

Winter 1993

REVIEW ESSAY

The Clandestine Armed Struggle for South Africa, 1961-1990: a review of two competing histories

Ellis, Stephen and Tsepo Sechaba. *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile*. London: James Currey, and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Roherty, James M. *State Security in South Africa: Civil-Military Relations under P W Botha*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1992.

At a surprise news conference just after the start of South Africa's summer vacation period in December, State President F.W. de Klerk announced a purge of 23 senior officers of the South African Defence Force's (SADF) intelligence establishment for unauthorized clandestine activities linked to the current political violence.¹ Earlier in August, he had purged 19 South African Police (SAP) generals.

Similarly, security commanders of the African National Congress (ANC) have been strongly criticized — first by an internal ANC inquiry in October and then more strongly by an Amnesty International report the following month — for torture and killings in its guerrilla camps in exile.²

To understand these recent events and the broader issues of spiralling violence and political negotiations in South Africa today, it is necessary to place them in the context of the objectives and rationale of the security commanders on both sides of this clandestine armed struggle within and beyond its borders. James Roherty's *State Security in South Africa* provides the best inclusive survey of the mindset of the senior commanders of the South African security forces — as does Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba's *Comrades against Apartheid* for the mindset of the senior commanders in the ANC/SACP/MK alliance — over this 30 year period. Yet readers will benefit from reading both Roherty's study and Ellis/Sechaba's more detailed one in comparison, if only as a cross-check.

For 40 and 30 years respectively, the South African Communist Party (SACP) or, as Ellis and Sechaba refer to it, "the Party") and the African National Congress were banned from South African politics by the white minority regime. With their formation in 1961 of a joint armed wing the *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (or MK, meaning Spear of the Nation in Zulu), they launched an "armed struggle" to destroy the apartheid system of government in South Africa.

As a result of the Party's obsession with secrecy — regarding its leadership, members and internal activities — as well as the MK's operational needs, there has not been a detailed account of the "internal workings" of the armed struggle. There is the semi-official though "sanitized" history of the ANC by the late Francis Meli — longtime ANC editor and onetime SACP Politburo member — entitled *South*

Africa belongs to us: a history of the ANC. Similarly, Howard Barrell — for ten years, a clandestine ANC activist — has written a very short preliminary survey on *MK: the ANC's armed struggle*, although a more detailed study arising from his doctoral work is expected.³ There have also been a number of academic and journalistic studies done on the ANC which attempt to lift the “cover of secrecy” on SACP/MK activities and their relationship with the ANC leadership in exile. But none provide a frank disclosure on the subject — either due to the writers’ lack of detailed evidence or an unwillingness to discuss their firsthand knowledge.

Comrades against Apartheid attempts to provide the first detailed account of the interwoven activities of the ANC/SACP/MK alliance. But this was not an alliance of three separate organizations, rather individuals could become members in each organization without disclosing their membership in the other ones. (p. 6) Similarly, while the MK was a joint ANC/SACP creation, it would come to be Party-driven, as argued by the authors (e.g., p. 63), through caucus techniques and secret Party loyalty.

Although using the *nom de plume* of “Tsepo Sechaba,” one of the authors claims extensive “insider knowledge” as a black African member of both the ANC and the SACP, having participated in the ANC underground with access to highly confidential information. His British co-author, Stephen Ellis, is a former editor of the London-based *Africa Confidential* newsletter, who as a journalist from 1986 to 1991 travelled throughout southern Africa where he had occasion to interview some of the ANC/MK participants.

From this unique combination of backgrounds and experiences, they have tried to place a “personal memoir of a black South African who was a revolutionary during the 1980s” (p. 7) into the broader context of the SACP’s “hidden history,” as well as using available though limited published sources linked with individual but unreferenced participant interviews. This study is exceptionally informative, even if difficult to read, due to its mass of evidence — amounting to a small encyclopedia outlining the key people, factions and events during the decades of exile.

Citing as their declared goals, the authors first seek to remove the self-imposed cover of secrecy over the Party’s internal processes and cadre leadership — hidden even from its rank and file members — and its clandestine activities, under which it has operated since its founding in 1921. And second, as their basic thesis, to analyze how the SACP leadership increasingly came to dominate the *Umkhonto we Sizwe* in particular and the exiled ANC in general, from 1960 to the unbanning of the ANC and the SACP in February 1990.

Regarding the SACP’s “cover of secrecy,” the book offers ample evidence — even if mostly reliant upon the authors’ own knowledge — of the Party’s obsession with maintaining the secrecy of its organizational processes and membership, with its vanguard role in the armed struggle, and with “infiltration” of the controlling structures of both the MK and the ANC. But what the authors leave undiscussed is the effect this may — or may not — have had. Did the ANC senior

leadership in exile choose courses of action — such as the 1969 “Strategy and Tactics” policy document which called for a politico-military campaign based upon the urban working class in the black townships — due to internal pressure from “hidden” Party cadres which it wouldn’t have chosen otherwise? Alternatively, would support for a mobilization of rural Africans and ultimately a series of regional uprisings have proved to be more effective, compared to the Party’s obsession with creating a perceived set of conditions for an urban uprising on the 1917 Soviet model? It is likely that the ANC leadership would have pursued much the same strategies as it did, if only due to the lack of viable alternative options as well as the overwhelming control exercised by the apartheid regime in Pretoria.

The second goal was to describe the techniques and activities of the SACP in extending its control over the MK structures and its influence within the ANC senior leadership in exile. In detail, the authors outline how the Party’s strength rested on its organizational techniques and obsession with secrecy in its efforts to dominate the armed struggle by its influence on the ANC. Yet, contradictorily at one point, the authors suggest that the senior circles of the ANC did know the “true extent of the Party’s influence” within the organization. (p. 193) This contradiction is perhaps explained by the Party’s resources leverage over ANC policies and MK operations, due to its seemingly limitless access to foreign (e.g. Soviet communist bloc) military, financial and diplomatic assistance — at least until Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms in the late 1980s.

As a further *undeclared* goal — based upon this reviewer’s experiences in the Frontline States during the 1980s — this study graphically describes the “exiled condition” of those who had fled the oppression of apartheid South Africa. Whether they fled the security police crackdown of the 1960s, or after the Soweto uprising in 1976 or after the township violence in the mid-1980s, these exiles faced years of separation from their families, the numbing frustration of inactivity in distant guerrilla camps, the leadership intrigues of competing ANC and Party factions, and the tyranny of a paranoid ANC internal security apparatus. The book offers up an excellent insight into how the “exiled condition” affected the MK personnel — whether by the “murky world” of security police agents, “supposed agents,” and innocent individuals “fingered” due to exile politics or by the constant fear of a deadly long-range strike by South African conventional forces or of a clandestine assassination or letter bomb by covert government death squads. These factors, while not weakening the authors’ arguments, draw out the complex depth within which South African exiles lived throughout this period and which will remain psychologically with them even after their long-awaited return home.

The book’s writing style is very reminiscent of that found in *Africa Confidential*, being detailed, unsourced and interwoven in its intricacy. But, in spots, it lacks clarity, as for example when referring to a communist cadre “spirited out of South Africa for training in the Soviet Union before his murder by the Security Police in 1971” (p. 72) — a reader can only suspect that the authors meant murdered by South African security police upon his return. Also the depth of data may tempt

some readers to have close at hand a general survey of southern African affairs covering this period, if only to keep the subtle currents and intricate linkages in focus. With the exception of the lucid and referenced background portion of the book dealing with the years between 1921 and the early 1960s, the reader is left to rely upon the authors' credentials as to the source and accuracy of their analysis. Yet the wealth of detailed statements concerning people and events strongly points to information which only an active participant would possess — or be able to verify.

Already the focus of considerable comment within South Africa, some columnists have pointed out that this book, while being very informative about the ANC's internal politics in exile and the sensitive issue of ANC/MK detainees, has little to say about the ANC's present orientation or where it is heading. Others, such as SACP ideologue Jeremy Cronin, have simply ridiculed it as crude conspiracy theory while offering little contrary evidence. Even so, Gail Gerhart, in the fall 1992 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, has suggested that this book is "possibly the most original contribution in a decade to the literature on South African politics."⁴

In the view of this reviewer, this book is not only the most original contribution on the ANC and the SACP in exile, but its "programme of key players cum chronology" format will make it an essential reference for researchers and students of southern African affairs. Notwithstanding possible discovery of factual errors or additional information — such as that recently released from the Soviet communist party's secret international archives concerning its instructions to the SACP⁵ — future research writings and personal memoirs on these three decades of exile politics and armed struggle will, in all likelihood, use this study as a reference source on the one hand, while on the other having their own writings measured against it.

One final question on *Comrades against Apartheid* needs to be asked: was Tsepo Sechaba the inside "source" for *Africa Confidential* on the internal politics of the ANC and the SACP over the past decade? If so, he may have possibly "blown" his cover, depriving the newsletter of a key source. Or does *Africa Confidential* have additional "sources in place," particularly during this time of continuing political transition in South Africa?

An alternate view of the same period of the South African armed struggle is provided by University of South Carolina political scientist James Roherty in his *State Security in South Africa*. He describes his book as:

an account of an imaginative and innovative utilization of military and intelligence assets in [sic] behalf of state purposes ... [where then President P.W.] Botha's direction of his security forces was in fact critical in forming the foundation upon which [current President] de Klerk, today, seeks to build the South African future. (p. 3)

Researchers should read Roherty's book carefully in view of its range of unsubstantiated assertions, uncritical use of participant perspectives, and Reaganite approach to "geostrategic" analysis. Yet his study does provide the best inclusive

survey of the South African security forces' *raison d'être* during the three decades of internal warfare that this reviewer has read. And it may prove to be an essential background reference for current "third force" allegations in South Africa — namely, that senior security force members clandestinely are continuing to foment political violence countrywide, which could still derail the fragile negotiation process for a "New South Africa."

In essence, Roherty's thesis is that during the early 1980s, "P.W. Botha, recognizing that his country had reached the historical juncture when it must establish a new political order encompassing all of its diverse people, moved with dispatch to put in place those prerequisites indispensable to fundamental constitutional change." (p. 7) The cited prerequisites were "for the most part ... stabilization measures" to enforce a "climate of security" both internally and regionally. Internally, this meant the "eradication of revolutionary war" (p. 43) through a combination of violent suppression and basic welfare — referred to by the SADF as "winning hearts and minds" or WHAM, though not by the author — programs. Externally, it came to mean a destabilization strategy of preemptive cross-border military strikes and punitive economic measures. Following stabilization, other prerequisites included "normalization" measures in terms of welfare programs internally to blunt social dissent and of diplomatic relations regionally to block external involvement (p. 43), and a "rationalization" of the state security-management process. (p. 79)

The book is a *tour de horizon* in describing the efforts made by P.W. Botha's security forces to counter the rising "revolutionary war" situation within South Africa's borders and beyond, as seen from the viewpoint of his "securocrat" advisors and security commanders. This security establishment included the SADF, the SAP, the National Intelligence Service (NIS), and the Armaments Corporation of South Africa (Armcor).

In the view of this reviewer, there are at least two levels at which this book can be read. First as uncritical praise for P.W. Botha, the SADF and their approach to "stabilizing" and "normalizing" South Africa. The two best sections consist of Chapter 3 which describes the turf battle for the "intelligence brief" in the late 1970s which the SADF would win from its SAP and NIS competitors, and Chapters 2 and 4 which deal with SADF doctrinal thinking on "Total Onslaught" and "Total Strategy" in the 1980s. But there is *no* mention of covert government "death squads" such as the Civil Cooperation Bureau, or of clandestine operations linked to the SADF Directorate of Military Intelligence, or of the recently uncovered operations of the SADF Directorate of Covert Collection — despite almost continuous media revelations over the past three years gradually exposing the security forces' "dirty war" operations against unarmed anti-apartheid activists as well as armed guerrillas.

The second (and possibly unintentional) level is that this book is as close to a "securocrat participant" viewpoint as seems possible — until one or more of the principal SADF commanders write their own "histories." While providing an excellent survey of the security commanders' mindset of what "they" thought they

were trying to accomplish, it also lends support to the view that “they” had little recognition that they at the same time were creating a national “culture of violence and counter-violence.”

Hopefully this reviewer sought some new revelations about the Botha period but disappointingly found few. One insight was just how strongly Botha (pp. 144-45) — using the SADF as his anointed instrument — had to work to get his reform process through the civilian Afrikaner bureaucracy. This civilian bureaucracy was described by the author as “South Africa’s foremost caste, created by a populist, labor-oriented Afrikaner political elite ... to accommodate a steadily urbanizing White working class.” (p. 69)

In another insightful example, his discussion (pp. 162-68) of the 1987-88 battle of Cuito Cuanavale in southern Angola basically recites the SADF perspective on the six-month siege, namely that the SADF had won due to the greater losses it had inflicted on the defending Angolan/Cuban forces. Yet the watershed battle highlighted the SADF’s major vulnerabilities: a limited number of combat aircraft air frames due to the UN arms embargo and the political unacceptability among the “whites only” electorate of even a small number of *white* casualties. (p. 114) While tactically a victory, the strategic result was that the SADF forces had to withdraw — the author like the SADF prefer the expression “step down” — from Angola to its base areas in Namibia, opening the way for earnest negotiations on Namibian independence and Cuban withdrawal from Angola.

A third insightful example is his approval of the late William Casey’s “alternative channels” efforts in the early 1980s, suggesting that they were reciprocated by Botha and his SADF advisors. (pp. 193-95) During his period as Ronald Reagan’s Director of Central Intelligence, Casey attempted to maintain “highest level” links and intelligence sharing with the Botha government through military contacts and “knowledgeables ... fully trusted, highly knowledgeable, private individuals.” Was this possibly a southern African dimension to the private foreign policy initiatives or even the Iran-Contras operations of the Reagan White House? While claiming that these backdoor efforts were “complementing formal channels” of the Reagan “constructive engagement” policy toward South Africa, Roherty goes on to criticize the US State Department under George Shultz and Chester Crocker, for “working its own purposes ... inserting the United States into southern Africa as principal broker of regional issues.” (p. 191) Rather than the United States attempting to act as “the” regional powerbroker, the author argues for a more correct “geo-strategic” policy “à la” Reagan Doctrine. Under this approach, the “primary global power” (the United States) only assists through *access* to the “primary regional power” (South Africa) in countering regionally a “great power adversary” (the Soviet Bloc) or in pursuit of common strategic interests within the region. (pp. 196-200) This would appear to be a policy approach favoured by Botha and his security advisors — especially in view of the earlier American policy reversal on the Angolan conflict in 1975 which left “Pretoria in the lurch” (p. 73) as well as the 1985-86 failure of the Reagan Administration to pursue “highest level” even if

informal contacts with President Botha (p. 195) — based upon the author's participant interviews.

Roherty seeks to position his study in sharp contrast to what he claims are "now standardized contentions" (p. 7) that, in order to protect the white-minority South African state, there was "a silent bloodless coup" by SADF senior officers and related securocrats under Botha which "militarized" its administrative regime and embarked on a complementary regional policy of violent destabilization. Repeatedly citing his own "high level contacts" with the South African security establishment over the past decade, he argues that both foreign and South African writers of this "coupist" school of thought fail the test of adequate primary evidence from government "documents or the principals involved" for their analyses. On the other hand, he points out that his study utilizes "some one hundred" interviews which he conducted with political, military, intelligence, corporate and academic members — "some more than once" — in South Africa between 1979 and 1990. Although making good use of the available though limited published materials in English by a variety of security establishment participants, there are in fact only a sprinkling of references to his impressive list of interviewees, many which are not attributed. Thus the reader is left repeatedly with little idea whose views were being used or not used — beyond the presumably "self-evident" perspective of senior SADF commanders.

Further, his reliance upon security establishment participants likens his descriptions of South African events to writing about the American civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s solely from the perspective of the state government authorities. And he makes no effort to place these events within the socio-political context of the country's *apartheid* system of racial domination. He does discuss Botha's limited political reforms from white-minority government to a white/"coloured"/Asian parliament controlled by a white executive president. Yet he makes no mention — beyond an oblique hint on p. 17 — that Botha's August 1985 "Rubicon" speech effectively halted his limited reform program and lead to further re-enforcement of the securocrat-run National Security Management System, originally created in Botha's 1979 security re-organization.

The author is highly critical of both local and foreign writers for their "remote sensing" — in terms of their review of local media sources — of the South African security forces' thinking and activities. But many of these writers closely follow the press statements and publications of the security establishment in English and Afrikaans. Even so, he is at the same time prepared to quote such local writings where they support his views, examples include Brian Pottinger (pp. 5 and 187, n.37) and Annette Seegers (p. 5 and 33, n.23).

Additionally, a significant portion of the author's copious endnotes refer to secondary source literature by non-South African writers perhaps best categorized as from a "geostrategic" school of thought often linked to the Reagan Doctrine of the 1980s. An unsettling aspect of this perspective is Roherty's repeated references to unspecified groups, almost in code — "some saw" (p. 151), "usual sources" (p.

160), “usual circles” (p. 166), “suggested to some” (p. 167), etc. Equally unsettling is his apparent lack of familiarity with the names of senior anti-apartheid activists, such as the senior ANC constitutional expert Albie Sachs (not Albie Jacks) who was seriously injured in a South African-organized car bombing in Mozambique. (p. 151)

The final word on Roherty’s study should be given to the “Great Crocodile,” the media nickname given P.W. Botha during his presidency by the South African press. In his public denial of allegations that his government ordered the assassination of black activists (South African Press Association news report, 27 May 1992), Botha “proposed that the [de Klerk] Government and the ‘hateful media organs’ read a book recently published in the USA, *State Security in South Africa — Civil Military Relations under P W Botha* by James M. Roherty.” Whether Botha’s suggestion meant that this book would vindicate him or only provide an explanation for the violent activities of his government, only the Great Crocodile knows!

This reviewer is looking forward to reading “personal histories” by key participants in South Africa’s clandestine struggle — as found, for example, in the detailed memoir of the Rhodesia/Zimbabwe armed struggle found in *Serving Secretly: an intelligence chief on record, Rhodesia into Zimbabwe 1964-1981* by Ken Flowers, then head of the Central Intelligence Organization.⁶ But presently it seems unlikely that senior security commanders on either side will be writing their “histories,” at least in the foreseeable future. Even so, the continuous flow — if not a flood — of secret information resulting from security leaks, media investigative reporting and judicial commission investigations, since de Klerk became president in 1989, keeps adding significant information “pieces” to the jigsaw puzzle of covert activities undertaken during South Africa’s armed struggle.

Even though the definite “picture” of that puzzle still remains unclear, the question of accountability of senior security commanders within both the South African security forces and the ANC/SACP/MK alliance has started to be addressed. Will they collectively or individually be held accountable — in some sort of “Nuremberg” trials as suggested in the South African press — for their acts of violence and counter-violence, repression and counter-repression, terror and counter-terror which became the trademarks of the clandestine armed struggle? Are their covertly-organized actions still continuing?

Currently, the most likely outcome is that such senior security commanders will *not* be placed on trial. This follows the pattern in the independence transition phase of the earlier Zimbabwean and Namibian armed struggles. But there is a widespread perception within South African society, blacks and whites, that security commanders should publicly acknowledge responsibility for unauthorized acts of violence and that there has to be some “final accounting” made — if a “New South Africa” is to emerge from the continuing fog and violence of clandestine internal warfare.

Robert D’A. Henderson
Ottawa

Endnotes

1. *The Star*, (Johannesburg), 22 December 1992.
2. *The Independent*, (London), 28 November 1992.
3. Francis Meli, *South Africa belongs to us: a history of the ANC* (London: James Currey, 1989); Howard Barrell, *MK: the ANC's armed struggle* (London: Penguin, 1990).
4. Gail Gerhart, *Foreign Affairs* 71, no. 4 (Fall 1992), p. 219.
5. *Izvestia*, (Moscow), 1 June 1992.
6. Ken Flowers, *Serving Secretly: an intelligence chief on record, Rhodesia into Zimbabwe, 1964-1981* (London: Murray, 1987).