the former liberation movement guerrilla fighters with the experiences of black soldiers who fought on the opposite side of many battles in Angola and Namibia – former members of armed groups that supported apartheid South Africa and its intrusions into those countries.

In his well-researched and packed offering, *Apartheid's Black Soldiers: Un-National Wars and Militaries in Southern Africa*, Lennart Bolliger offers new perspectives on the reasons advanced by those who joined armed groups that supported the apartheid states' intrusions into neighbouring countries.

The book chronicles some of the experiences of the soldiers during the wars they were engaged in, and their experiences following the resolution of those conflicts.

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Unlike other triumphalist books – written by some of the apartheid military operatives on South Africa's aggression in Angola and Namibia – it provides a scholarly account and analysis of the experiences of black soldiers who were part of the repressive state apparatus.

Many South Africans, Angolans and Namibians will recall, with deep pain, the trauma caused by the activities of these soldiers. And that is where many will have a problem with the book.

On the one hand, it provides a rich analysis of the complexities of the involvement of a few members of the oppressed group in the defence of a system that subjugated everyone and did not exclude them simply because they defended it.

Hence, no matter how much revisionist historiography may seek to recast the motivations of those who supported the apartheid state and its imperialist aggression, the scars that they inflicted remain on the bodies and souls of those they helped to brutalise.

The very framing of the book betrays the pitfalls of postmodern history writing and scholarship. Such scholarship often accentuates arguments that obfuscate the real issues at the core of a given problem by privileging peripheral points. In this regard, the anti-colonial struggles waged by the oppressed met units organised by the state that involved black soldiers, who were drafted into the offensive against the oppressed in Angola, Namibia and South Africa.

These included: the SADF's 32 Battalion, operating in and against the nationalist struggle in the then-occupied Namibia and post-independence Angola; the South West African Territory Force (SWATF), which fought mainly the guerrilla armies of the people of Namibia; and, the paramilitary police unit, Koevoet, which assisted the SWATF to suppress the liberation aspirations of the people of Namibia.

Drawing partly from archival materials and analysing available scholarship, but largely based on interviews with the black soldiers themselves, Bollinger advances a range of reasons to explain why some joined the repression against their own people.

Some claimed that they did so due to seeking protection against the violence meted out by the guerrilla groups in some of the regions of Namibia.

Others are said to have been drawn by the wish to be part of some form of a professional army. Thus, the appeal of a military culture would have been an attraction in this regard.

In advancing these and other arguments, Bollinger rejects what he regards as a nationalist historical lens, of seeing those who joined apartheid armies as "collaborators", "sell-outs", or "traitors". He also views as limited the argument that socio-economic need, born out of poverty, drove some of the soldiers into the roles that they played.

An attempt to minimise the role played by the "lure" of money, which was widely employed by settler-colonial governments to draw in a section of the oppressed, is a limitation in what is otherwise a novel attempt to understand how soldiers often operate. Such a minimisation runs into an analytical "cul-de-sac" when seeking an

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explanation for what draws people to enlist in mercenary armies hired to either execute coups or to protect dictatorships.

Having been used to repress the liberation demands raised by the people mainly of Namibia and destabilise post-independent Angola, the members of the armed groups – 32 Battalion, SWATF and Koevoet – found themselves on the margins of post-conflict societies. Most could not return to post-war Angola, while others could not stay in Namibia following its independence in 1989.

Their journey as appendages to statutory forces ended in 1993, when 32 Battalion was disbanded in preparation for the new military regime in the post-apartheid settlement.

With only a few being integrated into the post-apartheid South African National Defence Force, a lucky few found employment with private security companies. Others continued what Bolliger terms the “un-national” journeys of rendering their services as mercenaries in several African countries. Still others joined the US invasion of Iraq and worked as contracted security personnel.

Whatever scholarly criticisms we may have against Bolliger’s analytical frames, this book provides well-researched experiences of and reveals how black soldiers who defended the apartheid state’s interests in Angola and Namibia ended up being discarded by their former masters.

This is a too-familiar story of how the poor often get used by the elites to advance their interests, only to be discarded once their use-value has been expended.

Perhaps that is the only thing those who fought against their own people share with those who fought for liberation. They both returned from war, only to be discarded by the elites.

I Apartheid’s Black Soldiers: Un-National Wars and Militaries in Southern Africa is published by Ohio University Press (US). It can be bought online and retail outlets at R1 250.

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