RESEARCH

Journeys of Redemption and Reconciliation: The Return of South African Defence Force Veterans to Angola

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A number of South African Defence Force (SADF) veterans have undertaken trips to the erstwhile Angolan battlefields of the so-called 'Border War' (1966–1989) in recent years. This paper proposes to examine two projects by SADF veterans who returned to Angola. The first involved the making of a film called *My Heart of Darkness* that records the journey of former paratrooper Marius van Niekerk who returned to Angola in 2007 in search of redemption from his shameful memories relating to his role in the war. The second is a more recent trip to Angola by a number of SADF veterans who initiated joint ventures and sourced investment to provide employment for Angolan veterans. Such initiatives are framed as exercises in reconciliation between former enemies who celebrate a new-found camaraderie occasioned by their common histories as soldiers. The paper conceives of SADF veterans as 'transnational agents' who have crossed borders so as to promote co-operation rather than dwell on past ideological and political differences. It argues that the informal initiatives by SADF veterans might be regarded as attempts to make amends for the absence of formal institutional ones by South Africa and that these ventures have been undertaken in lieu of admissions of culpability for the damage inflicted upon Angola by the defunct apartheid army.

The term 'Border War' (and its Afrikaans equivalent *Grensoorlog*) were used by white South Africans to describe the war that was waged in Namibia and Angola from 1966 to 1989. The low-intensity war initially involved the South African security forces in counter-insurgency operations against PLAN (Peoples' Liberation Army of Namibia) guerrillas within Namibia. Then the South African Defence Force (SADF) employed 'hot pursuit' operations in which its troops frequently crossed the Angolan border on the heels of PLAN insurgents, as well as pre-emptive strikes and cross-border operations that involved attacks on specific SWAPO (South West Africa Peoples' Organization) bases inside Angola. Gradually, the war against SWAPO was expanded as the SADF provided support for its proxy the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) that formed a buffer in southern Angola to hinder PLAN's infiltration of Namibia. This increasingly brought the SADF into conflict with Angolan and Cuban troops that were seeking to destroy UNITA. As the scope and intensity of the war escalated during the 1980s, the SADF shifted its strategy from counter-insurgency to mobile armoured warfare. The SADF penetrated further into Angolan territory and actually occupied large swathes of the southern parts of the country for extended periods. Although the SADF seldom engaged Popular Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA) and Cuban forces intentionally, contacts became commonplace. These culminated in large-scale battles, most famously the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1987–88.[1]

Since the end of the conflict, a number of SADF veterans have undertaken trips to the erstwhile Angolan battlefields. Two such journeys have been recorded in the form of travelogues: the one taking the form of a motorized convoy that amounted to tourist safari and the other the form of a penitent pilgrimage by a solo cyclist (Baines 2018). These veterans revisited war sites primarily to pay tribute to their own dead and engage in acts of person-to-person rapprochement. The journeys served to connect the veterans with their former enemies and, to a lesser degree, with the Angolan people.

This paper proposes to examine two further projects by SADF veterans who returned to Angola. The first involved the making of a film called *My Heart of Darkness* that records the journey of former paratrooper Marius van Niekerk who returned to Angola in 2007 in search of redemption from

his shameful memories relating to his role in the war. The second is a 2018 trip by a group of SADF veterans who visited Angola to facilitate reconciliation by way of the establishment of joint projects. Definitions of reconciliation are contextually and culturally specific. Here it is understood here to mean 'the act of building and rebuilding relationships that are not haunted by the conflicts and hatreds of yesterday' (Brown 2005 in Quinn 2009: p. 10). Such reconciliation initiatives are based on a particular ordering of time in which interventions draw a sharp line between a violent past and present, and a future of envisaged peace and prosperity. In other words, partial and selective remembrance of the war serves the purpose of reconciliation. This paper asks why these veterans cross borders to meet their former enemies. It will conceptualize veterans as 'transnational actors' where the transnational sphere is defined as 'the space where encounters across national borders [take] place' (Rodogno, Struck & Vogel 2015: p. 2). It will examine the common assertion made by veterans that soldiers do not have deep-seated enmities; that the bond of comradeship between ex-soldiers transcends politics and national boundaries.

The paper will situate these SADF veteran initiatives against the backdrop of the changing political situation in South Africa in which reconciliation has arguably run its course and in which the African National Congress government has made little more than token gestures to so-called 'frontline' states' (including Angola) to express appreciation for their support during the war of liberation. It will argue that the informal initiatives by SADF veterans might be regarded as belated attempts at restitution in the absence of formal institutional efforts by South Africa to assist a country that was ravaged by a lengthy war in which the (now defunct) SADF played an enormously destructive role. It will suggest that these veteran initiatives have been taken in lieu of admissions of culpability for their part in the war.

Post-conflict South Africa and Angola

South Africa's Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was a national exercise for what was a civil war, as well as a regional and international conflict. A coterie of retired generals served as gatekeepers for SADF submissions to and discouraged independent testimonies pertaining to the conduct of the security forces. Consequently, there was little compunction for SADF veterans to appear before the TRC and address the issue of human rights abuses in Namibia and Angola. For those who did testify, the TRC followed a restorative rather than a retributive justice model which meant that human rights violators could be granted amnesty provided they owned up to their politically-motivated deeds. Testimony from its hearings, as well as research undertaken by TRC staff, informed the Report that provided an authoritative record of human rights violations by the apartheid state's security forces against its domestic enemies, namely the liberation movements and their armed wings. However,

it did not provide a comprehensive account of South Africa's strategy of destabilization, the overall aim of which was to exact a high price of the 'frontline' states that allowed the ANC to operate bases within their countries. Nor did the TRC Report record details of many of the military operations that the SADF conducted in Angola (Saunders in Baines & Vale 2008).

Unlike SADF veterans, former Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) combatants had appeared before the TRC to advance their case for having waged a 'just war' and seek amnesty for human rights abuses. The national liberation movement reckoned that it had 'earned [its] legitimacy to govern in perpetuity through armed struggle' (Southall 2013; McDowell & Braniff 2014). But the inability of the ANC to manage its own transition from a liberation movement to ruling party has created a crisis of legitimacy. After more than two decades of democracy and exercising state power, the ANC still sees a need to have to justify its credentials as *the* organisation that was instrumental in achieving liberation. Indeed, the ANC still regards itself as the party of freedom fighters that has to live up to its past. This preoccupation with the ANC's past achievements sometimes overshadows its willingness to face up to the challenges of the present and the future. It also partly explains why the country has not given much attention to improving its relationships with its neighbouring states who still harbor resentment about the strategies of the apartheid regime. Because Angola was caught up in the maelstrom of a civil war (escalated and prolonged by the intervention of foreign powers), as well as a cross-border conflict with South Africa as the MPLA government gave refuge to SWAPO and ANC cadres, it had borne the brunt of the fighting.

Angola's faultlines of class and ethnicity emphasized by the Portuguese colonizers were reinforced during the civil war. The MPLA, with its stronghold in Luanda, included a disproportionate number of *mestiços* or mixed race intellectuals in leadership positions. The FNLA's support base was among the Bakongo, who inhabited the north-eastern region that straddled the border with Zaire, and its leader Holden Robert had familial ties with Mobuto Seseo Seko, who became that country's dictator. But the collapse of the FNLA in 1976 meant that Savimbi's UNITA remained the only serious domestic adversary of the MPLA. Savimbi was from the largest ethnic group, the Ovimbundu that inhabited the south-eastern parts of the country. The vestiges of these rivalries outlived the civil war and the ultimately victorious MPLA repeated the repressive habits of the Portuguese colonizers (Birmingham 2015). This included their divide and rule approach to governance. National reconciliation has become a hollow phrase in the post-colonial period

Cuba's intervention in Angola in the guise of international solidarity had saved the self-styled Marxist-Leninist MPLA government in Luanda but created a legacy of dependency. Havana's role was not confined to military support. Castro had also provided as many as 50,000 civilian assistants

known as *cooperantes* to lend their expertise to the MPLA government between 1976 and 1991 (Hatzky 2015). These included doctors, nurses, teachers, and bureaucrats who helped to build the rudiments of a public administration as the Portuguese had departed their former colony in indecent haste and had vindictively destroyed much of the infrastructure before doing so. Angola's war economy was reliant on oil revenues to remunerate the Cubans for their assistance. The state-owned company, Sonangol, ensured a flow of income from multinational corporations that were granted concessions and established offshore oil installations that supplemented the exploitation of the Cabinda enclave. Following the 1989 New York Accords which brought peace and a political settlement to Namibia, the withdrawal of the SADF from that country, and the phased withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola, the MPLA government found itself dependent on Cuban managers rather than the skills of its own cadres to administer the post-colonial state.

Angola opted for blanket amnesty following the termination of hostilities. Like many other post-conflict societies in Africa, the MPLA government did not have the means nor the political will to deal with the divisive legacy of its war. And the end of the civil war has not brought about much improvement in the fortunes of most Angolans who have paid a high price for conditions of relatively peaceful co-existence since the death of the rebel UNITA leader, Jonas Savimbi in 2002. Corruption fueled by the windfall from the oil boom is rife and inequalities have been exacerbated by the distorted development from that oil wealth under a despotic MPLA regime. The economic and political elites have been the only real beneficiaries of the post-war situation. Angola, is 'a model of elite self-enrichment and wealth disparity'. But the postwar poor 'have found the extremes of inequality far easier to live with than foreign invaders, marauding soldiery, press gangs and starvation' (Harding 2016). Peace has ensured a measure of stability but not the conditions for sustained development of all sectors of Angolan society (Pearce 2005).

The Angolan landscape still bears tangible traces of the war. This is evident from the detritus of the wrecked military vehicles strewn across erstwhile battlefields, as well as the demarcation of areas as off limits deemed hazardous on account of the existence of landmines concealed in the earth. As recently as 2013, Edward Crowther, a location manager with HALO Trust, an organisation tasked to demine parts of the country, observed:

> Even now, years after the war ended, living within these communities can still be hazardous. Landmines have a devastating impact on people's lives beyond the very obvious physical perils they pose. Basic everyday tasks such as collecting water, growing food and fetching firewood – staples of family life – can often demand travelling through a minefield. Mine-littered roads deny vehicular access too, cutting off

communities from the outside world (LSE Connect 2013a).

These landmines make life precarious, particularly for peasant farmers eking out an existence from the soil. They are the most likely to lose life and limb. Angola has more than its fair share of orphans and amputees (Parks 1987). Indeed, the vestiges of the war that ended many years ago have left a deep imprint on the Angolan landscape that might have deterred prospective tourists but not necessarily extreme adventurers from visiting the country. Nor have the adverse conditions deterred a small number of SADF veterans who had previously undertaken tours of duty to Angola from visiting the country in altogether different capacities and circumstances.

A Journey of Personal Redemption

As a SADF paratrooper, Marius van Niekerk's unit was often airlifted into Angola to attack 'enemy' targets well inside that country between 1979 and 1981. As part of the SADF's elite fighting force, the parabats were periodically deployed on the frontline of the fighting.

Some SADF soldiers expressed misgivings not so much about violating Angola's sovereignty but transgressing an invisible 'red' or 'danger' line when they crossed the border to engage with the enemy (cited in Batley 2007: p. 90). Borders were spaces where 18 or 19-year old conscripts confronted their own mortality, where the risk of death and the adrenalin rush that accompanied the excitement of battle was at its greatest. The 'red line' was a liminal space, a permeable frontier between good and evil, madness and sanity. Karen Batley reckons that it represented a point of no return into a metaphorical heart of darkness (Batley in Baines & Vale 2008: p. 182). This trope might well be archetypal. It is certainly common in representations of colonial wars. Its appropriation by SADF soldier-writers might suggest that they were acquainted with Joseph Conrad's well-known story of Marlowe's journey on the Congo River into the African hinterland. But they are far more likely to have been familiar with Francis Ford Coppola's updated version of the journey into the heart of darkness depicted in his film *Apocalypse Now* (1979).[2] SADF soldiers' acquaintance with and admiration for Hollywood's cinematic representations of the Vietnam War is further suggested by acts such as the wearing of red bandannas during contacts (Batley 2007: p. 16). If American soldiers in Vietnam mimicked John Wayne and World War Two celluloid heroes (Herr 1977), their South African counterparts imitated more edgy persona like Christopher Walken's character Nick in *The Deerhunter* (1978).

Unlike Nick who returned to Vietnam to gamble with his life, Marius van Niekerk, returned to Angola in search of redemption from his shameful memories relating to his role in the war. In 2007, Van Niekerk undertook a journey from his home in Sweden (where he had gone into exile),

to the heartland of Angola where he had been deployed by the SADF. He recruited three other veterans of the Angolan War to join his party. They were Patrick Johannes who had been coerced to fight for FAPLA, Samuel Machado Amaru who was forcefully enlisted by UNITA, and Mario Mahonga who had fought for the Portuguese colonial army before he was recruited by the SADF to fight against the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) regime. Van Niekerk himself had been conscripted by the SADF at the age of 17. He viewed national service as an opportunity to escape a stifling home and school environment whereas the Angolan veterans had been coerced into their respective militias at a tender age. It is not clear how the three Angolans were induced to participate in the project whose objectives they evidently did not share. But they became props in Van Niekerk's melodramatic performance.

Van Niekerk set out with a shoebox of photographs that included shots of trophy killings and other heinous deeds. He does not explicitly state on camera what acts or atrocities he committed during the war.[3] However, he persuaded the others that the photographs were mementos of the cruelty of war, and should be destroyed. Despite their misgivings, the three Angolans joined Van Niekerk on a journey, boarded a small boat on the Kwando River and headed for the Angolan interior. Dialogue between the veterans from former enemy forces was stunted – partly because of language barriers and partly because at least one of the Angolan veterans was reluctant to accept that he had done anything wrong by defending his country against external aggressors. But Van Niekerk was not interested in apportioning blame. Instead, the journey was supposed to be an exercise in existential self-discovery, an opportunity for him to come to terms with his painful past and find redemption. The journey culminated in an act of ritual purification with the burning of the photographs and other mementos of the war in a bonfire.

The project was filmed by the Swedish filmmaker Stefan Julén and co-directed by Christian Beetz. The debt to Joseph Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, is made explicit by the title, *My Heart of Darkness*. The river journey and the act of purification also mimics the plot of *Apocalypse Now*. The cleansing ceremony that involved the sacrifice of a goat echoed the ritualistic killing of the water buffalo in the film. The bloodletting of *My Heart of Darkness* is not as vivid as the Vietnam film but still captures the sense of horror articulated by Kurz (played by Marlon Brando) in *Apocalyse Now*. The scene showing the sacrifice owes it pathos as much to its association with Coppola's film as its own atmospheric visual imagery. Although the intertextuality seems somewhat contrived, the film has some first-rate qualities. It boasts an accomplished original music score by the composer Jan Anderson and the cinematography has the appearance of a professional production. However, Van Niekerk's scripting of this autodiegetic documentary is entirely self-serving. As protagonist/focalizer and voice-over narrator, he managed to direct the project so as to achieve his preconceived goal.

My Heart of Darkness was not Van Niekerk's first venture into film making nor the first exposition of his anguish about his conduct as a SADF paratrooper. An earlier low-budget production called *Nomansland* (1995) was shot entirely in the confined space of a room in Stockholm and purports to show how the protagonist wrestled with his inner self or conscience. *Nomansland* has the appearance of a television reality show which showcases the intimacies of daily routines and bodily functions. It is spare and discomforting for the viewer. The extracts uploaded on YouTube are excruciatingly torturous and amount to an abject art form. They have not attracted many viewers.

It is difficult to know exactly what audience Van Niekerk targeted with the making of *My Heart of Darkness*. For the most part, it has been screened at film festivals where it has been viewed by small, elite audiences. While the film has attracted some critical accolades, it has not reached a large audience. Fellow South African war veterans have not been at all receptive to it. This owes something to the subject matter but also to the fact that Van Niekerk himself is an outlier who is detached from the community of SADF veterans. These veterans constitute a mnemonic community who connect via cyberspace where their sharing of collective memories on web pages enhances their sense of belonging to the group (Nguyen & Belk 2007; Baines 2014). The fact that Van Niekerk presumed to speak on behalf of all SADF veterans apparently angered some who watched an extract from the film uploaded on YouTube.[4] When I last viewed it, the trailer then accessible on YouTube had had 2,625 viewers but the absence of comments would suggest it has sparked little interest within the SADF veteran community. Its poor reception would seem to suggest that it speaks for and to few other SADF veterans. *My Heart of Darkness* no doubt would have challenged and unsettled prevalent views on these veterans' roles in Angola. It has also been suggested that Van Niekerk's project can be read as a critique of the efforts by Angola's elites to cement official memory discourse in the face of the challenge by a vernacular counter-memory narrative (De Wolff in Jager & Hobuß 2017: p. 64). But it can hardly claim to articulate a moral or political standpoint for alienated Angolan veterans. Indeed, it is questionable whether *My Heart of Darkness* even begins to capture the gist of the experience or the nuances of the narratives of the three Angolan veterans who feature therein.

Commentators have noted how *My Heart of Darkness* has been represented as a 'universal film about war veterans' (De Wolff in Jager & Hobuß 2017: pp. 53–55). This might be plausible insofar as the filmmakers deliberately chose to decontextualize the Angolan War and provide little specific historical and political background information to explain why the SADF was involved in the war in the first place. Hence Van Niekerk and his Angolan counterparts are depicted as 'everymen'; veterans whose experience is universal rather than unique. But there is little evidence to suggest that their experience is representative of the veterans of other wars or that it even typifies the Angolan War. The stories of SADF

veterans are diverse as a study of conscript memoirs reveals (Doherty 2015) and the stories of Angolan veterans have seldom appeared in the public domain so we are hardly in a position to generalize about these experiences.

My Heart of Darkness seeks to portray Van Niekerk and his Angolan companions as victims rather than survivors of the war. Van Niekerk's approach to victimization owes much to the discourse of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that entered the lexicon of the Western medical/psychiatric fraternity following the treatment of American Vietnam veterans (Lembcke 2015). But unlike the USA where PTSD became a diagnostic category and where veterans were belatedly admitted into state-funded recovery programmes, there was no such counselling available in South Africa at all. Hence, a few SADF veterans established their own self-help groups. To this end, websites were established for the express purpose of facilitating links between veterans seeking to engage with others who were in a similar situation to themselves. Like their American counterparts, SADF veterans invested in a narrative framework of PTSD to build posttraumatic solidarity (DeGloma 2011: p. 172).

Van Niekerk was instrumental in the establishment of the South African Veterans' Association (SAVA) which set up a site that dubbed itself: 'A Non-Governmental, Non-Profitmaking Veteran Service for Survivors of the 1970's–90's conflicts'. The website touted the byline: 'The victims of war are not just those that die, but also those that kill' thereby rejecting the perpetrator-victim dichotomy.[5] Van Niekerk also self-published his story in conjunction with the therapist Peter Tucker under the title *Behind the Lines of the Mind: Healing the Mental Scars of War: The Story of a South African Parabat* (2009). This amounted to a self-help manual for those suffering the effects of war trauma and Van Niekerk became an advocate for PTSD diagnosis and the efficacy of therapy after the success of his own treatment by Tucker (Doherty 2015: pp. 38–9). These ventures suggest that Van Niekerk took upon himself the task of facilitating healing for veterans suffering from PTSD and that the making of *My Heart of Darkness* was part of this project.

The treatment of PTSD sets much score by the cathartic effects of the talking cure for individual soldiers haunted by memories of their participation in or witnessing of gratuitous and unconscionable violence. Indeed, all those exposed to violence are summarily constituted as victims. Van Niekerk clearly believes that his inability to control his own violent tendencies and anti-social behavior can be ascribed to PTSD. But it is a model that makes victims of all ex-combatants and veterans, even the perpetrators of atrocities. While there is merit to the argument that victims and perpetrators cannot be differentiated in absolute terms, and that there is often overlap between these categories that are usually treated in binary fashion, not all victims are equal. A SADF conscript like Van Niekerk may have had limited choices but has been able to exercise a greater degree of agency than his Angolan comrades. He might have borne the psychological effects of being both victim and perpetrator, but he has not had to live

with the long-term socio-economic consequences of the war in a country ruined by war. He, at the very least, was able to extricate himself from Angola whereas the other veterans that feature in *My Heart of Darkness* have had to live with the legacy of the war on a daily basis.

Van Niekerk's project was founded on an asymmetrical relationship between the participants that replicates colonial power relations (Jager in Jager & Hobuß 2017: p. 199). The Angolans were not fellow travelers but passengers on the South African's boat. They could not afford the luxury of an experimental journey. Their priority was simply trying to make ends meet in a post-colonial society where the distribution of wealth was skewered in favor of the political elites whereas Van Niekerk is a middle-class white who has made a home in Sweden which is an equitable society with one of the highest living standards in the First World. So while the three Angolan veterans did not subscribe to his view that 'all soldiers are alike and desire forgiveness', Van Niekerk projected his own needs onto the others (Knutsen in Jager & Hobuß 2017: p. 131). He convinced them that they shared the same experience despite their having very different memories of the war. As Knutsen puts it: '[Van Niekerk] evades true dialogue with the others by arguing and appears to prefer his own soliloquies…He is defensive, seeming[ly] uninterested in acknowledging their perspectives as [equally valid] opinions'. Van Niekerk prevailed upon the Angolans to agree to the destroying of his pictures notwithstanding their objections to a course of action which he might live to regret. His is the dominant voice throughout the exercise and he controls the narrative. He set the agenda and allowed little scope for unscripted developments. The project is anything but a collective endeavor. In fact, Van Niekerk imposed his vision on the others and they went along with it – to humor him rather than to exorcise their own demons.

Van Niekerk reflects upon the purpose of his project as follows: 'What does a man have to do to regain his self-worth after losing it? I have lost my family to exile, my sanity to trauma, my innocence to war' (01:17–01:39). He seeks to rehabilitate himself so that he is fit to become a responsible father figure; to transform himself from a victimizer who uses violence against his partner into a better role model for his daughters. However, his stated wish to save his daughters from being exposed to his shameful past is undone. For as Jager points out, the very pictures he sets out to destroy are given new life by their filmic remediation. 'So his fear that his daughters will become aware of these pictures is not resolved' (Jager in Jager & Hobuß 2017: p. 199). If anything, they are more likely to be highlighted should his daughters view the film which is, presumably, his intention.

The purpose of the cleansing ceremony is ambiguous and its outcome unclear. Rituals are arguably designed to create social solidarity, to integrate society in the absence of any commonality of beliefs (Kertzer 1988). Van Niekerk appropriates an African tradition and presumes that the community's participation in the dramatic performance might

create something of a bond around the significance of the shared experience of and suffering from war. But, again, the act of ritual purification is self-defeating because it becomes no more than an attempt on the part of Van Niekerk to attain absolution for his sins. And, as Knutsen notes, there is nothing in the film to suggest that the journey and cleansing ceremony have any impact on Van Niekerk (Knutsen in Jager & Hobuß 2017: p. 137).

To his credit, Van Niekerk does not frame his film as a Hollywood-type morality tale and its final sequence can be interpreted as open-ended rather than suggesting closure. But the lack of resolution is typical of the film's many ambiguities and contradictions. It is open to a multiple readings and hence we have no way of knowing whether the journey provided the redemption that Van Niekerk sought. Nor do we learn whether the project had any real impact upon the Angolans who participated therein.

A Journey of Public Reconciliation
In May 2018 a party of nearly 100 SADF veterans embarked upon a two-week trip to Angola that included visits to many of the sites at which they had engaged in battles with their former enemy. Organized by the 61 Mechanised Battalion Veterans Association under the banner of 'Unidade de Amizade/Unity in Friendship', the trip was co-ordinated with General Fernando Mateus, former commander of FAPLA during the Angolan War. It was undertaken 'to remember their former comrades who died or were wounded during the Border War and to extend the hand of friendship and reconciliation to their former enemies' (Szabo 2018b). Gregory de Ricquebourg, a former Lieutenant Colonel in the SADF, is quoted as saying that: "We will return to the battlefields of Angola and pay homage to all our lost comrades" (Baxter 2018). He explained that the comrades referred to included Angolans, Cubans and Russians. De Riquebourg dubbed the trip a 'journey of healing' and a 'pilgrimage.' He posted a series of photographs of the trip on the site SApeople.com and also made a documentary film for broadcast by M-Net's investigative journalism program Carte Blanche (SAPeople 2018). Given its exposure on television, the trip garnered a fair amount of publicity on social media.

The party's itinerary included the village of Mupa where the veterans returned a wooden cross with a carved statue of the Christ figure to the community in a ceremony held at the restored Roman Catholic mission church. The church had been abandoned and looted during hostilities in the region during 1982-3. The crucifix had been stolen by a SADF national serviceman who had subsequently given it to the 61 Mech Veterans' Association for safekeeping until its return to its rightful owners. The ceremony was staged as a symbolic act of reconciliation and restitution (Szabo 2018a).

The veterans reckoned that they were welcomed as 'heroes' by the Angolan people wherever they went. They were hosted by the governor of Cunene province where they were treated as dignitaries. Another ceremony was held on the bridge that spanned the Cuito River where the SADF veterans prayed with their MPLA counterparts and threw poppies into the river. This act of remembrance and gesture of goodwill was meant to underscore the idea of a brotherhood of former adversaries. The SADF veterans' party held a ceremony of their own in the town of Cuito Cunavale. Here they erected crosses to remember their fallen comrades and 'planted' replica acacia trees with their names thereon. Later, retired Colonel Loubser, who had been second in command of 61 Mechanised Battalion in 1988 and participated in the journey, reflected that:

> This journey cemented, strengthen[ed] and reconfirmed our own 61 veterans bond of brotherhood again…. The trees that we planted next to the tank with call sign 53, were cemented in by our Angolan friends and that is now a permanent monument to our last big battlefield. And that was our final bond of friendship with the Angolans…. And most importantly, the bridge at Cuito Cuanavale, the bridge that was once a bridge too far and the source of pain and suffering, is now the bridge of peace and friendship that connects us forever… (Szabo 2018b).

The party also visited the museum with its exhibits of weapons destroyed during the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Here it handed over a replica of the color of 61 Mechanised Battalion to the curators of the Cuito museum (SAPeople 2018).

Angolan war veterans paid a reciprocal visit to South Africa in August 2018. They laid wreaths on behalf of Angolan soldiers who died during the war at the 61 Mechanised Battalion memorial located in the grounds of the Ditsong National Military Museum in Saxonwold, Johannesburg. Wreaths were also laid on behalf of the Angolan ministers of the environment, as well as hospitality and tourism by the head of the delegation, General Mateus. This would suggest that the visit was undertaken with the imprimatur of Angolan officials. But there was nothing in the media coverage to suggest the participation of the South African authorities or serving members of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), the post-apartheid armed forces (Szabo 2018b). We must assume, then, that members of the 61 Mech Battalion Veterans' Association acted in the capacity of non-state actors and that this was an informal initiative. Still, the Angolan veterans seem to have been partners rather than props in the exercise.

In a further spin-off of the 'Unity in Friendship' initiative, SADF veterans have teamed up with their Angolan counterparts to co-operate on a range of agricultural, tourism and cultural projects around Cuito Cuanavale. This ambitious venture is envisaged as a commitment to the future of the area. Apart from wishing to attract financial investment, it seeks to draw upon South African expertise in order to create employment for Angolan veterans and teach them farming skills (Jordan 2018). The choice of location is significant. Cuito Cuanavale is a small town in the Cuando-Cubango province of south-east Angola, an area that the Portuguese dubbed *el fin del mundo* ("the land at the end of the earth").

If Cuito was regarded as a remote, desolate region by the colonialists, it is still relatively inaccessible and dangerous forty years after Angola obtained independence. The area around Cuito is littered with the detritus of war and landmines that kill and maim. Given that travel is hazardous, why do SADF veterans choose to visit Cuito Cuanavale?

The answer lies in the mystique attached to the name Cuito Cuanavale; to the significance that statesmen, politicians, and military veterans ascribe to the so-called battle of Cuito Cuanavale. For instance, Fidel Castro went so far as to claim that "the history of Africa would be written as before and after Cuito Cuanavale". And, in expressing gratitude for Cuban solidarity with the ANC's armed struggle against the apartheid regime, Nelson Mandela asserted that Cuito was "a turning point for the liberation of our continent and my people". Cuito's symbolism belies its size; it is a small town with a large footprint (LSE Connect 2013b).

Why is this so?

Cuito Cuanavale became the frontline of the Angolan war in 1987–88 when FAPLA launched an operation to eject UNITA from its stronghold in nearby Mavinga. The SADF went to the rescue of its proxy, repulsed the offensive on the Lomba River and pushed FAPLA back to the Cuito River where the Angolan forces established a bridgehead. The SADF laid siege to Cuito but FAPLA, reinforced by Cuban detachments, dug in and mined the approaches to the floodplain (or Tumpo Triangle). Following delays caused by the rotation of troops, the SADF/UNITA lost the initiative. A protracted war of attrition ensued as the SADF launched repeated frontal assaults on the bridgehead while subjected to artillery barrages and constant bombardment by MiGs. The stalemate afforded the Cubans an opportunity to consolidate control of southern Angola air space and deploy a division that advanced upon the Namibian border. Consequently, the SADF was forced to withdraw from Angola and negotiations – now involving the Cubans – resumed. The agreement that was eventually brokered provided for the withdrawal of South African security forces from Namibia as a prelude to elections, and the concomitant withdrawal of Cuban forces from Angola. All parties claimed victory. Only victory can bring people together; there can be no fraternity in defeat.

Although its outcome and significance is contested (Baines 2012; Baines 2014: pp. 105–119), the battle of Cuito Cuanavale has been mythicised by all the belligerents. Analogies have been drawn with Arnhem and Stalingrad.[6] Notwithstanding the hype, there can be little doubt that Cuito conjures vivid memories for those who fought there. Indeed, it is a name charged with cultural meaning for SADF veterans. Previous visitors have attested to a visceral affect experienced at the site (Bothma 2011; Morris 2014). Cuito Cuanavale features on the itineraries of all SADF veterans who have returned to Angola since the end of that country's conflict(s).

Traces of the Angolan war are imprinted in the memories of all veterans who participated in the conflict. As the carriers of these memories, the veterans amount to transnational actors. They can cross national boundaries and come to constitute transnational knowledge practices (Schwenkel 2009: p. 10). Although the memories of Angolan and South African veterans might be at odds, both groups have shown a willingness to accept a version of the past that ignores the incommensurability of their respective experiences. Hence the story of the Angolan War has become what Schwenkel calls a 'recombinant history', an interweaving of diverse and frequently discrepant national histories, knowledge formations and logics of representation' (p. 12). Whereas Cuito Cuanavale might mean different things to Angolan and South African veterans, as a metonym for the war it serves to emphasize their combined and collective experiences as soldiers.

Conclusion

SADF veterans have visited Angola for a variety of reasons. Some, like their American counterparts who returned to Vietnam, have done so to 'find closure through some kind of restitution and direct personal assistance to … victims of the war' (Furmanovsky 2007: p. 3). Now SADF veterans are becoming involved in a range of reconciliation initiatives. As with the participation of former US soldiers in charitable or humanitarian work in Vietnam, such projects can be construed as "giving back" to Vietnam and "healing ourselves by healing others" (Schwenkel 2009: pp. 28–9). Schwenkel (2009: p. 33) holds that US veterans 'belief in their capacity to "help" Vietnam transformed their healing journeys into a moral and salvation mission in which the long-delayed fantasy of rescuing Vietnam from poverty, oppression and communism was realized'. Like the US veterans, SADF's ex-soldiers also seem to aspire to "uplift" their former enemies in the spirit of reconciliation.

However, it is doubtful that SADF veterans are any more willing to accept responsibility for the "wrongs" inflicted upon the Angolan populace by SADF than US veterans are prepared to do for the Vietnam War. Their projects are not framed as exercises in dealing with feelings of guilt or culpability. Rather, they are framed as exercises in reconciliation between former enemies who celebrate a fraternal camaraderie occasioned by their bonds as soldiers. They seek to promote future co-operation rather than dwell on past ideological and political differences. As such, SADF veterans may also harbor a desire to rehabilitate their image and that of white South Africans more generally. The returning SADF veterans have utilized their own resources to source funds for projects designed to promote economic growth and employment. Such altruism appears to have informed these informal initiatives in the absence of formal institutional efforts by South Africa to assist a country that was ravaged by a lengthy war in which they were involved. The SADF veterans discussed above have crossed the Angolan border to seek personal redemption or to perform acts of restitution for the sake of reconciliation. From their positions of privilege, they have sought to become partners in post-conflict reconstruction. They are unlike other transnational actors on the African continent, such as mercenaries and

the personnel of private security companies, who engage in military missions at the bidding of their paymasters. Instead of bearing arms, they carry memories.

Notes

[1] The standard military histories of the 'Border War' written from the perspective of the SADF are Steenkamp (1989) and Scholtz (2013). For accounts that encompass the wider Cold War context and diplomatic relations between Washington, Moscow, Pretoria and Havana, see Gleijeses (2002 and 2013). For the intervention of Cuba, South Africa and other role players in Angola see Spikes (1993) and George (2005). On the representation and remembrance of the 'Border War' see Baines & Vale (2008) and on the afterlife of the 'Border War' see Baines (2014).

[2] For the appropriation of Vietnam analogies and metaphors by SADF soldiers, see Baines (2013, 2014).

[3] We learn from another source that Van Niekerk participated in the decapitation of a wounded soldier, amongst other gruesome deeds. See Tucker & Van Niekerk 2009: p. 225.

[4] An extract from the film was available for viewing at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOEuF6m9vns (accessed on 3 November 2010). Most of the comments on the site were negative. It has since been taken down.

[5] http://www.saveterans.org.za/ (accessed on 12 November 2008) is no longer accessible.

[6] The battle of Stalingrad analogy may have been invoked by Soviet strategists. See Brooke 1998 and Polack 2013.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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