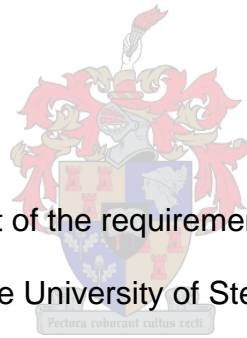


Compliance, Compulsion and Contest; Aspects of Military  
Conscription in South Africa, 1952-1992

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Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts at the University of Stellenbosch

Supervisor: Professor Albert Grundlingh

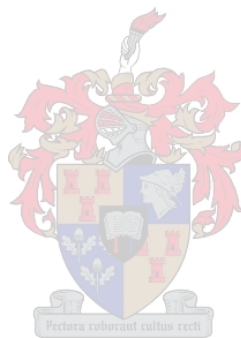
December 2007

## Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature: .....

Date: .....



## Abstract

From 1952 until the ending of apartheid in 1994, South Africa possessed a system of compulsory military service for white males. Until 1967, conscription was not universal and men were selected by ballot to attend military training. From 1967 onwards, all medically fit white South African males were obliged to perform national service, a service which from the mid 1970s often included tours of duty on the border of Angola and South African-occupied Namibia, and later tours of duty in Angola or within the townships of South Africa herself.

This thesis looks at aspects of the public reactions to compulsory military service in white South Africa. It traces the evolution of anti-conscription sentiment amongst the white community, juxtaposed with the continued support for compulsory military service that was found in many quarters up until the end of apartheid. It makes a brief examination of the anti-conscription organisations that existed, most notably the End Conscription Campaign, analysing their impact on white society as well as discussing their limitations. The impacts of conscription are also considered, looking at some implications of compulsory military service for the men involved, for society as a whole, and for the Defence Force in which the conscripts served.

A thorough examination is also made of the motivations that existed for young men to either acquiesce to or reject military service, taking into account the unique set of circumstances that prevailed in South Africa during the military service era. While South Africa during these years has no direct parallel anywhere else in the world, this thesis briefly discusses South African conscription in an international context, demonstrating, where relevant, the similarities and differences between the South African experience and those of other Western nations, such as Britain, France, Israel and the United States of America.

While a reasonable amount of literature and other media exist pertaining to South African conscription, this thesis demonstrates how many of these works are unsatisfactory, and how the topic is in some respects becoming largely misunderstood in both academia and in wider society. The current existence of a number of false beliefs, or myths, about South African conscription is discussed, along with an assessment of how and why these myths were created.

## Opsomming

Vanaf 1952 tot en met die beeïndiging van apartheid in 1994, was daar in Suid-Afrika 'n stelsel van militêre diensplig vir blanke mans. Tot 1967 het diensplig nie vir alle mans gegeld nie en is slegs sekeres geloot om militêre diens te doen. Vanaf 1967 is alle mediese geskikte mans verplig om nasionale diensplig te verrig; dit het onder meer diens op die grens tussen Angolo en Suid-Afrika beheerde Namibia behels asook later binne Angolo sowel as die swart woonbuurte in Suid-Afrika self.

Hierdie verhandeling bestudeer aspekte van openbare reaksies op verpligte militêre diens in blanke Suid-Afrika. Die evolusie van anti-diensplig sentimente in die blanke samelewing word nagespeur en dit word in teenstelling geplaas met die volgehoue ondersteuning vir verpligte militêre diens in talle kringe tot die einde van apartheid. Die organisasies wat hulle teen diensplig verset het, word kortliks ondersoek, veral die "End Conscription Campaign", en daar word op hulle impak en tekortkominge gelet. Die uitwerking van diensplig word ook oorweeg in terme van sommige van die implikasies daarvan vir diegene wat diens gedoen het, asook die ramifikasies daarvan vir die breëre gemeenskap sowel as vir die Weermag self.

Daar is ook gepoog om 'n dieptastende ondersoek te loods na die motiverings van jong mans om in diensplig te berus of dit te verwerp, gegee die unieke stel omstandighede wat in Suid-Afrika gedurende die onderhawige tydperk in swang was. Hoewel daar in die jare geen parallel met verwikkelinge in Suid-Afrika en elders in die wêreld was nie, bespreek hierdie studie tog, in soverre relevant, die ooreenkomste en verskille tussen die Suid-Afrikaanse belewenis en die van ander Westerse lande soos Brittanje, Frankryk, Israel en die Verenigde State van Amerika.

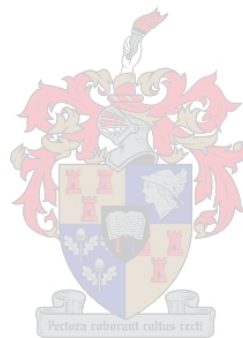
Ofskoon daar geredelik literatuur en mediaberiggewing oor diensplig bestaan, word aangevoer dat baie van die vertolkings onbevredigend is en dat die onderwerp in sekere opsigte in akademiese geskrifte sowel as die breër samelewing misverstaan word. Die bestaan van 'n aantal valse voorveronderstellings of mites oor diensplig word bespreek asook die redes vir die ontstaan van die mites word ontleed.

## Contents

List of Tables	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Abbreviations	iv
Notes on Terminology and References	v
Introduction – South Africa in the Compulsory Service Era	1
1. The Myth of Refusal; a Review of Perceptions of National Service	13
2. Traditions and Practices of Military Service in South Africa	30
3. Attitudes towards Service; the Evolution of Resistance	43
4. The Acceptance of Conscription	62
5. Motives and Methods of Resisting Conscription	80
6. Organised Opposition to Conscription	99
7. The Impacts of Conscription	112
8. South African Conscription in an International Context	130
Conclusion – Heroes or Oppressors?	142
Appendix 1 – The Findings on Conscription of the TRC	151
Bibliography	152

## List of Tables

Table 1 - Typical Defence Force career of a National Serviceman	<b>36</b>
Table 2 - Service Requirements for Conscripts in the SADF	<b>39</b>



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I would also like to thank Marie Coetzee at the United Party Archives, UNISA, and Steve de Agrela at the Department of Defence Documentation Centre, Pretoria, and their respective colleagues, for the kindness they showed me and the time that they put into helping me find research material on my visits to their archives.

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Finally on a personal level I would like to thank my family and friends for their support and encouragement in my endeavours. Their constant belief and backing was as always a great help to me.

## List of Abbreviations

- ANC – African National Congress  
AVF – Afrikaner Volksfront (South Africa); All Volunteer Force (USA)  
CF – Citizen Force  
CIIR – Catholic Institute for International Relations  
COSAWR – Committee on South African War Resistance  
COSG – Conscientious Objectors Support Group  
DDDC – Department of Defence Documentation Centre  
DRC – Dutch Reformed Church  
ECC – End Conscription Campaign  
IDF – Israeli Defence Force  
MP – Member of Parliament  
NP – National Party  
NRP – New Republic Party  
NUSAS – National Union of South African Students  
PF – Permanent Force  
PFP – Progressive Federal Party  
PP – Progressive Party  
SAAF – South African Air Force  
SACC – South African Council of Churches  
SADF – South African Defence Force  
SAI – South African Infantry  
SAMS – South African Medical Service  
SAN – South African Navy  
SWAPO – South West African People's Organisation  
SWATF – South West Africa Territorial Force  
TRC – Truth and Reconciliation Commission  
UCT – University of Cape Town  
UDF – Union Defence Force  
(Note: In the context of the liberation movement UDF stood for United Democratic Front. As this work deals with the military and not the liberation struggle, the military term is used. The United Democratic Front is always referred to in full)  
UNISA – University of South Africa  
UNITA – União Nacional Para a Independencia Total de Angola  
UP – United Party



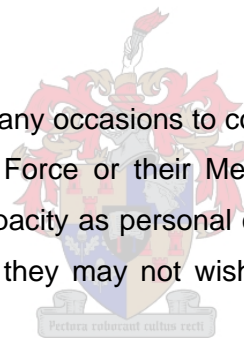


#### Note on Terminology:

This study often talks of 'the people' or 'public opinion in South Africa'. In this context it generally refers to only the white population, as the topic of conscription affected mainly white people. This indicates no disrespect on the part of the author. Where terms such as liberal, right-wing and left-wing are used, they are purely descriptive expressions indicating a person or organisation's political leanings and are not loaded with any of the disparaging connotations that are attached to them in some circles. For the sake of clarity the name Namibia rather than South West Africa has been used throughout this piece, as the modern reader is probably more familiar with that term. The name Rhodesia and the name Zimbabwe are both used in the study, the former to describe the White-governed pre-1980 country, the latter to describe the post-1980 majority government country. The distinction is made as the two different regimes of this country had diametrically opposed attitudes towards apartheid South Africa.

#### Note on References:

Reference has been made on many occasions to correspondence between members of the public and the Defence Force or their Members of Parliament. Where the letters were sent in a private capacity as personal correspondence the names of the writers have been withheld, as they may not wish their private correspondence to become public.



## Introduction – South Africa in the Compulsory Service Era

Military conscription in apartheid South Africa is not a topic that has attracted much attention from post-apartheid scholars, yet it is an issue that dominated the lives of a whole generation or more of white South African school leavers. From 1952 a system of compulsory military service existed in South Africa, first through a selective service system where men were chosen by ballot, and then from 1967 onwards all medically fit white males were legally required to perform military service for the state upon leaving school.<sup>1</sup> In later years men often served on active duty in war zones on the 'border', that is the border of Angola and South African controlled Namibia, or else later served within South Africa patrolling the townships to control potential and actual black unrest. The service rendered to the apartheid state was not limited to a one-off tour of duty, but was also given on a part-time basis over a period of several years as a member of the Citizen Force (CF) or of the Commandos.

When the topic of military service has received attention from scholars, emphasis has generally been put on the opposition to conscription, on the reluctance of men to be conscripted, and on the bad experiences that men had in the military. In the latter days of apartheid and the early years of universally democratic government, most of the mainstream works dealing with the subject of conscription tended to follow the attitude that apartheid had been created and maintained by a few with the help of a largely co-opted armed forces.<sup>2</sup> Evidence of disenchantment with the system of national service is often equated in these works with protest and active resistance to the South African Defence Force (SADF). Put bluntly, in the first decade after apartheid it seemed politically unacceptable for a mainstream scholar to claim that the majority of those who had served in the apartheid military had done so willingly.

The case presented by such works is not the full truth. The aim of this study is to dispel some of these myths about apartheid conscription that have of late begun to be accepted as fact, and to give a more accurate portrayal of compulsory military service in apartheid South Africa. This study will examine the entire period of military conscription in South Africa, from the introduction of the ballot system in 1952 to the

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<sup>1</sup> Deferments were available for men who wished to attend university before entering the military, but the majority of men were conscripted straight from school.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Catholic Institute of International Relations (CIIR), *Out of Step, War Resistance in South Africa* (London, 1989); Jacklyn Cock & Laurie Nathan (eds), *War and Society, the Militarisation of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1989); and Julie Frederikse, *South Africa, a Different Kind of War* (Johannesburg, 1986).

phasing out of national service four decades later. The aim of this study is to provide a more complete picture of national service in apartheid South Africa, not by following typical scholarship and focusing principally on opposition to conscription or the experiences of conscripts in the conflicts in Namibia and Angola, but by also looking at the pro-conscription sentiments that existed among certain sections of the white population.

This study will provide a brief examination of the actual system of conscription, and will answer the basic questions of why, when, and on whom it was imposed. It will then consider how the system was received among the white populace, and discuss in some detail the reasons that existed for people to either support or reject the system. Along with this will be an examination of the evolution of such anti-conscription feelings as existed, and also a discussion of the anti-conscription movements, placing them not only in their contemporary context as regards the military situation in Southern Africa, but also in the context of the mushrooming numbers of anti-apartheid organisations that sprang up during the early 1980s, and the increasing costs to the white population of upholding the apartheid system. The impact of conscription on white South Africa will be assessed, with a focus on both the short and the long term effects of national service on South African society. Finally, the study will consider South Africa in an international context by juxtaposing the South African experience with the contemporary experiences of other Western powers, among others the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Israel.

To begin with, however, the first chapter of this study will provide an examination of the perceptions of conscription as shown in some of the literature and other media which exists pertaining to South African national service. It will draw out the broad trends that can be discerned in such works, and demonstrate how something of a myth has begun to gain currency concerning the military and conscription. Much of this literature, it will be shown, has been written either with ulterior motives such as the denigration of the apartheid military and state, or else has been written from the context of a now democratic South Africa where political correctness and the history of the victors often take precedent over such things as strict objectivity and accuracy. The majority of writings on South African conscription concentrate on aspects of objection, and most commentators fail to examine just how many other men actually did their national service willingly or even enthusiastically, and why they did so. The fact that service was split between a single extended period of full-time service and then a series of shorter call-ups, or 'camps', with the CF has also led to some

confusion from scholars, and complaints about the camps have been incorrectly interpreted in many essentially anti-conscription works as complaints about the whole system. Other works, such as some of the official histories or publications supporting apartheid, will be shown to be equally lacking in meaningful substance. Altogether, these works have left the topic somewhat light on worthwhile scholarship, leading to a situation where a series of misunderstandings and myths about apartheid era conscription are being propagated.

The myth of widespread opposition and refusal that has grown up around the topic of conscription in South Africa has a number of probable causes. All societies have myths, and to a certain extent all societies are founded on myths, as much of the common bond felt in any community comes from a shared history or ideals which are changed, through the medium of myth, to give continued shared purpose to that community. Henry Tudor stated that 'a myth is told...in order to promote some practical purpose',<sup>3</sup> and although his narrow definition of a myth as simply a story or an account of events is not valid for the populist distortions concerning conscription, his assessment of the origins of myth is well-founded. Bronislaw Malinowski propounded the idea of a sociological cause of myth, and believed that myths were created due to a social need; 'if, for example, we observe that, in a certain culture, myth making enhances social solidarity, we can conclude that members of that culture have a need for social solidarity and that this is why they create myths.'<sup>4</sup> While Tudor rejects this as a blanket statement, in specific circumstances such as post-apartheid South Africa it can have validity.

In post-apartheid South Africa a myth such as that which has evolved around conscription has many purposes. In the 1980s and early 1990s, apartheid South Africa was popularly seen as split into two camps; the white population, which used all of its manpower in the security forces, widely considered as forces of oppression; and those outside of the white community, widely considered as the oppressed. In a need to bridge this dichotomy and promote reconciliation from 1994, white opposition to apartheid and especially to the increasingly discredited apartheid military was foregrounded, and coercion and compulsion commonly used to explain actions in support of the system. Given the negative publicity that surrounded the acts of the apartheid security forces in the 1980s and 1990s, the belief that the majority of white men were not particularly averse to serving in those forces could have proved

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (London, 1972), p.16.

<sup>4</sup> Tudor, *Political Myth*, p.50.

damaging, and such a myth helps in some way to promote a social cohesion in a previously split community. Similarly, the idea that the majority of those in the security forces were unwilling participants helped to somewhat assuage the collective guilt of the white community at having such oppression carried out not only in their name but, through conscription, by numerous members of that community.

Another aspect that gives the myth of widespread refusal added credence, is the fact that there has been little study of the extent to which any resistance that did exist changed over time, as authors have generally constrained themselves to discussing the period when internal unrest was at its height, rather than examining the earlier period of compulsory service. Most writings focus on post-1967 national service and neglect the selective service period entirely, and many also pay scant attention to the early and relatively calm years of the universal service period. By taking the majority of their evidence from the 1980s and applying it to the whole period of conscription, many commentators present a rather distorted picture. Few make more than passing mention of the fact that in the early years of national service there was little or no meaningful protest, as it was not until conscripts began to be extensively deployed in operational areas and especially in the townships that the issue of national service came up for serious debate. It appears that unresisting compliance with the law attracts little attention from scholars.

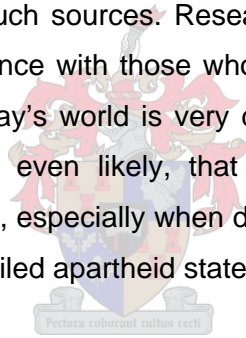
There is also no doubt at all that, as the years went by, there was a growing protest movement against national service. Initially most protest focused on the lack of provision for conscientious objectors, but by the 1980s the links between the SADF and apartheid had grown close enough for anti-apartheid campaigners to begin to protest about the military and this led to inevitable attacks on conscription. Organisations, most notably the End Conscription Campaign (ECC), were created with the intention of opposing apartheid militarism and military conscription, though much of their efforts were aimed at opposing the SADF deployments in Namibia, Angola and the townships rather than actually demanding the abolition of national service.<sup>5</sup> The anti-conscription campaigns were never widely supported by white society, and even in moderate circles the ECC's often vitriolic attacks on the military that was popularly portrayed as defending the nation from communism and anarchy were not always well received. The ECC did attract a number of supporters and many others sympathised with their message, but they were by no means able to

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<sup>5</sup> Merran Willis Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign 1983-1988: A Study in White Extra-Parliamentary Opposition to Apartheid* (MA Thesis, UNISA, 2002).

turn white public opinion against national service as for example the anti-Vietnam movements had in the USA.

Writing about and researching South African conscription can be problematic. When dealing with the military it is only natural that a researcher will turn to the military archives for information. However, many of the files in the archives are still classified, or are part of a large backlog awaiting declassification, which is an expensive and time-consuming process. The researcher is therefore largely constrained to using the information that is already available, and to relying mainly on published material or correspondence with contemporaries of the issue. Although there is a wealth of literature devoted to apartheid, especially from the late 1970s, the military is usually treated as a peripheral topic, if mentioned at all. Works that do mention the SADF usually concentrate on the numerous 'atrocities' carried out by the security forces, or else note the rising influence of the military in government decision making. Many such works were produced with a political agenda, and so the researcher must be extremely careful when using such sources. Researchers must also be wary when using interviews or correspondence with those who lived through the experience of apartheid and conscription. Today's world is very different from that of the national service era and it is possible, even likely, that the modern context will colour recollections of the earlier period, especially when dealing with such an emotive topic as military service to the now reviled apartheid state.



The topic of conscription in apartheid South Africa is potentially vast, and this work is not intended as an exhaustive evaluation of all facets of the issue. Despite the military nature of conscription, this is not a military history, but rather a history that falls under the general heading of 'war and society'. This study is not intended as an historical account of national service in a conventional sense, nor is it another attempt to reveal the 'truth' about service in the apartheid military by presenting a mass of testimony and recollections of former conscripts. The extraordinary experiences of conscripts will not be dealt with except for tangentially; where experiences are recorded they are more likely to be of the banalities of service that made up the overwhelming majority of national service man hours. This work is not an apologia for or an accusation of those men who were involved in the events of the tumultuous decades of the conscription era; it will endeavour to explain but will not excuse or condemn the actions of that period.



This is a work about South Africa and South Africans, and as such it will not deal specifically with conscription beyond the borders of the Republic in South African-controlled Namibia. From 1981 all Namibian men, regardless of race, were liable to render service to the State, which was still effectively under South African control. They served in their own force, the South West African Territorial Force (SWATF), which, although nominally independent, fell under the command of and worked alongside the SADF.<sup>6</sup> The omission of Namibia from this study is not to relegate in importance the issue of apartheid-era conscription in that country, but this topic is complex and deserves studying in its own right.

Conscription in South Africa is a topic which naturally deals mainly with white males, and as such much of this work will concentrate on the men liable to military service. However, white females did also play an important role in the conscription debate, both actively and passively.<sup>7</sup> Passively they represented the 'home' that the conscripts were meant to defend, through their role as wives, girlfriends and mothers. Actively women were involved in both promoting and protesting conscription. Women's organisations such as the Southern Cross Fund provided comforts and benefits to the 'boys on the border', and through the Defence Force Ladies Association the wives of servicemen were involved in helping the military effort.<sup>8</sup> On the other side of the debate, women were heavily involved in the anti-conscription movement that sprang up the 1980s, with the women's organisation Black Sash proving instrumental to the creation of the ECC, which itself contained many female activists.<sup>9</sup>

Conscription was also a mainly 'white' issue, in that people outside of the white hegemonic group were never liable to it. Plans to extend military service to the coloured and Indian populations in the 1980s caused a storm of protest and were shelved almost immediately.<sup>10</sup> Although conscription occasionally cropped up as a subject for discussion by the liberation movements, it was never more than a peripheral issue, and barely an issue at all before the township deployments of the mid-1980s. It was an equally unimportant issue for ordinary people outside of the

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<sup>6</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.30.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the role of women in the apartheid military and in the conscription debate see for example: Jacklyn Cock, *Colonels and Cadres, War & Gender in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1991); and Annette Strauss, 'Die Betrokkenheid van Vroue in 'n Era van Oorlog', *Journal for Contemporary History*, Vol. 31, No.3, (December 2006), 370-98.

<sup>8</sup> Jacklyn Cock, 'Manpower and Militarization: Women and the SADF', in Cock and Nathan (eds), *War and Society*, pp.52-56.

<sup>9</sup> *Sash*, Vol.27, No.2, (August 1984), p.22.

<sup>10</sup> Gavin Cawthra, *Brutal Force, the Apartheid War Machine* (London, 1986), pp.66-69.

white community, whose own lives and communities were barely touched by conscription or national service. This study will therefore predominantly concentrate on white South Africans, although where appropriate discussion of the implications of conscription for those outside of the white community will take place.<sup>11</sup>

When this study talks of the white community, it will take into account the differences of opinion that existed between the various sections of that community, most notably between the Afrikaner and the English-speaking populations, which are generally given as the two white groupings in South Africa. However, neither of these populations were homogenous groups, and it would be wrong and simplistic to use these labels without some justification. Within the Afrikaner population there were often differences between the rural and the urban sections of society, between the richer and the poorer and there were some well publicised antagonisms between the 'northerners', that is the Afrikaners from the Transvaal or the Orange Free State, and the Afrikaners from the Cape.<sup>12</sup>

However, the Afrikaners were the more homogenous of the two white populations and were in general linked by a common language, a common religious denomination in the various branches of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), and a common sense that South Africa was their only home and that there was nowhere else to retreat to if the fight to preserve their civilisation was lost. They also tended to vote for the ruling National Party (NP) and often possessed great loyalty to their leadership, as Giliomee points out in his epic biography of the people, 'In the mid-1970s a large opinion survey, undertaken on behalf of a German research group, found that 60 percent of Afrikaners "would support their leaders even if they acted in ways they did not understand or approve."<sup>13</sup> Many Afrikaners also had a vested interest in the maintenance of apartheid, as the NP government had cemented itself in power in part by providing many of their Afrikaner supporters with employment in the bureaucracy of the apartheid state, and the demise of the racial system would lead to uncertain futures for many of the *volk*.<sup>14</sup> With the uniting factors of religion,

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<sup>11</sup> There are a number of books detailing the experience of African soldiers in the SADF including: Jan Breytenbach, *Buffalo Soldiers, the Story of South Africa's 32 Battalion 1975-1993* (Alberton, 2002); David Robbins, *On the Bridge of Goodbye, the Story of South Africa's Discarded San Soldiers* (Johannesburg, 2007); and the rather dated Kenneth Grundy, *Soldiers Without Politics, Blacks in the South African Armed Forces* (London, 1983). As these soldiers were not conscripted, their experiences are outside the scope of this thesis.

<sup>12</sup> Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners, Biography of a People* (Cape Town, 2003), p.548; and F. W. de Klerk, *The Last Trek, a New Beginning* (London, 1998), p.61.

<sup>13</sup> Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.568.

<sup>14</sup> Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.546.



language, fatherland and the support for the government in mind, it is possible to find a loose consensus on issues such as conscription, and so it is also possible to refer to general Afrikaner traits when discussing national service.

The English-speaking group provides more complexities, as the splits were even greater and more marked than in the Afrikaner population, and there were far less common factors. White South Africans who are generally referred to as English-speakers are usually any white people for whom Afrikaans was not the first language, and who therefore were not Afrikaners. It is often used as a catch-all term and included not only the descendants of British settlers but Eastern Europeans, Jews, Portuguese refugees from Mozambique and Angola, and in fact any other white immigrant who found themselves resident in South Africa.

While some English-speakers were ardent South Africans, others still had strong family ties with the UK or Europe and could and indeed would go back there when conditions in South Africa deteriorated. Politically English-speakers traditionally tended to vote against the NP, with only an estimated one percent of English speakers voting for the NP in the 1958 elections,<sup>15</sup> but there was no political consensus among English-speakers and in the early years of apartheid at least they were not noticeably more liberal than Afrikaners on race matters.<sup>16</sup> As time went by and parliamentary opposition to the NP became less effective, and the idea of white survival more pressing, more English-speakers would find themselves voting for the government.<sup>17</sup> Even so, there was an inclination towards more liberal and free thinking among English-speakers, especially in English-speaking universities, and they were as a rule far less keen on maintaining apartheid at all costs than some Afrikaners.

Religiously English-speakers were fragmented into dozens of denominations and even different faiths, but this fragmentation was partially offset by the South African Council of Churches (SACC) which looked for common ground for English-speaking Protestant denominations (the Afrikaans churches withdrew in 1961), though it included neither the Roman Catholic Church nor the Jewish community, both of which were fairly sizable. Nonetheless even by defining English-speakers negatively (i.e. saying what they are not; in this case they are white South Africans who are not

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<sup>15</sup> Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, p.489.

<sup>16</sup> David Yudelman, *The Emergence of South Africa* (Westport, 1983), pp.13-14.

<sup>17</sup> *Spectator*, 12 November 1977, p.7; and *Frontline*, March 1984, p.39.

Afrikaners) general trends can be discerned in the group's attitudes to conscription, and so the term will be used, with due circumspection, in this study.

The white society on which conscription was imposed in apartheid South Africa was to all intents and purposes a Western European society in outlook and tradition. Despite the well documented abuses and degradation of the apartheid system by varying degrees for those outside of the white community, white South Africans enjoyed a great deal of freedom throughout the period. Politically, few restrictions were placed on whites and the white state was never deeply oppressive or authoritarian to its own. Unlike their black countrymen, whites were never obliged to bear passes and their movements were largely unrestricted within the designated 'white' and 'common' areas that constituted the vast majority of the country. The parliamentary democratic system was strictly adhered to within its own racial group, and whites regularly went to the ballot box to exercise their democratic rights.

The elections within the white community of the apartheid era, while consistently returning the incumbent NP to power, were never rigged, and apart from a kind of gerrymandering dating back to the formation of the Union in 1910 which saw rural Afrikaners wield considerably more electoral power than their numbers justified, there was nothing in South African elections, obviously discounting racial exclusivity, that was inconsistent with free democratic principles. The NP still had to please this constituency to be sure of its vote, as the elections of 1989 and 1994 showed when the NP lost a great deal of ground to the right-wing Conservative Party. White South Africa was a multi-party democracy, and even during the State of Emergency in the latter half of the 1980s the government respected the rights of the Parliamentary Opposition to voice their dissent.

While most fundamental freedoms were assured for whites, the freedom of speech was one aspect that the government eventually did restrict to a large degree outside of parliament, and public utterances were increasingly strictly censored. From 1974 it became illegal to encourage any person or persons to attempt to avoid their military service obligations; this was a direct response to a SACC declaration that had questioned the morality of serving apartheid and had tacitly given moral approval to anyone who refused. In the State of Emergency during the latter half of the 1980s it would become illegal to make any public statements that brought into question the role of the SADF and especially the system of national service. The ECC would run a

campaign saying 'Want to know our views on conscription? Sorry we can't tell you', challenging the government to allow them the freedom to express themselves.<sup>18</sup>

For people of any colour who consistently offended the government censors a banning order could be issued that severely restricted their movements and prevented any of their written or spoken words from being published. Despite these often draconian restrictions of the 1980s the regular press remained reasonably free for most of the period and criticism of the government was frequent and often damning. On issues of security the government took a firm line on what was and what was not permissible, but on other issues the press had a fairly free reign. It was helped in later years especially by a manner of self-censorship whereby editors did not try to provoke the government unnecessarily or report spuriously on serious matters such as security,<sup>19</sup> but the press, and especially the anti-NP English language press, did not shy away from attacking the government on important issues. The Information Scandal, which is credited with bringing down the Vorster government and preventing Connie Mulder from attaining the premiership, was widely reported; an act that no totalitarian regime would have allowed to happen. Into the 1980s however the government would clamp down on anything that might damage the morale of the white population or give heart to the white nation's enemies, and any negative reporting of the military situation was severely curtailed.

Conscription was a particularly sensitive issue to the government and its censors, and anything that could be seen as subverting the system or portraying it in a bad light ran a real risk of being banned. At one point the government even wished to introduce legislation to make it illegal for a person to encourage anyone to influence somebody else to avoid conscription, thus making meaningful debate on national service extremely difficult.<sup>20</sup> Despite the wide and sometimes harsh censorship there was still room for debate and critical reporting, but by the 1980s the press in South Africa could on no account be described as free.

The strict press and media news censorship gives an impression that the white South African state was authoritarian and domineering, though this was only relative. For most of the period that conscription was in place, whites in South Africa did not suffer from any noticeable lack of personal or social freedoms, except those

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<sup>18</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step*, pp.117-18.

<sup>19</sup> D Foster, P Haupt & M De Beer, *The Theatre of Violence* (Cape Town, 2005), p.33.

<sup>20</sup> Cock, *Colonels & Cadres*, p.125.

conventions which society had to a large extent evolved for itself and apartheid had turned into legislation, such as in the Immorality Act and other restrictive statutes on inter-racial relations, platonic or otherwise. The sometimes almost puritanical stance of the DRC which was reflected in such things as film or fiction novel censorship gave South Africa a somewhat undeserved reputation in some constituencies for lacking freedom of expression on popular as well as political levels. However, apart from enforced racial segregation, legal restrictions on personal behaviour on a social level for white South African were essentially no different from any other Westernized society.

The capitalist and consumerist nature of white South Africa, especially from the 1960s, allowed those who wanted it a good deal of licence, and while censorship of films and books was strict people did have access to James Dean, the Beatles, and the other icons of Western popular culture. In 1960 Admiral Biermann complained that 'young people of today have too much time, too much money, and too many Elvis Presleys',<sup>21</sup> a fact that was becoming true across the Western world. The 1960s saw this consumerist youth culture really take off, with popular and glossy magazines such as *Scope*<sup>22</sup> appearing and bringing young people articles and pictures of the latest in fashion, film and fun, as well as some more serious reporting. By the 1980s South African society, and especially young South African society, was fully immersed in the Western consumerist culture of seeking enjoyment and entertainment through film, music, fashion and discotheques.

Although the idea that is portrayed for example by Frederikse<sup>23</sup> that life was highly regimented through school, cadets, church and the military was not entirely untrue, particularly in more conservative circles, it was offset by the fact that young people had a great deal of personal freedom and free time, and often had money in their pockets to enjoy that freedom in whatever way they saw fit. Nonetheless church and school still had a big influence on young lives, and often attempted to curb the influences of modern Western culture. One youngster stated 'one whole lecture [at veld school] was about how sex, communism and drugs all goes into the music that we listen to'<sup>24</sup> though she went on to say that she did not accept that view. She was not the only person to question the values the Establishment taught. An informant in

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<sup>21</sup> Rodney Warwick, 'The SADF and White South Africa 1960-66', (Seminar, University of Stellenbosch, 29 September 2006).

<sup>22</sup> *Scope* Vol. 1 appeared in July 1966.

<sup>23</sup> Frederikse, *South Africa, A Different Kind of War*.

<sup>24</sup> Frederikse, *South Africa, A Different Kind of War*, p.10.

Cock's study of South African militarism stated bluntly: 'the political education was absurd...too crude really.'<sup>25</sup> This was especially the case for the more liberal sections of society where parents would encourage their children to think more for themselves and would counter the state's discourse. Government propaganda did have a big impact, but it was generally limited to an anti-communist discourse and was not puritanical. The society from which young conscripts came was in fact, like other Western societies, increasingly consumerist and hedonistic, with the youth as always leading the way into these activities.

The four decades over which South Africans were compulsorily drawn into the Defence Force was an unstable period. There was a great difference between the situation of South Africa in the mid-1950s and the situation by the mid-1980s. When selective conscription was introduced in 1952 South Africa was a member of the Commonwealth, a staunch member of the Western world, with increasing economic prosperity and a white population that was engaged in legislatively entrenching its dominance over the other population groups. By the mid-1980s South Africa was a pariah state, a Republic with few friends and many enemies, shunned politically and only reluctantly and clandestinely tolerated as an ally of the West, with a failing economy and a white population that was forced to use its considerable military resources to quell internal unrest. Yet through this period of change white South Africa continued to define itself as a member of the West and whites in South Africa became involved in the consumerism that was a facet of life in all Western societies. The young were especially involved in this. White South Africa throughout the period continued to be affected by the English-Afrikaans splits that had existed since the Union in 1910, though from the 1960s the two communities began to come together somewhat as citizens of the wholly independent South African Republic. The population that was liable to render military service in South Africa saw manifold changes over the four decades that compulsory service existed; it is unsurprising that attitudes towards the military underwent equally wide reaching changes.

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<sup>25</sup> Cock, *Colonels & Cadres*, p.58.

## 1. The Myth of Refusal; a Review of Perceptions of National Service

South African conscription has, since the ending of apartheid, become something of a neglected topic. Following a spate of publications dealing in some way with the issue during the mid- to late-1980s, few authors or historians have approached the issue. Whenever the topic of national service has come up in recent years it is almost without exception either aspects of resistance to conscription that are examined, or else the reminiscences and thoughts of ex-conscripts that are related, with emphasis on the often brutal experiences of basics, the border, and the townships.

In many ways conscription has become something of a lost topic. It has merited little meaningful discussion in its own right, and has instead become intricately linked to service on the border or in the townships, and to apartheid militarism. The wider issue of conscription is confused with the experiences of conscripts in the active theatres. Koornhof states 'Writing about the "South African experience" has become synonymous with writing about war',<sup>1</sup> and the notion that conscription and national service outside of the war zone existed for a number of years is often somewhat forgotten. This is especially the case for the studies written during the period of apartheid. The publications of the apartheid era were generally written as contemporary commentary aiming to point out the inconsistencies or immoralities in the system of national service in the apartheid context, and although the works are widely accepted, their objectivity is often questionable. They often focus mainly on either draft resistance or on the negative experiences of conscription, either marginalising the positive aspects or else using them stylistically as a build-up for the disappointment that comes later.

While it is a useful exercise to look at issues of resistance to conscription, the unpopularity of national service, or the campaigns to bring the system to an end, these issues need to be put into context. Conscription was never opposed across the whole of white society, and indeed it can be argued that more people supported or recognised the necessity for the system than opposed it, even during the dark days of the 1980s. Duty in the townships and combat on the border, as opposed to simply being stationed in Namibia, were also not typical national service experiences,

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<sup>1</sup> H.F. Koornhof, 'Works of Fiction: Current South African War Literature', in Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan (eds), *War and Society, the Militarization of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1989), p.275.



neither of them occurring for the entirety of the compulsory service era and both involving only a minority of conscripts.

The preponderance of the anti-apartheid and anti-militarist literature of the 1980s has led to something of a myth being created surrounding the SADF and its conscripts. The conscription debate of the 1980s began to drift away from total objectivity largely because the issue had become tied up in the debates about the moralities of the conflicts in Angola and Namibia, and finally the morality of apartheid itself. Morality is not a universal truth but is by nature wholly subjective, and so, however unintentionally, subjectivity largely replaced objectivity in many debates concerning South Africa. Largely subjective arguments then became the major focus of the conscription debate. Indeed, in 1985 when the South African military writer H.-R. Heitman tried to ignore morality and take a more 'scientific' and economic approach to the conscription debate, he drew a great deal of criticism.<sup>2</sup>

A large number of works, however, deliberately abandoned objectivity, and these works have become part of the myth that exists surrounding conscription. A common stratagem in war is to deny the humanity of one's opponents and to assert moral superiority over them. This took place with a vengeance in late apartheid South Africa. Almost universally writings produced in the 1980s concerning South Africa were politicised and written with a political agenda, either to justify or more usually to denigrate the system of apartheid. Works were written for a target audience which would most likely already share the author's views for or against white dominance, and so objectivity was not highly prized. Within South Africa a few works based on racist ideologies or delusions of white superiority were produced in support of apartheid and the wars being fought in the region, and tailored the facts accordingly. Internationally however, as apartheid was so universally reviled, it became acceptable and indeed almost fashionable to condemn any and every facet of the apartheid state or anything connected with it. To many authors white South Africa could do no right while those who opposed it could do no wrong, and when the facts did not fit preconceived notions, they were simply altered or totally ignored.

The SADF was especially affected by this phenomenon. Ex-Chief of the Defence Force General Jannie Geldenhuys commented that 'the emotions mobilized against the employment of the military seriously damaged neutral and objective approaches

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<sup>2</sup> *Frontline*, (December 1985), pp.15-17; and *Frontline*, (March 1986), p.50.

to the problem',<sup>3</sup> and although some might accuse him of being a biased observer he makes an interesting and perfectly valid point. His point also works both ways, as not only are there people who subjectively denounce every act of the apartheid military, even now, but there are others who are willing to claim that all accusations of wrongdoing or unfair play levelled at the SADF are utterly false. It was in this climate, which lingers in some circles even today, that much of the literature pertaining to the apartheid military and its system of conscription was written.

The subjectively written and factually debatable works have had an impact on perceptions of national service. It is increasingly believed that conscription was a greatly resented, widely opposed institution and that those who served in the SADF did so only reluctantly. Service in the South African military from the 1950s to 1994 has nowadays become almost synonymous with fighting for apartheid, while for most of the soldiers it was simply the defence of their country and its territorial integrity. The prevailing situation of the mid-1980s onwards, when literally thousands of men failed to report for duty and when the SADF presence in the townships made it seem that the military was directly involved in racial repression, has been almost unquestioningly accepted as the epitome of the military situation of apartheid South Africa. This is, quite simply, a myth.

Like most myths that surrounding South African national service has its roots in reality. Mahmood Mamdoni wrote 'a myth is not a lie. It is based on the truth. Only, its tendency is to de-contextualise the truth, and to present a version of the truth as truth.'<sup>4</sup> This is what has happened with notions of conscription in South Africa. There is no contesting that for some conscription was a deeply worrying phenomenon, and that for others a life in exile or even a spell in prison was preferable to donning the uniform of what they considered an institution of racial repression. It is also established fact that thousands returned from their service scarred both physically and mentally by their experiences. However, these aspects of conscription were more prevalent in the last decade of the system, and are not representative of the whole compulsory service era. It will be demonstrated how the situation at the end of the national service years has come to be accepted as typifying the experience of conscription in apartheid South Africa, something that was palpably not the case.

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<sup>3</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys, *A General's Story from an Era of War and Peace* (Johannesburg, 1995), p.299.

<sup>4</sup> Mahmood Mamdoni, 'The Truth According to the TRC', in Ifi Amadiume & Abdullahi An-Na'im, *The Political of Memory; Truth, Healing and Social Justice* (New York, 2000), p.177.



It has now become unpopular to challenge the myth that national service and the war effort against the supposed threat to apartheid South Africa were widely rejected. In 2006 Ingo Capraro wrote in the Afrikaans language newspaper *Die Burger* that the war was largely supported in South Africa and that only a small minority of men refused their national service. He further made the point that most accounts of the war today lack proper historical perspective.<sup>5</sup> Despite these points being perfectly valid, his article provoked an angry response, with Anton Steenkamp writing in reply that the war was illegal and unjust, and that the only alternative to national service was six years in prison.<sup>6</sup> Steenkamp's reply fell into the exact trap that Capraro warned against, by presenting facts out of context and without proper perspective, and seemed more motivated by a desire to denigrate the now defunct racist system and the military that supported it than to present a balanced or well-researched version of events.

The myth that has been created has been helped by the fact that today many ex-conscripts do reject national service and say that given the choice they would not do it again.<sup>7</sup> Tales of the brutality, futility and trauma of service are commonplace. However, this is not a true reflection of national service perceptions at the time, and it is only by looking at public perceptions contemporary to conscription that a proper understanding of the topic can be gained. The men who now recount their experiences are older and presumably can look more objectively at the issue, and they also look at it from the perspective of post-apartheid society. The boys who were conscripted into the SADF were usually young, less mature and more susceptible to such things as peer pressure, propaganda and the idea of adventure and excitement, and they viewed conscription from the perspective of a racially based society supposedly facing an atheistic communist-backed 'total onslaught'. While it is important to take account of the feelings that men nowadays bear for their national service, it is also important to remember that these may have little in common with the views they held at the time they were called up to serve.

The idea that serving willingly in the SADF made one a partisan of apartheid is now also widely held, as is the idea that those who fought for apartheid were all monsters and callous killers. The 'dirty tricks' uncovered by the Goldstone Commission,<sup>8</sup> by

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<sup>5</sup> *Die Burger*, 28 August 2006.

<sup>6</sup> *Die Burger*, 30 August 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Wouter Pretorius, (Uniondale, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> See Richard Goldstone, *For Humanity, Reflections of a War Crimes Investigator* (Johannesburg, 2000).

General P. Steyn and by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) made the South African public and the world aware that certain members of the security forces had perpetrated acts of almost unspeakable cruelty. Although it was either members of the PF or more often members of the police who were implicated in the horrific acts of violence,<sup>9</sup> all former conscripts have now become tarred with the same metaphorical brush as the less morally conscious members of the security forces.

Even in educated and knowledgeable circles this is the case, as is shown in the following passage found in an article about the employment of South Africans as security personnel in Iraq:

Richard Goldstone...was revolted when he learned that some apartheid-era veterans are now employed in Iraq under U.S. government contracts. "The mercenaries we're talking about worked for security forces that were synonymous with murder and torture," says Goldstone..."My reaction was one of horror that that sort of person is employed in a situation where what should be encouraged is the introduction of democracy."<sup>10</sup>

While many of the mercenaries working in Iraq were probably not simply ordinary conscripts but members of the PF or even the Police, the distinction is not apparent in the article and 'apartheid-era veterans' are lumped together as members of 'security forces that were synonymous with murder and torture'. The murder and torture alluded to above were acts carried out by the few and not by the many, but the stigma attaches itself to all. It is therefore unsurprising that those men involved in the SADF but not involved in the murder or torture would play down their role or go to lengths to explain their involvement as a compulsion rather than an inclination.

While a discussion of the attitudes towards conscription of white South Africans will be given elsewhere in this work, it would be worthwhile now to examine in more detail some of the existing pool of literature and other media which fails to do justice to the topic, and why it has been allowed to propagate the myth about conscription almost unopposed.

Many of the works written on the topic of South African national service share certain characteristics. They are generally anti-apartheid in tone, and the vast majority of

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<sup>9</sup> General G. Meiring scathingly referred to those involved in these activities as 'mostly riff-raff policemen', Hilton Hammann, *Days of the Generals* (Cape Town, 2001), p.154.

<sup>10</sup> Barry Yeoman, 'Dirty Warriors', *Mother Jones*, Vol. 29, Issue 6, (Nov/Dec 2004), p.31.

them written pre-1994 are anti-SADF. They often share the notion that to challenge the apartheid Establishment was a noble act, and that to fail to do so was somehow a betrayal of the oppressed masses. They also almost universally portray the war in Angola and duty on the border as a brutal and psychologically damaging phenomenon for the average conscript. Works conceived and published between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s are usually the most vociferous in their criticism of apartheid, the SADF and conscription, and tend to make the most of resistance and objection while lionising the anti-conscription movements, especially the ECC. There are some items which denigrate the anti-war and anti-conscription campaigns, but these are usually blatant government or right-wing propaganda and are widely written off as such.<sup>11</sup> The only books that manage to reconcile a favourable approach to apartheid South Africa's military, and not stray into attempting to justify white dominance, are the works that deal exclusively with the SADF's operational deployments in Angola and largely ignore the politics surrounding the issue, such as Heitman's *War in Angola*<sup>12</sup> or Fred Bridgland's *The War for Africa*.<sup>13</sup>

The works that are fairly anti-SADF in tone provide a large part of the publications on South African conscription, and their influence on received notions is great, as there has been little written since to contextualize their assertions. The acceptance of their perception of events and issues is also helped by the fact that South Africa's most recent experience of conscription was the period of 'civil war' and illegal occupation that these works speak of, and so people who lived through the experience of apartheid can relate most easily to these more recent and widely publicised turbulent events than to the relatively calm periods that preceded them.

The anti-military works were normally published as an exposé of the acts of the security forces, aimed at educating people of the oppressive nature of the apartheid military. Official refutations of accusations aimed at the military were not widely publicised outside of South Africa, and publications showing a human face to willing conscripts, such as Heitman's *South African Armed Forces*<sup>14</sup> or the SADF's own booklet *The Figure in Brown*,<sup>15</sup> were and are largely ignored as apartheid

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<sup>11</sup> For example the 'Veterans for Victory' pamphlets, such as *The ECC Will Never Tell You the Full Story...But we are Determined that You Should Know* (Houghton, 1988); or *Semantic Gymnastics, or, How to Talk South Africa to Death* (Houghton, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> Helmoed-Römer Heitman, *War in Angola, the Final South Africa Phase* (Gibraltar, 1990)

<sup>13</sup> Fred Bridgland, *The War for Africa, Twelve Months That Transformed a Continent* (Gibraltar, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Helmoed-Römer Heitman, *South African Armed Forces* (Cape Town, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> SADF, *The Figure in Brown* (Pretoria, no date).

propaganda.<sup>16</sup> As Geldenhuys points out, authors who wrote about the apartheid military in favourable terms ran the risk of being condemned for 'relaying Defence Force propaganda',<sup>17</sup> something that could badly damage an academic career.

One category of scholarly works that is now coming into vogue is publications recounting the experiences of ex-conscripts and their time in the SADF, aiming to give an impression of the life of a national serviceman, and also autobiographical works from servicemen themselves. This type of research and writing has been gaining in popularity of late, and the general feeling among such researchers is that conscripts wish to be heard and for their stories to be told. Books such as J. H. Thompson's *An Unpopular War*<sup>18</sup> or Barry Fowler's *Pro Patria*<sup>19</sup> and his Sentinel Projects website<sup>20</sup> fit into the category of recounting tales told by former conscripts. Many of the accounts published are shown without any analysis or commentary from the researcher who merely acts as an editor. These authors or editors are generally more sympathetic towards individual conscripts, and where commentary does exist they portray conscripts as human beings caught up in events not of their own making trying to do the right thing in an impossible situation, and they thus become in a sense apologists for the conscripts.

While all authors share the belief that the SADF was responsible for upholding apartheid, they generally attempt, even if unconsciously, to divorce the service given by individual men from the overall impact of the Defence Force. Emphasis is often placed on the national servicemen's unwillingness to serve, the bad experiences they encountered during their tours of duty, or the 'moments of truth' when they realised that what they were doing in the SADF was wrong and immoral, and possibly even their rejection of further violence. Ex-soldiers will often emphasise these points themselves, not to make them seem a better person to their listener, but because that was how they coped mentally with violent situations, by seeing themselves as an unwilling participant and detached from the brutality.

Psychologist Diane Sandler, when writing about how men experience war, states that the soldier 'experienced the other soldiers as vicious, violent, and out of control,

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<sup>16</sup> *Frontline*, September 1985, p.40, A review of Heitman's book *The South African War Machine* accuses him of 'regurgitating the same feeble old lines about the "external threat"'.  
<sup>17</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, p.277.

<sup>18</sup> J.H. Thompson (ed.), *An Unpopular War, from afkak to bosbefok* (Cape Town, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Barry Fowler (ed.), *Pro Patria* (Halifax, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Barry Fowler (ed.), *Sentinel Projects*, <<http://www.geocities.com/sadfbok/index.html>>, accessed 1 October 2006.

and he continually defined himself as separate from them and the brutality meted out.<sup>21</sup> Authors writing the stories of ex-conscripts faithfully recount the revulsion of witnessing violence and brutality as reported by the soldiers, without questioning whether this is a true reflection of their military experience. As apologists for the actions of the conscripts, the researchers are generally satisfied to uncritically relate that the majority of men were unhappy participants in the oppressive and violent aspects of service.

Even in objective works, issues surrounding conscription are written of in terms of opposition or unpopularity, sacrificing some of the truth for sensationalism, or maybe even political acceptability. Other works on national service, written during the apartheid era, are written with a great deal of anti-conscription and anti-SADF bias. The titles of works on the SADF and conscripts are often indicative of this, and a number of publications bear titles suggesting that military service was either evil, opposed, widely disliked, or destructive. Such studies as *Brutal Force, The Apartheid War Machine*, by Gavin Cawthra,<sup>22</sup> or Phyllis Johnson and David Martin's *Frontline Southern Africa, Destructive Engagement*,<sup>23</sup> or Thompson's *An Unpopular War*, are all typical of the sensationalist and hard-hitting titles that characterise many books dealing with the South African military.

The former two publications appeared in the mid- to late-1980s at a time when the SADF was involved not only in occupying the townships but also in a series of wars of destabilisation in the region. Both books are highly critical of these policies and aim to turn the reader against the force they perceive as bringing death and destruction to the region. They do not deal exclusively or even in any great detail with national service, but their criticism of government and military policies carries with it an implied or sometimes explicitly stated criticism of continued conscription. In some ways they are little short of propaganda but in the context of the revulsion that the authors evidently felt at witnessing the continued impact of apartheid and the SADF's perceived role in this their views are comprehensible.

Thompson's book however was not published during apartheid, but appeared over a decade later in 2006. It recounts the experiences of forty or so men who served in

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<sup>21</sup> Diane Sandler, 'The Psychological Experiences of White Conscripts in the Black Townships', in Cock & Nathan (eds), *War and Society*, p.88.

<sup>22</sup> Gavin Cawthra, *Brutal Force, The Apartheid War Machine* (London, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> Phyllis Johnson & David Martin (eds), *Frontline Southern Africa, Destructive Engagement* (New York, 1988).

varying positions and at varying times in the Defence Force from 1967 to 1994, though it fails to deal with the earlier selective service period, a trait all too common in writings on South African conscription. Nonetheless the book aims to give a 'snapshot' of national service, and so to call the book *An Unpopular War* seems to be looking for sensationalism. The title is not only factually debatable (a large number of white South Africans did support the war that South Africa was said to be engaged in against communism and anarchy) but is also fairly peripheral to the subject matter, which is meant to be the soldiers, not the conflict they were engaged in. That an author at this remove in time used such a title cannot be attributed to an attempt to denigrate the white supremacist regime, and must instead be seen as a symptom of the now widely accepted myth that fighting for apartheid South Africa was deeply unpopular, and that there was some resistance to being compelled to do so.

Thompson's book is a good example of how the negative is often emphasised when dealing with national service. The negative slant begins with the title, *An Unpopular War*, and is then followed by the subtitle *from afkak to bosbefok*, which gives an indication that the experiences to be recounted are not all pleasant. The book contains no analysis, but simply recounts the stories of soldiers as told to the editor. The lack of editorial comment in the book aids the impression that conscription was resented, because no comment is made on how men's perceptions may have been changed by the service or become distorted since the advent of universal democracy in South Africa when the men's actions in the SADF became seen as unacceptable.

On opening the book, the first chapter is entitled *You're in the Army Now*, and begins with the line 'It was the worst day of my life',<sup>24</sup> and at first glance the whole book basically conveys a very negative impression. The book does contain some accounts of bad experiences though most stories, even the bad ones, are in fact told with a sense of humour or nostalgia, and some of the experiences recounted are even good. This makes the book's title and opening so much more unrepresentative. Accounts of the border or of active service are given a good deal of space in the book, despite being not altogether typical of the national service experience. An indication of how far the book focuses on border service rather than general national service is a review in the *Sunday Independent* which claimed that 'it's possibly an important book for their [the conscripts'] sons and daughters to understand the futility

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<sup>24</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.1.



of war'.<sup>25</sup> That a book purporting to give a 'snapshot' of national service is considered important in understanding the futility of war demonstrates how far into the post-apartheid populist myth both the book and the reviewer have strayed.

In fairness to Thompson she has tried to be objective, and says in the preface 'It was a radically different political climate – one that now, from the perspective of a non-racial and democratic South Africa, is almost impossible to comprehend. Today, it is not socially acceptable for these men to talk about their experiences. But even if the politics were abhorrent this doesn't make the soldiers so.' She goes on to say that she wrote the stories as she was told them with no editing or embellishing to make the men seem better or worse.<sup>26</sup> Her book has also received favourable reviews from many former conscripts, who previously felt that the story of their experiences had largely been left untold.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless it is still evident that the book falls into the trap of believing the myth and in doing so helps to propagate it further.

The abovementioned publications are by no means the only ones to look at conscript's experiences from the point of view of negativity or rejection. While most follow Thompson's lead in attempting objectivity and do not exaggerate or embellish, the focus remains on the bad, simply because these experiences are different and make for interesting studies, while studies of the banal make poor reading. A study by Catherine Draper on conscripts' psychological experiences naturally focuses on such things as 'coping', 'readjustment', and 'violence', all of which in the context have negative connotations, simply because it is not useful to write a study of military psychological experiences if they were no different from experiences in civilian life. Clive Holt's autobiographical account of national service *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter*<sup>28</sup> is also a book that has a great deal of emphasis on the psychological traumas of military service. The book is entirely factual and the author is at pains to point out his pride in having served his country, but Holt's experiences of open warfare in Angola are extremely untypical of most men's national service, even on the 'border'. Larry Schwartz's work *The Wild Almond Line*<sup>29</sup> also puts a large emphasis on the negative aspects of service and how the author and his friends did not wish to have any part in it. He also talks of thousands of men resisting or deserting, mutinies and sabotage, and while none of this is factually incorrect, the

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<sup>25</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 16 July 2006, p.18, review by Charlene Smith.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.viii.

<sup>27</sup> *Pretoria News*, 14 October 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Clive Holt, *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter* (Cape Town, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Larry Schwartz, *The Wild Almond Line* (St Leonards, 2000)

lack of context presents a largely distorted picture of national service in the late 1970s. These studies of conscripts' experiences do not noticeably bend the truth, are objectively or even dispassionately written, and have value as academic studies in themselves, but they still do not paint a complete picture. Put together they constitute a body of largely negative oriented scholarship to which there is currently no counterbalance and which is being widely accepted as the only side to the conscription story.<sup>30</sup>

Of the academic works which look at South African conscription, a large proportion focus mainly on aspects of resistance to service. The literature produced by those who concentrate on the rejection aspects of conscription is generally anti-national service in nature, and the scale of the resistance to and rejection of conscription is sometimes exaggerated, whether to give the work credibility and value as a scholastic pursuit or because the authors are looking in from the present, when national service is widely disliked and rejected. As little enough has been written about national service and even less purely about resistance to conscription, those works that do exist are even more influential.

During the national service era some works appeared criticising the system or lauding conscientious objectors, both political and religious, as well as the opposition movements like the ECC, but these were not always balanced or particularly scholarly editions. *Out of Step*, published by the Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR),<sup>31</sup> and *Hawks and Doves* edited by Michael Graaf<sup>32</sup> are two of the better apartheid era works charting resistance to conscription, though even these are explicitly pro-conscientious objection and pro-ECC and are not unbiased in assessing the impact of that organisation. There are no pro-conscription works looking objectively at the ECC, as the government and pro-conscription organisations seemingly found it easier to engage in name calling and mud slinging to disparage their opponents than to study them.

Since the ending of conscription and the campaigns opposed to it in the early 1990s, some more reflective works have appeared concerning the resistance to national

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<sup>30</sup> An example of this is the *Lonely Planet* travel guide, which advises readers to see Schwartz's book for 'the realities of military service during South Africa's darkest days', despite the shortcomings of the work. *Lonely Planet Guide to South Africa, Lesotho & Swaziland* (6<sup>th</sup> edition, London, 2004), p.40.

<sup>31</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step, War Resistance in South Africa* (London, 1989).

<sup>32</sup> Michael Graaf (ed.), *Hawks and Doves, the Pro- and Anti-Conscription Press in South Africa* (Durban, 1988).



service. Daniel Conway, who has done some work on concepts of citizenship through military service in South Africa, is one person who concentrates almost wholly in his writings on the opposition to conscription. He is more concerned with the topics of constructs of masculinity and sexual citizenship than with conscription per se, but in discussing aspects of objection to service as a part of his work he builds up something of a false picture of the strength of the anti-conscription movement.

In his article *'Every Coward's Choice?'*<sup>33</sup> Conway talks of the failure of the ECC to challenge the state's hegemonic concepts of masculinity, saying that they could have done far more to discredit the state's association of objectors to military service with 'effeminacy, cowardice, and sexual "deviance."' <sup>34</sup> While it is far beyond the scope of the current study to further examine Conway's point, it is relevant here because he is crediting the ECC with being in a position to challenge the state on issues such as received concepts of masculinity and actually make an impact. This is at best an exaggeration. The ECC's message was limited to a narrow constituency and the organisation was already seen by many of its opponents as nothing other than a group of deviant and subversive communist puppets, and although they did sterling work in the anti-conscription field their popularity was never such that they could mount such a challenge on received notions of sexuality without irreparably damaging their already shaky reputation. Conway's articles accept as a fact the questionable premise of a strong popular opposition to national service, both from organised groups and implicitly from their target constituency in wider society, and are thus examples of how far the historical distortions have reached.

Conway is not however the only author to exaggerate the impact of the ECC. An excellent thesis by Merran Willis Phillips<sup>35</sup> gives a thorough study of the organisation, but the impact of the ECC is rather overstated. She concludes 'the ECC spearheaded a significant white extra-parliamentary challenge to apartheid',<sup>36</sup> a position that is hard to maintain given that the ECC managed to sway few enough people to oppose conscription, and that the apartheid state was not even close to being forced to capitulate due to a dearth of manpower. The ECC did provide an outlet for white frustrations with apartheid and militarism, but it was just one of many

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<sup>33</sup> D. Conway, "'Every Coward's Choice'? Political Objection to Military Service in Apartheid South Africa as Sexual Citizenship', *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 8 No. 1, (March 2004), 25-45.

<sup>34</sup> Conway, "'Every Coward's Choice'?", p.25.

<sup>35</sup> Merran Willis Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign 1983-1988: A Study in White Extra-Parliamentary Opposition to Apartheid* (MA thesis, UNISA, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*, p.227.

organisations to do so and its specific focus on conscription did little to harm to the political system of apartheid. Indeed it is possibly telling that in another book detailing white opposition to apartheid, the ECC is mentioned only in passing as one of 'a number of organisational outlets' for white activists in the 1980s.<sup>37</sup>

It is highly doubtful that any of the above works intend to deceive readers by making the ECC into something that it was not. Rather, it seems to be an error of perspective. A decade and more has passed since the ending of apartheid and national service, and with hindsight it can be seen that the demands of the ECC were largely met. It is therefore easy, and even logical, to ascribe the current world order to the efforts of those who fought for it. The efforts of the ECC were widely praised as the façade of apartheid came tumbling down, even though their endeavours had done little enough in practice to end racial discrimination. History is written not only by the victors but also about the victors, and when something is sufficiently lauded it can take on an importance that is largely illusory. This is what has happened with the ECC.

While scholastic literature provides most of the meaningful work on conscription, the issue was and is too emotive to be constrained to dry academic accounts. Fictional literature in abundance has dealt with the issue of apartheid and much of that literature has concentrated on the apartheid military and on the fictional experiences of soldiers. The many fictional accounts of the 'border' that have been written in the last four decades have become collectively known under the title of *grensliteratuur* (border literature). Both English and Afrikaans works were published and were often intended not simply as fictional works of entertainment but as indictment of the war, militarism, and of apartheid, or as an emotional examination of the relationship between individuals and events too large for them. According to a study of the border literature by Koornhof 'The overall sense created by the majority of border novels is one of nihilism, incoherence and suffering.'<sup>38</sup>

While *grensliteratuur* does not deal directly with national service, the border is now intimately linked to the idea of conscription, and so by proxy it casts something of a shadow over the experience of national service. As fictional works border literature can reach more people than more academic accounts of national service and the

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<sup>37</sup> Joshua Lazerson, *Against the Tide, Whites in the Struggle Against Apartheid* (Bellville, 1994), p.254.

<sup>38</sup> Koornhof, 'Works of Fiction', in Cock & Nathan, *War and Society*, p.281.

border, which are read by only few people. The overall impact is that people reading these novels or short stories are subjected to a one sided view of military service in South Africa that came about as an expression of frustration with apartheid and the war, but which is quite distant from reality. *Grensliteratuur* is not in fact only limited to actual stories of the border but as a term encompasses most books containing significant stories of soldiers or national servicemen. This is again an indication that the issue of conscription has become confused with the active service given by conscripts. As not all conscripts served on the border, and by no means all in a combat function, tales that are based in such settings are not typical of the national service experience, even though they are becoming increasingly accepted as such.

The myths surrounding national service are now so well entrenched that research about the South African military is seemingly expected to concentrate on the ills of conscription and the brutality and violence experienced by ex-soldiers. In searching for sources for this work the author received the following recommendation; 'For a vivid evocation of an ordinary conscript's Angolan-Namibian experiences, post-traumatic stress and testimony before the TRC I suggest you read Tony Eprile's novel *The Persistence of Memory*'.<sup>39</sup> The mindset seems to be that in researching conscripts and conscription tales of tragedy and scarring experiences must be recounted. Eprile's book is in fact an eclectic and satirical novel about an adolescent English speaking South African Jew with a childhood history of mental issues, who is conscripted in the late 1980s and then witness to an atrocity in Namibia that causes him to break down. It is certainly nowhere near the experiences of an ordinary conscript. The book is, by the author's own admission, 'a work of the imagination',<sup>40</sup> but it has somehow been accepted as 'a vivid evocation of an ordinary conscript's Angolan-Namibian experiences'. The book is not the only relatively recent publication to portray abnormal experiences in the SADF; André Van der Merwe's novel *Moffie*<sup>41</sup> also tells the tale of a conscript who did not fit in, in this case a homosexual, who had a miserable national service experience. That these books portray conscription and the service given by conscripts in so negative a light is again not only symptomatic of the myth that now exists; it is actively aiding its propagation.

Written media in books, journals, articles and on the internet are the main sources for discussion of national service, but they do not hold a monopoly on the issue. As

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<sup>39</sup> Personal correspondence, (May 2006), concerning the book Tony Eprile, *The Persistence of Memory* (Cape Town, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> Eprile, *The Persistence of Memory*, p.283.

<sup>41</sup> André Carl Van der Merwe, *Moffie* (Hermanus, 2006).

with almost any emotive or historically important issue, television, film and music have addressed the topic of national service. Indeed these media have probably reached far wider audiences than the written media. Music and films are especially influential and easily diffused, and the wealth of anti-war films and songs that existed by the end of apartheid undoubtedly helped fuel the idea of a strong anti-war and anti-conscription movement.

Music was often used by sympathisers of the anti-apartheid movement to undermine or mock the state's efforts to defend the white nation from the majority black population. The music was often popular and the existence of such a proliferation of anti-war and anti-conscription songs was without a doubt a reflection of the feelings of many people at the time. However, the anti-war songs aimed at whites only began to appear in the late 1970s, with most produced from the mid-1980s onwards, when resistance was at its height. They are not at all representative of the whole conscription era, although they are sometimes taken as such. Writing about the relationship between music and the anti-conscription movement, Michael Drewett writes that the anti-war songs 'even today capture the intense contest and angst that was', although he makes no attempt to clarify the comparatively limited duration and even scope of that contest and angst.<sup>42</sup> The anti-war music does not contextualise itself but instead relies on the listener to know to what the lyrics refer, and so the continued existence of such music out of context can only help fuel the idea that conscription and the war were widely resented and resisted.

Films dealing with South African military service also give off something of a false image of the compulsory service period. During the national service era a number of films appeared dealing with military service, though few dealt more than tangentially with conscription itself. Most of these films were produced with the assistance of the SADF and South African government, and were often little more than nationalist propaganda.<sup>43</sup> Some were *Rambo*-style films that portrayed heroic South Africans defeating the odds in defence of their country, though others such as *Mirage Eskader* or *Die Winter van 14 Julie* were designed more to promote military service as the good life.<sup>44</sup> These films carried an extreme pro-conscription message, and present a totally untrue depiction of the SADF and military service. They are utterly rejected in

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Drewett, 'Battling over Borders: Narratives of Resistance to the South African Border War Voiced through Popular Music', *Social Dynamics*, Vol. 29, No. 1, (2003), p.81.

<sup>43</sup> Dylan Craig, 'Screening the Border War', 1971-88, *Kleio*, Vol. 36, (2004), 28-46.

<sup>44</sup> Craig, 'Screening the Border War', p.36.

modern South Africa, and while their impact on their contemporary audience may have been large, their lasting legacy is minimal.

The anti-war films, such as they were, that were produced under apartheid began to appear in the mid-1980s, and these films still have some limited currency today. These films provided a popular indictment of the border war, though some which carried too strong a message were banned by the apartheid censors. However, just as with American films dealing with Vietnam, it was the war itself that came in for criticism, while the system of conscription was largely ignored. In these films the war was portrayed as traumatic, violent and pointless, and they show service as harmful and soldiers as disturbed individuals, something that was by no means universally true.

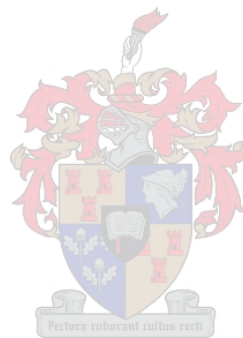
These themes are also retained in television documentaries on the issue of military service, even though such documentaries should strive for more accuracy. In 2006 the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) aired a programme called *Eat My Call Up*,<sup>45</sup> which showed the issues surrounding conscription and the traumas it caused for a number of the people involved. Television can reach a far wider audience than most written publications can manage, and the almost wholly negative experiences brought out by the programme are at once a symptom and a continuing cause of the myth that has been built up around the issue of South African conscription. National service was presented as resented, resisted and traumatic. It was all of these things, but not to all men and not to an overwhelming degree. The programme makers focused on the experiences of the minority, possibly in an attempt at sensationalism, and little attempt was made to present any lengthy discussion of national service before the extensive strife of the 1980s, even though calmer times constituted well over half of the conscription period.

The perception of national service today is that it was disliked and rejected, submitted to only grudgingly, and deeply traumatic for the men involved. This perception is based on the widely publicised accounts of the few for whom the above scenarios were true, but for the majority of men national service was not like this. Literature and other media dealing with national service tend to focus on issues of trauma or rejection for different reasons. Some works which appeared when conscription was still in force aimed at pointing out the rejection and resistance in the

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<sup>45</sup> *Eat My Call Up*, SABC1, broadcast 26 July 2006.

hope of undermining the system. Other more objective pieces have since focused on traumatic experiences and resistance to conscription not in a deliberate attempt to show the system in a bad light, but because these unusual aspects of service make for more interesting scholarship than discussions of the commonplace. Some undoubtedly do seek a degree of sensationalism that accounts of men experiencing nothing extraordinary would not bring them, while fictional literature, films and music are at least partly sensationalist in nature from the need to keep possible non-academic readers, viewers or listeners entertained. Much of this media was produced as a rejection of the state's hegemonic discourse about heroic military service during the dying years of apartheid, and exists now out of context and so gives an inaccurate portrayal of the compulsory service era. While there has been no concerted effort to malign national service since the ending of apartheid, the body of literature and other media that has grown up around it has, however unintentionally, done just that.



## 2. Traditions and Practices of Military Service in South Africa

This chapter aims to give a brief outline of the military traditions of white South Africans, and to demonstrate how the military fit into both Afrikaner and English societies. It will then proceed to discuss the introduction of compulsory military service in South Africa in 1952, to briefly examine the system that was introduced and how it evolved over the conscription era.

Although South Africa as a nation has only possessed its own armed forces since the creation of the Union Defence Force (UDF) in 1912, there is a much longer military tradition, or rather military traditions, in white South African society. From the earliest settlers through to the Anglo-Boer War and beyond, the land was taken and held by military forces. Those who were strong thrived while those who were weak perished.<sup>1</sup> Violence and force played an integral role in the making of South Africa, and militarism was very much a part of society. The military heritage of the two historical white groupings, the Afrikaners and the British, helped to shape the Defence Force that came into being in 1912 and which four decades later begun for the first time in its history to induct conscripted men into its ranks.<sup>2</sup>

In South African society it is difficult to speak of a white socio-military tradition, as like much else the military and its role in society was deeply affected by the English-Afrikaner dichotomy. In this case English refers literally to those of British extraction for it was they who were militarily influential in much of South African history. Each group had their own separate and distinct traditions, which did not even begin to come together anywhere but in the Cape Colony until the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. Even after the Union separate attitudes generally prevailed, and it was not until into the 1960s that a merging of the two cultures and traditions came about sufficiently to make the SADF acceptable (or at least less unacceptable) to both populations.<sup>3</sup> To understand the attitudes of the white population towards the military, especially in the early years of compulsory service, it is necessary to look back at their traditions, and to see how the military played a role in society for those of English and Afrikaner descent, both before and after the formation of the Union.

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<sup>1</sup> Gavin Cawthra, *Brutal Force, the Apartheid War Machine* (London, 1986), p.5.

<sup>2</sup> Annette Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (London, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Rodney Warwick, 'The South African Military under Verwoerd: SADF popularisation amongst the white community, 1960-66', *South African Historical Society Conference* (June 2005).



For the Afrikaner population, and especially for those in the Transvaal or the Orange Free State, the military was traditionally very much integrated with the population through the system of commandos, and existed essentially for the defence of land and population, and for punitive actions against transgressing neighbours. From the time of the formation of the Dutch colony in the Cape area in the seventeenth century, the country had been too vast and too sparsely populated for the established authorities to make extensive use of regular garrison troops. A regular garrison was maintained in Cape Town for the defence of the settlement, but beyond that the colony relied on the local population for the defence of the land through a system of informal militias, which became known as the commando system. It was not so much a sense of civic duty which drove the early settlers to take up arms in defence of their lands, but rather a case of necessity, for if they did not defend themselves no one else would. They could be mobilised at the order of a *Landrost* (magistrate), and had little or no training. According to Silburn, writing just after the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), 'the burgher system went no further than compulsory service, in time of war, of the male population between certain ages, the only preparation for service depended upon being the possession of a rifle and a certain quantity of ammunition by those liable.'<sup>4</sup>

The northwards migration of the Afrikaner people in the 1830s further strengthened the military role of the free burghers, as the *Voortrekkers* came into contact with hostile native tribes and were compelled to fight for their very survival. With the creation of the Afrikaner Republics the informal military system was continued, as neither state made any real effort to create a standing army but relied instead on their citizens for their defence. The only regular forces possessed by the Transvaal and Orange Free State at the beginning of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899 were the artillery arms, consisting of 650 and 400 men respectively and combined boasting some 100 guns.<sup>5</sup> There was indeed a great ambivalence and even mistrust of uniformed regular soldiery, especially after the Anglo-Boer War, and military formations were seen more as symbols of oppression than of national pride.<sup>6</sup> The Afrikaner military tradition was therefore of a commando-style, citizen oriented force, with all men being responsible for the defence of the collective good. Defence is also a key word, as the commando formations existed only for the defence of the nation or community, not for service in distant lands or for waging extensive offensive wars.

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<sup>4</sup> P. A. Silburn, *The Colonies and Imperial Defence* (London, 1908), p.333.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *The Boer War 1899-1902* (Oxford, 2003), p.28.

<sup>6</sup> Annette Seegers, *The Military in the Making of South Africa* (London, 1996), p.21.



The traditions of the British military in society were much different to those of the Afrikaners. The home defence of Great Britain had long been the primary concern of the Royal Navy, and since the Act of Union of 1707 which merged England and Scotland into a single nation, the British army had been much more an offensive than defensive force. Furthermore, since the time of Oliver Cromwell, contemporary to the colonisation of the Cape by the Dutch, England's army had consisted of a standing force of professional volunteer soldiers, backed up by a reserve force of militia, also voluntary. The voluntary status of the army meant that the British developed a far more state oriented mentality, as the majority of the population expected others to do their fighting for them, an attitude which in general was taken by British settlers to South Africa. Regular soldiers were used with great frequency in the numerous border wars fought between the colonists and the native populations, and the role of militias in British southern Africa was to supplement rather than replace these professional troops. The British settlers continued to rely on Britain for their defence, and so it was only natural that they retained the British concept that soldiers should be volunteers in a professional standing army. Militias in the British colonies were also voluntary, and were organised along far more formal lines than the Boer commandos, reporting for regular training even in times of peace.

For centuries British soldiers had been volunteers, and Britain prided itself that even in its darkest hours it had never had to resort to conscription to fill the ranks of the army. There was 'a shuddering distaste for the concept of conscription or citizen soldiers',<sup>7</sup> and one commentator in the early 1900s summed up the British view that 'conscription is only accepted by a nation in the hour of dire need, the yoke is put on when the nation is grovelling in the dust.'<sup>8</sup> Excluding the Naval press-gangs, it was not until 1916 that Britain was first compelled to introduce compulsory military service, by which time the fledgling Union of South Africa and her Defence Force were already in existence. Within the British military, tradition was centred on professional units, and a great professional pride surrounded the army, often accompanied by mistrust and even scorn of things civilian. As opposed to the more inclusive commando set-up in which everyone could play a part, British military units were exclusive formations in which outsiders were rarely welcome until they had proven themselves worthy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ruth Jolly, *Military Man, Family Man: Crown Property?* (London, 1987), p.3.

<sup>8</sup> Silburn, *The Colonies and Imperial Defence*, p.166.

<sup>9</sup> The British view of regimental pride in the first decades of the twentieth century is shown in J.W.Fortescue, *A History of the British Army* (London, 1930), Vol.XIII, pp.562-64.

With the formation of the UDF in 1912, the new government attempted to create a force that would prove acceptable to both English and Afrikaans speakers. However, only a decade after the end of the Anglo-Boer War most Afrikaners were still unwilling subjects of the British Empire, and did not wish to be participants in what they saw as essentially an extension of the British imperial machine. This was reinforced by the fact that much of the insignia, weapons, training, and regulations of the new force were taken directly from the British models, and that service was given on a full time professional basis, rather than in the more informal commando style. The military traditions of the Afrikaners were marginalised or completely ignored, and there was little done to encourage Afrikaners to feel that the UDF was 'their' force or to give them any sense of proprietary pride in the new military formations. Nonetheless, not all Afrikaners turned their backs on the UDF; many of the senior officers in the new force were ex-Boer commanders, who encouraged their former comrades to join, and while English speakers saw service in the UDF as a way of affirming their loyalty to the crown, some Afrikaners saw it as a vehicle to recovering some of their independence from Britain and getting British troops off their soil.<sup>10</sup>

Despite resistance to the UDF in some circles, Afrikaners did participate in the new force. Grundy has shown that the percentage of white male South Africans of military age who volunteered for overseas service in the First World War was not significantly lower than that of other virtually wholly British settler colonies,<sup>11</sup> suggesting that Afrikaners contributed heavily to the war effort, and it has been estimated that over half of the soldiers who volunteered for service in the Second World War were of Afrikaner descent.<sup>12</sup>

However, extensive Afrikaner participation in the UDF did not mean that the force lost its British veneer, and it was not until after the election of the National Party government in 1948 that it began to be remoulded along Afrikaner lines. Afrikaans progressively replaced English in official terminology, for example in the names of some of the officer ranks, and the 1957 Defence Act made it compulsory for all

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Grundy, *Defence Legislation and Communal Politics, the Evolution of a White South African Nation as Reflected in the Controversy over the Assignment of Armed Forces Abroad, 1912-1976* (Athens, Ohio, 1978), p.13.

<sup>11</sup> Grundy, *Defence Legislation*, p.20. South Africa gave 11.12% of available manpower, compared with Canada 13.48%, Australia 13.43%, New Zealand 19.35%. Many South Africans also joined either the British or Australian armies, or else joined the Royal Navy as the UDF lacked a naval force at this time. The statistics do not include these men.

<sup>12</sup> Albert Grundlingh, 'The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force During the Second World War, 1939-45', *Journal of African History*, Vol. 40, Issue 3, (1999), 351-65.

officers and non-commissioned officers to be bilingual in English and Afrikaans, a move which generally favoured Afrikaners as they were more likely to be bilingual than native English speakers, many of whom were unwilling to learn another language.<sup>13</sup> The 1957 Defence Act also finally removed the last vestiges of British Imperialism in the military by changing the name of the UDF to the South African Defence Force (SADF), and substituting the old Queen's Regulations with a new South African military legal system.<sup>14</sup> In the aftermath of the Second World War the UDF was still an English-dominated force, but by the 1960s and certainly in the 1970s and beyond the SADF was largely Afrikaner controlled and dominated, with three in four PF members being Afrikaans speakers by 1975.<sup>15</sup>

The force that emerged from these various Acts was a blend of British and Afrikaner traditions. The army had a core of full time soldiers, called the Permanent Force (PF), while the main body was made up of conscripts undergoing basic training and part-timers called up for a short period each year, known as the Citizen Force (CF), whose organisation and service requirements very loosely followed the tradition of the British-style militia.<sup>16</sup> In addition there were local units, given the name Commandos, whose responsibility was local defence and who were to be called up in time of emergency. The major difference between this force and the early UDF was that this force was to be made up not of volunteers, but of men compelled to service.

The Defence Act of 1912 made provision for compulsory military service and allowed the government to call up men if they needed to, but due to sensitivities within the white population to service in the British Empire these clauses were never activated until the Nationalist government arrived after the Second World War. From 1952, all men of conscription age were balloted, about 30 000 men annually, and a small number each year were called up. Initially the small number of men were liable to only a three month training period and three CF camps of 21 days each, which was for a short time reduced to two months and camps only every other year.<sup>17</sup> However as the nation became slowly more reliant on its armed forces for its defence both internally and externally, the numbers of men called up and the period for which they

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<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Grundy, *The Rise of the South African Security Establishment, and Essay on the Changing Locus of State Power* (Johannesburg, 1983), p.2; & Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, pp.396-97.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Sass, 'The Union and South African Defence Force, 1912 to 1994', in Jakkie Cilliers & Marcus Reichardt (eds), *About Turn, the Transformation of the South African Military and Intelligence* (Halfway House, 1996) p.122.

<sup>15</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p.111.

<sup>16</sup> Sass, 'Union and South African Defence Force', in Cilliers & Reichardt, *About Turn*, p.120.

<sup>17</sup> Sass, 'Union and South African Defence Force', in Cilliers & Reichardt, *About Turn*, p.126.

were required to serve were increased. In 1957 about 7 000 men were called up; by 1964, after Sharpeville, South Africa's exit from the Commonwealth, and the UN non-mandatory arms embargo, this figure had risen to 20 000.<sup>18</sup> From 1961 the period of continuous training became nine months and the CF requirements were increased to five camps totalling 90 days. According to Sass 'by the early 60s...with few exceptions all ballotees were selected to attend training',<sup>19</sup> and this finally led to the decision to call up all men for military service.

In 1965, the then Minister of Defence, Jim Fouché, ordered that a committee be set up under the chairmanship of Professor Groenewoud to investigate the manpower needs of the SADF. The Groenewoud Committee, as it became known, conducted wide-ranging consultations with members of the Defence Force, Members of Parliament, and members of the public, as well as receiving 'some hundreds of memoranda from various sectors of the public'.<sup>20</sup> The committee made a number of findings, the most important of which was that the ballot was an unfair and inefficient system of recruitment, and that it should be replaced. It was on the recommendation of the Groenewoud Committee that universal military conscription for white adult males was introduced in 1967.

The creation of universal service in 1967 did more than just widen the net and bring in more recruits. From 1952 until 1967 those chosen by ballot had been required by the legislation to attend 'military training'. Their statutory time in the military was seen as a time of training and men were not under normal circumstances expected to see any kind of active service during this period. Under this legislation, the government was obliged to justify the need for longer call-ups in terms of longer training times. However, the Defence Act of 1967 (Act no. 85 of 1967) omitted the term 'military training' and replaced it with the term 'national service'. Henceforth men would no longer be expected to be trained by the Defence Force and then play the role of a strategic reserve to be called up in an emergency, but during their time in uniform they were available to be used in service as the military saw fit. In practice there was little immediate change in the use of conscripts, but by the mid-1970s national

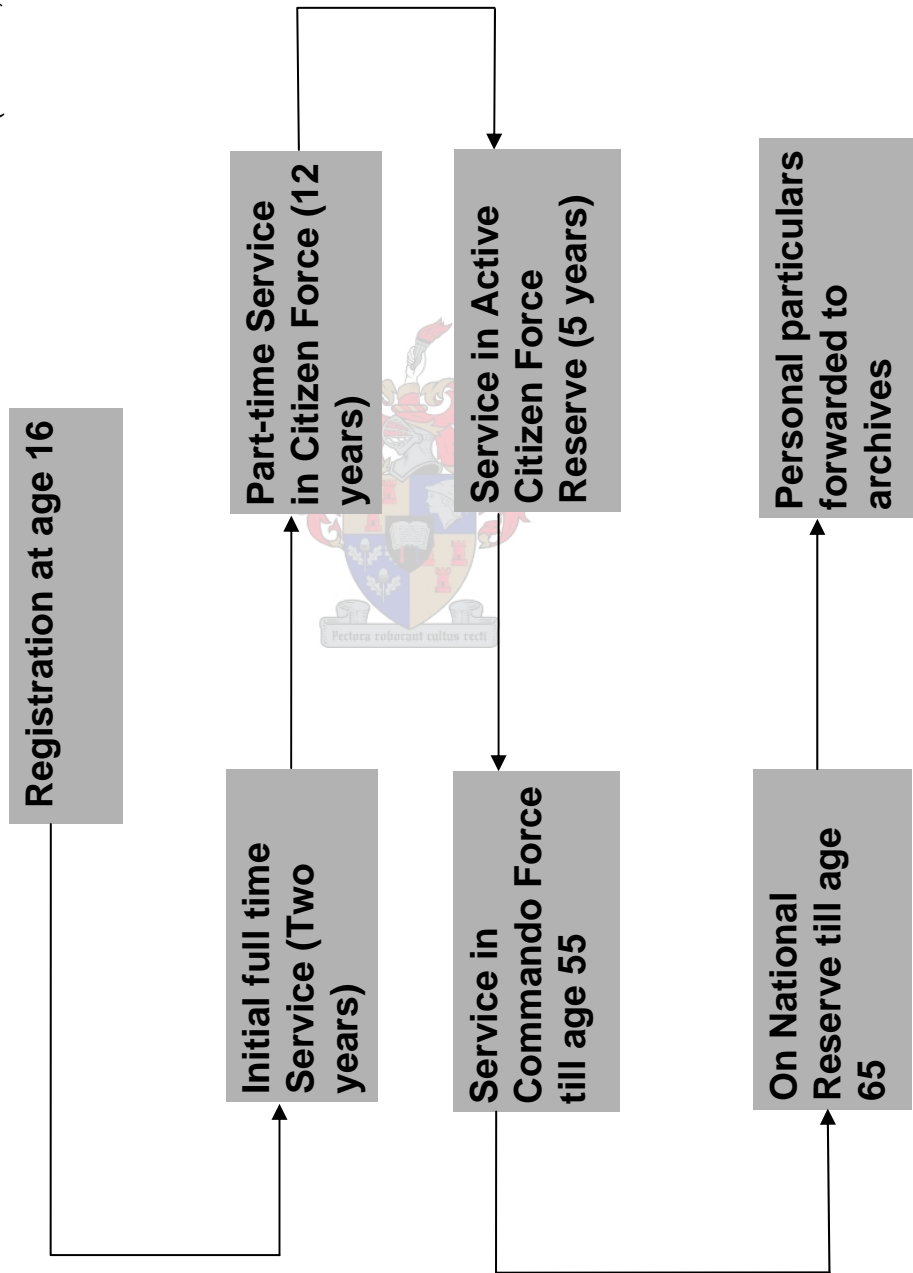
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<sup>18</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step, War Resistance in South Africa* (London, 1989), p.55. NUSAS puts the figure slightly lower, at 16 500, NUSAS, *In Whose Defence? Conscription and the SADF* (Observatory, 1984), p.4.

<sup>19</sup> Sass, 'Union and South African Defence Force', in Cilliers & Reichardt, *About Turn*, p.126.

<sup>20</sup> *Hansard, House of Assembly Debates* (Cape Town, 1967), Vol.19, Col. 2697.

**Typical Defence Force career of a National Serviceman**, as depicted in the SADF publication *Your Guide to National Service* (Pretoria, 1982), p.11.



**Note:** The number of years given in brackets indicates the service requirements at their height.

**TABLE 1**

servicemen were being sent to do their duty in operational areas in Namibia, something that could not have happened under the 'training' legislation.<sup>21</sup>

The process of calling men up changed little with the new legislation. As before, call-ups took place twice per year, with half of the intake reporting in January and the other half in July. To begin with the demands made on conscripts' time under the universal system were the same as under the last years of the ballot system, consisting of an initial training period of nine months followed by camps totalling 90 days over five years, with ten years being spent on the reserve list.

However, from the early 1970s onwards the apartheid state was dealt a series of damaging blows, which greatly increased the security risks to the nation, both real and perceived. In South African occupied Namibia an insurgency in the north of the country proved too large for the Police to handle and from 1972 military units began to be widely deployed in the area, until by 1974 the SADF had fully assumed control of the counter-insurgency effort. The death of Portugal's António de Oliveira Salazar in 1970 and the fall of his right-wing regime four years later led in 1975 to the independence of Mozambique and Angola and the installation of hostile governments in those countries, both of which had previously been part of South Africa's *cordon sanitaire*, and could be relied upon to keep South Africa's enemies distant. Then, in 1976, the Soweto riots and other black unrest within South Africa made it clear that the threat to the apartheid regime came not only from outside but also from within the country's borders. The mandatory UN arms embargo of 1977 further exacerbated the situation by denying South Africa access to the latest weaponry and military technology, and so making her forces more reliant than ever on increased manpower availability.

As South Africa's enemies began to close in around her, so the government began to place increased emphasis on the military and attempt to build up a force capable first of deterring or if needs be defeating any attack on the Republic, by either insurgents or conventional forces. Despite there being calls for a cut in military service in the early 1970s,<sup>22</sup> the government was compelled to respond to the new

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<sup>21</sup> Although there was previously provision for the employment of all SADF members on active service in the *defence* of South Africa, there was no specific legal provision for the employment of conscripts on service overseas.

<sup>22</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 January 1972, discussed calls to cut service from nine to six months for national servicemen. However it commented that the government claimed 'despite public



threats and requirements by increasing the length of conscript service, first in 1972 to an initial period of one year with CF duties of 19 days per year for five years, then in 1977 to a continuous service period of two years and CF camps totalling 240 days over eight years, and then finally in 1982 a Defence Amendment Act trebled CF requirements to 720 days over twelve years, though the initial period of service was unchanged.<sup>23</sup>

Even with these extended service obligations the SADF found itself short of its perceived manpower requirements. Although in 1977 P. W. Botha had 'firmly rejected calls...for national service to be made compulsory for immigrants',<sup>24</sup> by 1984 the government was obliged to pass the South African Citizenship Amendment Act which gave automatic citizenship to all white immigrants, along with all the concomitant privileges and duties, including military service for males aged 18 to 25. The extended terms of service remained in place until late 1989, when President F. W. de Klerk announced a halving of the national service commitments. With the apparent approach of the demise of apartheid and with the armed threat to South Africa receding, national service was officially brought to an end with the last intake reporting for service in July 1992 (see Table 2).

Over the whole of the conscription era the vast majority of men who were called up into the SADF went to do their service in the army.<sup>25</sup> The navy and air force did take national servicemen but required more technical expertise than the army and so were more reliant on their PF members.<sup>26</sup> The South African Medical Service also took conscripts, especially those with any kind of medical training, but compared to the fighting arms of the SADF it was only a small organisation. The army was, from the mid-1970s, by far the most heavily involved in active operations, most of which were manpower intensive and required a continual large supply of men. Indeed the shortage of army personnel meant that during the 1980s many of the naval and air force conscripts were retrained to take on an infantry role to lighten the burden on the army. However, not all men called up for national service went into the SADF. A

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demand for the training period to be cut down from nine to six months, the Defence Force needed all nine months to train young men'.

<sup>23</sup> Sass, 'Union and South African Defence Force', in Cilliers & Reichardt, *About Turn*, p.126; and *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report (7 Volumes, Cape Town, 1998)*, Vol. 4, p.246.

<sup>24</sup> *Daily News*, 1 September 1977.

<sup>25</sup> *Frontline*, December 1985, p.16.

<sup>26</sup> The Navy, for example, had only 2 000 national servicemen out of 7 500 officers and men in 1989. André Wessels, 'The South African Navy During the Years of Conflict in Southern Africa, 1966-89', *Journal for Contemporary History*, Vol. 31, Issue 3, (December 2006), p.284.



**TABLE 2**

**Service Requirements for Conscripts in the South African Defence Force**

Years	Type of Service	Period of continuous initial service	Time spent in Reserve service	Citizen Force service requirements
1952 - 1961	Military Training (Selective)	3 Months	4 Years	3 camps totalling 60 days
1961 - 1967	Military Training (Selective)	9 Months	4 Years	5 camps totalling 90 days
1967 - 1972	National Service (Universal)	9 Months	10 Years	3 camps of 26 days, plus 5 of 12 days
1972 - 1977	National Service (Universal)	12 Months	10 Years	5 camps of 19 days
1977 - 1982	National Service (Universal)	24 Months	10 Years	8 camps of 30 days
1982 - 1989	National Service (Universal)	24 Months	12 Years	720 days spread over annual 30, 60 or 90 day camps
1990 - 1993	National Service (Universal)	12 Months*	12 Years*	360 days spread over annual 30 day camps*

\* While these were the de facto service requirements, they came about as the result of a concession granted by President FW de Klerk rather than a legal change. Legislation still allowed for men to be called-up for an initial two years and 720 days Citizen Force service. Men called up from August 1988 were also granted concessions and not required to complete the full 24 months initial service requirements.

small number each year were, with the men's consent, allocated to the Police for the duration of their service, and performed police reserve duties in much the same way as the SADF servicemen performed their CF camps.<sup>27</sup>

The way in which national servicemen were deployed in the Defence Force over the four decades of compulsory service went through some dramatic changes, and saw conscripts going from supplements to a peacetime military to being the mainstay of a Defence Force that was embroiled in geographically extensive conflict. The changes in the employment of conscripts also caused great changes in the debates surrounding conscription, and each new deployment redefined how conscripts were seen by the general population. The men called up in the earliest waves of conscription were simply trained as soldiers, called up for some short refresher training camps, and then placed on the reserve list to be called up in case of emergency. Early conscription was the government's attempt to have a large potential Defence Force to call upon if needed, without having to go to the expense of maintaining an unnecessarily large peacetime military. As the potential threat to South Africa grew so the government responded by calling up increasingly more men for longer periods, but the idea was still that conscripts provided a mass deterrent for potential conventional aggressors, and that they would only be used in combat if that deterrent was ineffective.

While conventional forces may have been deterred from attacking South Africa, by the early-1970s an insurrection had broken out in northern Namibia, and the SADF found itself embroiled in a conflict it was not entirely prepared for. Namibia had been mandated to South Africa by the League of Nations in 1920 and by the end of the Second World War it was ruled as virtually a fifth province of South Africa. The people of Namibia maintained that the duty of South Africa under the mandate was to administer the territory until it was ready for independence, and by the 1960s there were increasing calls for South Africa to leave Namibia. The South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) was formed in 1959 to campaign for independence, but by 1966 it had concluded that the only way to force South Africa's hand was to engage in armed struggle, and to this end a military wing known as the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) was created.<sup>28</sup> The campaign that began in the mid-1960s was a low intensity insurgency, with small groups of guerrillas attacking

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<sup>27</sup> SADF, *Your Guide to National Service* (Pretoria, 1982), p.16.

<sup>28</sup> Gavin Cawthra, Gerald Kraak, & Gerald O'Sullivan (eds), *War and Resistance, the struggle for Southern Africa as Documented by Resister Magazine* (London, 1994), pp.25-27.

police outposts or committing acts of sabotage. As time went by the SWAPO fighters' tactics evolved little, but the numbers of insurgents greatly increased and the insurrection gained in effectiveness as the SWAPO forces gained in experience.

By the early 1970s it was apparent that the Police and the PF lacked the capacity to deal with the insurrection, and so from 1972 national servicemen began to be extensively used to occupy northern Namibia, with the SADF assuming full responsibility for the area in 1974. This signalled a major shift in the use of national servicemen, as henceforth conscripts were obliged to serve in a theatre of active operations rather than simply be part of a theoretical deterrent. This shift brought new factors into play in the conscription debate, such as it was, and the issue of national service eventually became inextricably linked to the conflict in and occupation of Namibia. Just as the spectre of Vietnam hung over debates on the draft in the USA, so the question of conscription in South Africa became bound to the issue of Namibia.

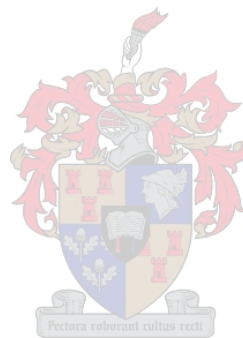
In the early 1980s the dynamics of the debate changed again as the government's grip on internal control of the black population began to slip, and the SADF was called upon to deploy internally to suppress the unrest, meaning that conscripts found themselves posted to black townships in a move widely seen as another facet of racial repression. From this time on the SADF and its conscript soldiers were no longer seen as simply the shield protecting the nation, but instead as a principal pillar of apartheid. The conscription debate now became entangled not only with the issue of the occupation of Namibia, but with the issue of apartheid itself.

The Defence Force of the national service era was a uniquely South African creation blending aspects of both British and Afrikaner traditions. While to begin with the force was most readily associated with English-speaking society, from 1948 the NP government embarked on a process of reforming the military so that by the end of the 1960s it had lost its British veneer and was an Afrikaner dominated and wholly South African force. About half a million conscripts served in the South African military during the compulsory service era.<sup>29</sup> The army constituted the vast majority of the SADF, and the largest part of the army was made up of conscripts completing their

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<sup>29</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Vol. 4, p.224; 'From 1960 until it was scrapped approximately 428 774 people reported for compulsory military service'. Including all men called up in the eight years before 1960 this figure rises to almost 500 000. Magnus Malan on the other hand claims that during the 1970s and 1980s alone 'more than 500 000 young white men were trained...as national servicemen.' Magnus Malan, *My Life With the SA Defence Force* (Pretoria, 2006), p.88.

initial service period. Over two thirds of the military's trained manpower consisted of CF part-time soldiers, although they made up only a small proportion of the men on active duty at any one time. Due to the continually deteriorating security situation, the service required of conscripts changed quite dramatically over the period, going from only a combined four months service in the early 1950s to a total from 1982 of 48 months service spread over some 14 years. The image of the military over the period also changed. While in the early years the military were seen primarily as defenders of the nation, by the mid-1980s the SADF had become seen as defenders of apartheid, an image that inevitably was passed onto the men who filled its ranks.



### 3. Attitudes Towards Service: the Evolution of Resistance

Conscription in apartheid South Africa existed through times of great change and upheaval in the country. Ideas and attitudes that were held at the beginning of the era had been proven invalid by its end, and the country which the last conscripts in the early 1990s served was widely different from that which the conscripts of the 1950s had served. As is to be expected in such a period, attitudes towards military service changed quite dramatically, and this chapter will examine the evolution of those attitudes, and the evolution of opposition to conscription.

Opposition to conscription in South Africa went chronologically through three very general phases. The first phase, running roughly from the system's introduction in 1952 through to the mid-1970s, saw little significant evasion of service and only insignificant protest about the system. When conscription was first introduced, in the ballot system of 1952, there was little public opposition to the move. The controversy and increased rejection of service developed over a number of years, and was not a natural reaction to the system. Even the unprecedented step of imposing universal national service from 1967 aroused little public opposition, and it was not until the events of the mid-1970s and the deployment of conscripts in what were seen as 'unjust war' situations, specifically in Angola and Namibia, that systematic and concerted opposition to conscription began. The most pressing complaints about early conscription were about the lack of provision for conscientious objectors, and the small minority of men who did refuse to serve during this period were almost universally pacifists who rejected service to any temporal authority.

The second phase of resistance ran from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, when increasing numbers of men, about ten percent annually, refused their military duties. Some refused to serve explicitly and publicly, but the majority simply did not report for their service. Other than personal motives, the reasons for opposition in this period tended to have religious roots, as the war the SADF was engaged in was increasingly becoming held as immoral and unjust. However, even then much of the political opposition concentrated on calling for the government to allow men freedom of conscience in choosing whether to render service or not, rather than calling for an end to the system. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s the issue of religious objection, illegal until 1983, was the major talking point concerning conscription, with the first protest organisations such as the Conscientious Objectors Support Group (COSG, formed in 1980) focusing on this issue.

The third phase of conscription resistance began in the early 1980s and it is this phase that most people associate with the national service experience. This phase saw over one in ten men refusing their military duties, and it also saw for the first time men publicly refusing their duties on purely political grounds, in opposition to apartheid as well as to the deployments of the SADF. The opposition to conscription was formalized with the creation in 1983 of the ECC, and during this phase conscription became inextricably linked with opposition to the Border War and with opposition to apartheid itself. While opposition continued to be based on moral grounds, it was no longer purely religious moral grounds as during the late 1970s, but rather linked to demands for a new political dispensation and social justice. The resistance to national service in South Africa that began to increase in this period was not so much a symptom of a society tired of giving its young men to the military, but a symptom of a society increasingly rejecting the unequal social system that the military, and therefore the nation's youth, was being called upon to defend.

The introduction of conscription in the early 1950s was not without its critics, though criticism was not aimed at the concept of conscription, but more at certain aspects of the system, such as the balloting itself. It was generally accepted that some form of compulsory military service was needed, and balloting seemed to some to be the best way to 'choose a fair cross section of recruits from urban and rural areas',<sup>1</sup> though certain people still thought it unfair while others opposed the ballot as it 'impaired army traditions'.<sup>2</sup> However, as few people had any alternative ideas short of abandoning the system and leaving the country almost defenceless or imposing universal service, the ballot was accepted if not particularly well liked. However, by 1967, when the climate was conducive to the imposition of universal service, many people did come out against the ballot, with even Minister of Defence P. W. Botha describing it as 'a system of fortuitous discrimination' that needed to be replaced.<sup>3</sup>

As well as the fact that men were chosen by ballot there were other aspects of early conscription that were not universally popular but still accepted. While the parliamentary Opposition formally supported conscription, the fact that the balloting was predominantly to be done by Afrikaner National Party (NP) supporters and not

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<sup>1</sup> *Pretoria News*, 26 May 1952.

<sup>2</sup> Sir de Villiers Graaff 'there are many of South Africa's former leading military men who believe that the ballot system impairs army traditions'. From a memo on Defence Policy issued by the UP Division of Information and Research, September 1957, p.230. UP archives; Division of Information Subject File; Policy: Defence 1957-1974.

<sup>3</sup> *Hansard, House of Assembly Debates* (Cape Town, 1967), Vol. 19, Col. 2694.

by the English-speaking or more moderate Afrikaans-speaking United Party (UP) supporters who had traditionally dominated the military raised some men's ire. Sir de Villiers Graaff commented 'They refused to fight during World War II. Now they are apparently listing the young South Africans who are to fight during World War III'.<sup>4</sup> The Leader of the Opposition was apparently not amused that those who had never fought for their country should be in a position to compel others to do so.

There was also concern, even in these early years of conscription, that the army might become a NP recruiting ground and that conscripts would be a captive audience for the Nationalists to work on. Even before the system was begun Opposition MPs were receiving letters concerning this, including one which asked for the recruiting age to remain at 21, as '[The Nationalist officers] will politically influence our boys, who will not be of an age yet to withstand that propaganda.'<sup>5</sup>

Apart from such few concerns about the unfairness of the ballot or the military being an increasingly Afrikaner institution, there were not really any great complaints about the new system. The complaints and criticisms that did exist at this time cannot be termed as a rejection of the system, for no serious calls were made to end it. They were simply concerns expressed about the workings of the system and complaints generally fell away as in practice the system was not as bad as some may have feared. Even the concerns about the heightened Nationalist Afrikaner influence were not widely held even in English-speaking society, and nor were they seen to be of more than slight importance, as the UDF continued to be seen until the 1960s at least as an English-speaker dominated force.<sup>6</sup>

The smooth introduction of conscription would also have been helped by the fact that most other Western powers, including the UK and the USA, had a similar system in place and so the imposition on South African would not have seemed anything extraordinary.<sup>7</sup> The UDF had also been woefully undermanned and under-equipped at the beginning of both World Wars and it was recognised by those who took an interest in the Defence Force that a system of compulsory service would reduce the likelihood of South Africa being caught completely unawares again.

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<sup>4</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; Sir de Villiers Graaff Collection; Defence, Acts/Bills.

<sup>5</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; Sir de Villiers Graaff Collection; Defence, Acts/Bills. Letter to Sir de Villiers Graaff dated 19 April 1952.

<sup>6</sup> Rodney Warwick, 'The South African Military under Verwoerd: SADF popularisation amongst the white community, 1960-66', *South African Historical Society Conference*, (UCT, June 2005).

<sup>7</sup> *Hansard* (1961), Vol. 108, Col. 6708.



On the political scene public opposition to the early system of conscription was minimal to nonexistent, as both the governing NP and the Opposition UP held largely the same views on the subject. As an issue conscription held no political capital for the parties, and mention of it was unlikely to gain any votes. It is thus unsurprising that in the General Election manifestos of the major South African political parties from 1948 to 1966, there is no mention of the ballot system and none of any type of compulsory military service.<sup>8</sup> There are references to the need to have a strong defence policy, which would indicate the need for a well manned Defence Force, but there are only extremely oblique references to the actual system of conscription from any of the parties, such as the NP's 1966 promise that it would improve the Defence Force 'by utilizing all means at our disposal' and that 'the Government is ready to do what is required' to ensure security.<sup>9</sup> This is indicative that while the population accepted the system enough for it not to be an issue on which the government could be tackled politically, there was certainly never such positive support for the system for the NP to feel that they could score any political points from having introduced it.

The fact that conscription was accepted does not mean that it was positively liked or that service was seen by individuals as greatly desirable. It is evident from the vocabulary of the time that military service was seen as an imposition; in the 1967 parliamentary debate on the introduction of universal service many speakers called those who were not selected to serve in the ballot as the 'lucky ones who escaped service' or complained about some men being allowed to get off 'scot-free' without serving.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore Mr H. H. Smit, MP for Stellenbosch, read to the house part of a speech made by the retiring General Jacobs, in which the General claimed that 'a big percentage of trainees entered their nine months training in a spirit of resistance'.<sup>11</sup> Also, despite the increasing popularisation of the SADF, it was not a wholly cherished institution. The editorial of the *Star* on 26 January 1968 stated that 'the public is out of touch and only one step away from being out of sympathy [with the SADF]',<sup>12</sup> indicating that in some constituencies the military was held in fairly low esteem. Nonetheless, despite these feelings military service was submitted to by the overwhelming majority of those chosen to serve and it retained a wide if grudging support from the white South African population.

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<sup>8</sup> WA Kleynhans, *SA General Election Manifestos 1910-1981* (Pretoria, 1987), pp.311-420.

<sup>9</sup> Kleynhans, *SA General Election Manifestos*, p.418.

<sup>10</sup> *Hansard* (1967), Vol. 21, Col. 7416 & Col. 7438.

<sup>11</sup> *Hansard* (1967), Vol. 21, Col. 7452.

<sup>12</sup> *Star*, 26 January 1968.

By the time universal service was introduced in 1967 there was little background of resistance to or rejection of military service. The criticisms that existed throughout the selective service years had generally continued to reflect the Afrikaner-English tensions of wider society, or else to remark on the unfairness of the ballot, and there is little evidence that people wished for the system to be scrapped. This is especially the case from the early 1960s onwards, when after Harold Macmillan's 'Wind of Change' speech, the Sharpeville shootings, and the ultimate withdrawal of South Africa from the Commonwealth and the imposition of the non-mandatory UN arms embargo, world opinion began to swing away from South Africa and white society began to realise it could not necessarily rely on its Western allies for support. When the system of universal national service came into force there was therefore little or no outcry from wider society, and nor was there any political parliamentary opposition to speak of. The UP generally gave their support to the overall direction of the Defence Amendment Bills, and when they did disagree with the NP it was only about certain details.<sup>13</sup> The second opposition party, the Progressive Party (PP), had only a lone representative in parliament in Helen Suzman, whose influence there was minimal and who was in any case more concerned with the huge racial divisions in the country than with universal national service among white men.<sup>14</sup>

Some independent groups expressed concern over the proposed universal system, for example the Trade Union Council was 'alarmed at the fact that 33 000 young men will be liable to call-up next year under the new training-for-all programme',<sup>15</sup> but their views were based on economic pragmatism rather than any deep seated opposition to national service. Indeed, little institutional opposition was voiced to the introduction of universal service, and in no way can it be seen as having been rejected by the population at large. When listing the reasons that the NP was losing popular support in 1971 and would possibly fall at the next election, the *Cape Times* omitted to mention conscription at all as a point of dissatisfaction among the general public.<sup>16</sup>

Even young people failed to voice any concerns in the early years of universal service. The National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), described by UP researchers as 'anti-government Establishment, anti-capital, anti-authority, anti-social system, anti-white, anti-parliamentary system, pro-African socialism, pro-total change

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<sup>13</sup> *Hansard* (1967) Vols. 19-21.

<sup>14</sup> Helen Suzman, *In No Uncertain Terms* (Johannesburg, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> UP archives; Division of Information Subject File; Policy: Defence 1957-1974. *Notes for Parliamentary Session 1968; Notes for Defence Group 1*, 5 March 1968, p.16.

<sup>16</sup> *Cape Times*, 9 November 1971.

and entirely revolutionary in outlook', did not mention national service once in a series of seminars about the ills of the nation in 1971,<sup>17</sup> and the Young South Africans at the UP's Transvaal Provincial Congress in the same year found time to express concern about issues of yellow margarine production while neglecting to refer in any way to the military or to national service.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that South African society made an almost seamless transition from selective service to universal service was in part at least attributable to the fact that the initial requirements of service and the sacrifices demanded continued to be comparatively low, with an initial training of nine months being followed by CF requirements of 19 day per year for five years. It is also attributable to the fact that in the final years of 'selective' service the SADF began to call up more and more men until the vast majority of balloted men were required to serve. The legislation creating universal military service that came into force from 1967 was virtually just making *de jure* the *de facto* position in white South Africa from the mid-1960s, and was thus never likely to cause a huge outcry in wider society. Furthermore, South Africa was not involved in a conflict, and indeed had not been since an extremely limited participation in Korea in the early 1950s. Apart from a recent police deployment in Rhodesia and the SADF's restricted role in the 1960 State of Emergency, there were few signs that South African conscripts might actually be called upon to fight. It was also widely believed in white society that a strong Defence Force was needed to oppose or deter any potential threat to the nation from communist inspired revolutionaries and invaders, and that if men were called upon to go into battle it would be against these 'atheistic forces of anarchy'.

Linked to this is the fact that until the mid-1970s the SADF was still seen as an institution concerned with the territorial defence of South Africa, and not as a pillar of the apartheid state. Although in the immediate aftermath of Sharpeville the black leader Chief Albert Luthuli had said 'The army has a new role, not the defence of our borders, but internal security. It is clear...this newly organised force will be turned against us as a last resort',<sup>19</sup> and although Minister of Defence J. J. Fouché had admitted that the suppression of internal disorder was now 'an extremely important

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<sup>17</sup> UP archives; Division of Information and Research; National Union of Students. *Confidential Condensed Memorandum on the Activities of NUSAS*, 1972.

<sup>18</sup> UP archives; Transvaal Provincial Head Office; Congresses (Provincial 1964-1976). 1971 Congress, Young South Africans, Topic 2.

<sup>19</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step, War Resistance in South Africa* (London, 1989), p.13.

role' for the Defence Force,<sup>20</sup> the SADF had in fact quickly faded into the background again once its internal deployments were ended. Anti-apartheid groups had yet to identify the SADF and its conscripts as oppressors, and so were content to ignore them and concentrate on attempting to campaign for political change and a liberalisation of race laws. While some people may have wanted to protest the unfairness of imposing universal national service on a peace time white population, in a state where there was already so much obvious repression and inequality such an argument would not have gained much activist support, as campaigners preferred to devote their time to confronting the massive problems caused by racial divisions rather than the relative inconveniences caused by conscription

In contrast to this widespread acceptance of conscription, one type of resistance which did begin to gain momentum before 1967 was the issue of religious objection. Religious objection, or conscientious objection, was allowed under the King's (from 1952 the Queen's) Regulations that governed the UDF, but when these regulations were replaced by the South African military code in 1957 the provisions for conscientious objection were largely omitted. The only provision that was made was that, at the discretion of the registering officer, men with pacifist convictions may be placed in a non-combat unit within the SADF. Calls began immediately to allow conscientious objection once more, but despite immediate petitions from religious groups to MPs to re-introduce the provisions for conscientious objection it was not catered for in the subsequent Defence Acts or Defence Amendments.<sup>21</sup>

However although calls for the legalisation of conscientious objection presented a challenge to the system, in the latter years of selective service and the early years of universal service the challenge was not particularly strong. During this time objectors were almost without exception members of the pacifist churches whose objection was based on the principle of the rejection of all military service, and in some cases the rejection of any service made to a temporal authority. Universal pacifists and people such as the Jehovah's Witnesses were generally seen as being marginal members of society for their unusual religious beliefs and practices, and their brand of objection held little currency outside of their own congregations. Furthermore, as the SADF was not involved in any type of conflict and was not widely identified with racial oppression, many people with strong religious convictions could reconcile

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<sup>20</sup> *Hansard* (1961), Vol. 106, Col. 1582.

<sup>21</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; Douglas E Mitchell Collection; Military Affairs. Letter DE Mitchell MP to the Religious Society of Friends in Southern Africa, dated 25 May 1956.

themselves with playing a non-combat role within the Defence Force and therefore avoid unpleasant clashes with the military authorities. The military authorities were also not initially particularly harsh towards objectors; before the SADF began to be deployed in Namibia in 1972, objectors were normally tried for disobeying a lawful command, which carried a 90 day Detention Barrack sentence as opposed to an 18 month sentence for failing to report or refusing to serve.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, religious objectors continually caused considerably more problems to the government than their numbers warranted, and as the years went by the complaints on this issue grew louder. Across the political spectrum, though mostly from the political left and from English congregation churches, complaints began to appear about the treatment of pacifist objectors, who were seen as being unjustly imprisoned merely for having strong religious convictions. As an indication that the conscientious objection debate was growing wider than involving only the pacifist objectors themselves, repeated requests were sent to the government from church groups, civil rights groups, and individual members of the public, asking for provision to be made for men with sincere religious scruples to be allowed either exemption or to be permitted to perform their service in a civilian capacity unattached to the SADF.<sup>23</sup> In 1971 even the UP, which usually took a hard line on security, added their voice to the calls,<sup>24</sup> and in 1972 Helen Suzman was moved to speak in parliament on behalf of objectors, despite admitting that she 'held no brief for Jehovah's Witness'.<sup>25</sup>

The debate over religious objection continued to pick up pace through the 1970s. A Defence Amendment in 1974 not only failed to make concessions on the issue, but instead increased penalties for objectors, a move which caused some dissatisfaction and provoked an upsurge of demands for change, including a letter from the Civil Rights League which said that while they reserved judgement on the moral grounds for national service, they saw the lack of provision for conscientious objection as 'a serious invasion of the basic human right of freedom of conscience'.<sup>26</sup> From the mid-

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<sup>22</sup> CIIR, *War and Conscience in South Africa, the Churches and Conscientious Objection* (London, 1983), p.26.

<sup>23</sup> For example pleas from Women for Peaceful Change Now, UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection, National Service Correspondence 1979-1984. Letter to Raw dated 9 July 1980.

<sup>24</sup> UP archives; Division of Information; Subject File; Policy, Defence 1957-1974. Statement by WV Raw MP, Chairman, UP Defence Group, dated 16 June 1971.

<sup>25</sup> Suzman, *In No Uncertain Terms*, pp.85-87.

<sup>26</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; Sir de Villiers Graaff Collection; Defence, Acts/Bills. Memorandum submitted to the Select Committee on the Defence Further Amendment Bill 1974 by the Civil Rights League, September 1974.

1970s until 1983 the issue of religious objection became the most pressing concern surrounding the national service system. However, in the late 1960s when universal service appeared, such worries were still on the horizon and although religious objection as an issue in South Africa had been born, it was as yet still in its infancy and posed few problems for the Defence Force or the government.

The first time that the issue of conscription as a whole was brought into the mainstream social and political arena for debate was in the mid-1970s, when in 1974 the South African Council of Churches (SACC) produced the Hammanskraal Declaration, called by one commentator the 'first salvo of the anti-conscription movement',<sup>27</sup> a document which questioned the morality of service to the apartheid state. Before this document, objection to military service on 'political' rather than simply religious universal pacifist grounds had not been an issue. The SACC declaration changed that view, if only inasmuch as it made white society aware that there was a debate to be had about conscription. The fact that this declaration came over twenty years after the first men were conscripted is telling; the opposition was not to men being conscripted into a military formation, but to men being made to engage in acts at odds with their conscience once in that formation.

The resistance that began to slowly build following the Hammanskraal Declaration was based not on the precept that military service was immoral, but that service to the apartheid state was immoral. In order to fully understand the nature of the vocal resistance to conscription in South Africa it must be understood that the resistance to national service was almost never about opposing the system per se, but about opposing the institution of apartheid which the system of national service was increasingly being seen in some circles as supporting. This may seem like a fine distinction, but it is a distinction nonetheless and one that set the tone for the nature of almost all public protest against South African national service.

From the mid-1970s onwards there was a discernable and fairly well documented increase in resistance to conscription, mainly based on a rejection of the now internationally denounced policies of the NP government that national service was contributing towards implementing, but also in part based on the continuing saga over religious objection to service. The increased SADF involvement in Namibia and the increasing role the SADF was being called upon to play in defending South Africa

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<sup>27</sup> Merran Willis Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign 1983-1988: A Study of White Extra Parliamentary Opposition to Apartheid* (MA Thesis, UNISA, 2002), p.24.



from the militant wings of the liberation movements were condemned internationally, and it was feared by some that forcing young men to take part in the military system would make them international outlaws.<sup>28</sup> The SADF as an institution began to attract criticism from some quarters, and this criticism inevitably extended to the system that brought men into its ranks. The Hammanskraal Declaration itself did little immediate harm to the conscription system, except to give public moral justification to objection, though the government did respond by making it illegal to incite anybody to resist their military obligations, and legislated for harsher penalties for objectors. Much of the political effect of the Declaration was further removed by the criticism it attracted from across the political board for inciting people to resist their lawful duties and for threatening to undermine the defence of the nation.<sup>29</sup>

However, the timing of the Declaration did coincide with an increased dissatisfaction with the workings of apartheid, and with the beginnings of a more vocal opposition to the government. In parliament the opposition Progressive Party (PP) began to more vociferously criticise government policy on issues avoided by the UP, which included the issue of national service. The PP, which held only a single parliamentary seat from 1961 to 1974, gained seven seats at the latter year's General Election, and as the Progressive Federal Party (PFP) in 1977 gained seventeen seats, and was able to reach a wide constituency with its arguments. The PP and later the PFP were in fact continually split on issues surrounding the military and security, with some members such as Harry Schwarz identified as 'hawks' and others such as Helen Suzman identified as 'doves'.<sup>30</sup> The party was never really against conscription itself, although they frequently expressed misgivings about the way that conscripts were being used and called for the government to 'come clean' about the SADF's incursions into neighbouring states.<sup>31</sup> Despite the fact that national service itself was generally kept off the PP or PFP agenda, their opposition to the government on aspects of the emerging security discourse provided a background for others to legitimately stimulate or keep alive debate on the topic.

However, parliamentary politics was not the only force at play in kindling debate on issues of security and defence. The Soweto riots and subsequent unrest of 1976 had

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<sup>28</sup> The 1977 Geneva Protocol defined 'practices of apartheid' as War Crimes. Gavin Cawthra, Gerald Kraak & Gerald O'Sullivan (eds), *War and Resistance, South Africa Reports: The Struggle for South Africa as Documented by Resister Magazine* (London, 1994), p.191.

<sup>29</sup> Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*, p.27; and CIIR, *War and Conscience*, pp.30-32.

<sup>30</sup> Suzman, *In No Uncertain Terms*, p.181.

<sup>31</sup> Ray Swart, *Progressive Odyssey Towards a Democratic South Africa* (Cape Town, 1991).



a profound effect on public opinion both in South Africa and abroad. For some whites it was confirmation that black agitation threatened to spill over unless strong forces were maintained to check it, and for these people continued national service was imperative. For others Soweto and the subsequent rioting indicated only that the government was determined to control black aspirations was not averse to using force to do so, and that the strong Defence Force was a powerful tool for racial oppression for the government to turn to should the Police ever lose control.

The continued occupation of Namibia, where from 1972 the SADF began to be extensively deployed, and the rumoured incursions into Angola further stimulated unease in some circles that conscripts might be being used not to defend the territorial integrity of the nation but to uphold the NP's morally wrong policies. In addition the issue of conscientious objection had not gone away and if anything resistance to the system over this issue gained momentum in the latter half decade of the 1970s. In late 1979 there was the highly publicised trial of pacifist Peter Moll, followed a few months later by that of his cousin Richard Steele, which caused some sensation and some embarrassment to the government, which frequently claimed that the SADF was trying to uphold 'Western Christian Civilisation', while fervent Christians were being imprisoned by the military for their beliefs. Steele himself pointed out this contradiction of thinking, saying 'One of the ironies is that some of the officers [in the Detention Barracks] used to say to me "you know we're fighting to defend religious freedom." And there I was sitting in jail because of my religious beliefs! It was absolutely pathetic!'<sup>32</sup>

These trials and the publicity they caused were symptomatic of a growing feeling of unease in wider society, and especially English-speaking society, at the lack of provision for conscientious objection in a situation that made many consciences uneasy. In isolation none of these factors caused much more than a ripple of dissatisfaction with conscription, but taken together with the public announcements such as the Hammanskraal Declaration, the political opposition to the government's security discourse, and the increased unease with the deployment of conscripts, the stage was set for the wider opposition to conscription that was seen in the 1980s.

When conscription is reported as being widely opposed, it is the opposition of the 1980s that is referred to. From the late 1970s onwards the concerns about national

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<sup>32</sup> Julie Frederikse, *South Africa A Different Kind of War* (Johannesburg, 1986), p.82

service began to multiply, with controversy growing around SADF deployments and with the length of service required by young men rising, and the next decade saw the creation and proliferation of a number of anti-conscription movements, as well as a definite increase in refusals to serve from members of the public. The key year that saw a definite change in the composition of conscription resistance was 1983, which on the one hand saw the culmination of the campaign for pacifist conscientious objection in Section 72D(1)a of the Defence Amendment Act which gave limited grounds for religious objection,<sup>33</sup> and on the other hand saw the birth of a new anti-conscription movement in the ECC, which was to become the largest and most effective organisation in keeping the conscription debate alive.

When the NP government legalised conscientious objection in 1983, they hoped to bring to an end the most controversial aspect of the system up until that point and remove the grounds for complaint from many campaigners. However, the debate over conscientious objection did not end but instead mutated and changed focus. From 1983, there was the possibility to apply to be exempted from service on strictly religious grounds. Applicants would have their case examined, and would be given one of four classifications; total exemption from national service requirements, service outside of the SADF, non-combatant status within an SADF unit, or rejection of the application and therefore normal military duties. It was made clear that while exemption from service on religious grounds was permitted, the Board for Religious Objection would grant such exemptions only to extremely devout members of the 'Peace Churches' who were committed not only to universal pacifism but who rejected all service to the state in any capacity (Jehovah's Witnesses for example), and any other objectors, who also had to have strong Christian pacifist beliefs, would be required to serve the government in some capacity.

This situation was unacceptable to many people. From 1983 calls could be increasingly heard for an expansion of the grounds for religious objection, and for the provision of alternative community service to be provided for those who specifically did not want to serve the *apartheid* military, and whose objection was therefore more 'political'. These demands had been made before, such as in 1979 when a group of students wrote to the SADF saying that while they refused military service they would happily act as medics on the border in a civilian capacity,<sup>34</sup> but after the legalisation

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<sup>33</sup> Foundation for Peace and Justice, *Facing Prison, a Handbook for Conscientious Objectors* (Bellville, 1988), p.10.

<sup>34</sup> Department of Defence Documentation Centre (DDDC), Pretoria, Chief of Staff Personnel

of conscientious objection they became more voluble and urgent. The Chief of the Defence Force was bombarded with offers throughout the mid-1980s from civilian groups asking for conscripts with scruples to be allowed to do their service with them,<sup>35</sup> and by the time of the Gleeson Report on Conscientious Objection in 1991, 'alternative service' was the standard rallying cry for those wishing to see national service reformed.<sup>36</sup>

All such offers and requests for alternative service were refused by the authorities, both because it was statutorily irregular and because many of the people who now called themselves conscientious objectors were in fact objecting to service for political rather than religious reasons. A subtle change in this regard can be discerned in conscientious objection during the 1980s, as increasingly men began to apply for objector status on the basis of political rather than religious beliefs. Such men were a minority and although they tended to generate a good deal of publicity their views were not commonly held and even less commonly acted upon. Nevertheless they caused a shift in the public perception of conscientious objection, and thus in opposition to national service, by explicitly linking moral resistance to conscription with political objection to apartheid. Such people were representative of the views held by the protest organisations such as the ECC, which from 1983 also began to operate and caused another evolution in the protest against conscription.

The change in opposition to national service that occurred with the creation of the ECC was not just cosmetic, but entailed a whole change in attitude. Previous to the organisation's formation, most of the protest against conscription had been disjointed, and had often centred on the need for religious objection rather than tackling the system as a whole. The birth of the ECC saw the creation of a campaign that not only systematically opposed national service and the SADF, but that also turned complaint and relatively mild protest against the system into a reasonably well publicised struggle. The impact of the ECC is often overestimated, but they did have a considerable impact on the overall scene of resistance to conscription, even if the impact of their campaign on wider society was much more limited. It is true that the

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(Group 6), Box 1884, File ref. 107/7/5, *Uitstel/Vrystel van Diensplig, Geloofsbesware (Postponement/Exemption from Military Service, Religious Objections)*, (09/08/77-08/10/82). Letter to Major Beyers, 7 February 1979.

<sup>35</sup> DDDC, Chief of the Defence Force (Group 2), Box 9D, File ref. 107/7/5, vol. 1, *Gewetensbesware (Conscientious Objections)*, (10/07/84-18/12/86).

<sup>36</sup> DDDC, Verslae (Reports) (Group 2), Box 371, File ref. 97/1, *Report on Conscientious Objection – I.R. Gleeson Verslag (report)*, (30 July 1991) Also; Verslae (Reports) (Group 2), Box 371, File ref. 97/2, *Centre for Inter-group Studies – Workshop on Alternative National Service*, (October 1989).

campaign was often simply part of the wider anti-war and anti-militarization movement rather than solely dedicated to fighting national service, but its creation did lead to a more public face being put on objection to military service with pamphlets, newsheets and posters expressing their views being reasonably widely distributed.<sup>37</sup> The organisations that were created to oppose conscription, such as the ECC, posed a unique liberal threat to the apartheid government by challenging them on a purely white issue,<sup>38</sup> whereas almost all of the other liberal opposition that existed concentrated on the damage being done by the government's racial policies.

However, it was exactly this fact which meant that the anti-conscription movement often lacked support and manpower for its campaigns, for liberal-radical activists were more concerned with launching their assaults on apartheid rather than on an issue that affected only whites. Campaigns against conscription in the 1980s were often not so much concerned with defending the rights of the white conscripts, but rather with opposing or even disabling the Defence Force that was seen as almost the last major barrier to a black majority government. It was for example part of the ANC strategy that 'White anti-apartheid movements must be created to oppose compulsory military service and the war in Angola.'<sup>39</sup>

A problem for anti-conscription campaigners was that they had to gain the support of a public that was continually exposed to the government's security discourse about the military threat to the Republic, and which widely believed the ANC and other liberation movements to be enemies. To oppose the SADF or its military potential was seen by large sections of society as unpatriotic and even treasonous. Liberal political groups that wished to achieve or maintain a level of widespread public sympathy would therefore be loath to engage too deeply in the debate surrounding the Defence Force, lest they be counted among the country's enemies.<sup>40</sup>

The vocal anti-conscription movement that began to gather pace during the 1980s was based on the twin injustices of the SADF in Namibia, and then from 1984 the SADF in the townships. The internal deployment was particularly important as it attributed to the Defence Force a direct role against the agitation of the racial

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<sup>37</sup> *Images of Defiance: South African Resistance Posters* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Johannesburg, 2004), pp.126-37.

<sup>38</sup> See Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*.

<sup>39</sup> Hilton Hamman, *Days of the Generals* (Cape Town, 2001), p.124.

<sup>40</sup> Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, ed. Dene Smuts, *The System and The Struggle, Reform, Revolt and Reaction in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1989), p.124.

majorities, and was a factor that led to the now almost universally held belief that the role of the SADF was to uphold apartheid and racial oppression. Increasing numbers of young men began to feel very uneasy about service in the SADF, so much so that there was a tacit understanding amongst officers that where possible men with objections would not be forced to go on township duty.<sup>41</sup>

It can be claimed that the SADF troops were in fact more accepted in the townships than the police, as they were considered even by their opponents to be 'more moderate and disciplined', while the police were 'hard line and undisciplined'.<sup>42</sup> Some township residents were also apparently eager to have the protection of the military in their areas.<sup>43</sup> However, this was the exception rather than the rule. The troops themselves often did not feel comfortable with either crowd control work for which they were not properly trained, nor with the tactics of the police units to which they were attached.<sup>44</sup> There were also some cases of conscripts abusing their power to inflict degradation on township residents. Although the SADF could point to instances where troops were welcomed, the occupation of the townships was a humanitarian and public relations disaster, leading to a drop in sympathy from all parts of the population and also the acquisition of the uncontested label of racial oppressors, which had not particularly previously been the case.<sup>45</sup> The SADF presence in the townships was resented by both those who lived there and by the men sent to patrol the areas, and the Institute of Race Relations believed the role of the SADF in moderating police brutality was 'not a very significant factor'.<sup>46</sup> Calling for troops to leave the townships eventually became a major campaigning point of the anti-conscription movements. The opposition to township duty from conscripts can be overestimated, as many men showed mainly indifference to their deployment, but township duty was far more widely resented than border duty.

While the anti-conscription campaigns gained some prestige and publicity, there were other pressing problems facing the Defence Force in the 1980s. What concerned the government and the SADF most was not so much the vitriolic attacks

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<sup>41</sup> Annette Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (London, 1996), p.177.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Graaf (ed), *Hawks and Doves, the Pro- and Anti-conscription Press in South Africa* (Durban, 1988), p.7.

<sup>43</sup> Barry Fowler (ed.), *Sentinel Projects*, <<http://www.geocities.com/sadfbok/bgtoc.html>>, accessed 01/10/2006, 'Extract from Mother's letter of 2/5/1990'.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Wouter Pretorius, (Uniondale, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, ed. Dene Smuts, *The System and the Struggle, Reform, Revolt and Reaction in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1989), pp.88-89.

<sup>46</sup> South African Institute of Race Relations, 'Conscription and Race Relations: the Institute States its Point of View', *Race Relations News*, (March/April 1986), p.7.

from the anti-war groups, who they were generally able to semi-effectively muzzle with censorship legislation or ultimately banning orders, but the numbers of men actually refusing to report for their service. This phenomenon cannot be divorced from the existence of campaigns that either explicitly or unofficially urged men to consider rejecting service, but the majority of such objectors were unaffiliated to anti-conscript groups. Nonetheless the campaigns that began were undoubtedly created due to an increasing awareness that conscription was a topic that the public was beginning to be more willing to debate rather than just accept as it had previously, and the men refusing to serve were given a form of social legitimacy, albeit limited, by the existing movements. However men also had other more personal motives to avoid service than those presented by the protest organisations (see chapter 5), and the rise in men failing to report for duty began as service requirements increased during the late 1970s, that is before any anti-conscription organisations existed.

It is often quoted that Defence Minister Magnus Malan and various members of the military hierarchy admitted at different times that during the 1980s as many as one man in four failed to report for duty,<sup>47</sup> and subsequent refusals to release figures of draft evaders led to speculation that the SADF had something to hide. While the figure of one man in four is probably an overestimate reflecting only certain years or call ups, during the 1980s a significant minority of conscripts rejected the system in the most emphatic terms, simply by not showing up for their service. Some lived on in South Africa, usually at a different address than the Defence Force records showed so as to avoid arrest, though a large number also took more drastic steps and emigrated.

Exact numbers of refusals to serve are not readily available, mainly due to the Defence Force's refusal to release accurate figures and continual confusion over refusals and deferments. Over the entire period, approximately 30 000 men annually were called up for basic training. If one in four men refused to serve, this would give an annual figure of some 7 500 draft-dodgers, which is undoubtedly a gross overestimate. If, as was claimed by Malan and the SADF, half of the men who did not show were merely temporary defaulters,<sup>48</sup> this figure can be revised to 3 750 men per year. Frederikse puts the figures of draft-dodgers at 4 000 annually, though she

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<sup>47</sup> The Economist, 23 July 1988, v308 n7560 p.40, *The ones who won't go to war*; Also 'CATO', 'Apartheid Armed Forces in Crisis', *The African Communist*, No. 116, (1989), p.29.

<sup>48</sup> *Star*, 30 July 1988.



does not say where this figure comes from nor what period it represents.<sup>49</sup> In January 1987 the South African Army Non-Effective Troops Section, which was set up in 1983, indicated that they were concerned with tracing about 14 000 men, again meaning that about 3 750 men per year since 1983 had not shown up for service.<sup>50</sup> Overall during the latter half decade of the 1980s, somewhat more than ten percent of men annually refused to obey their call up into the SADF for basic training.<sup>51</sup> This represented a large and undeniable rejection of national service by sections of South African society, and is indicative of the great changes in public opinion that had taken place over the two decades from the inception of universal service in 1967.

A small minority of men during the 1980s made very public refusals to serve in the Defence Force, and there were a series of much publicised trials over their stands. While most men unwilling to serve in the SADF simply did not show up for service and were therefore guilty of the lesser charge of 'failing to report for duty', a few others publicly declared that they would not serve and so were guilty of 'refusing to serve', a charge that from 1983 carried a maximum six-year prison term.<sup>52</sup> Men such as Dr Ivan Toms, Charles Yeats, David Bruce, and Philip Wilkinson drummed up a good deal of interest in their cases, and used the platforms they had created to launch scathing attacks on the SADF and NP policies. Public reaction to the men was widely split, with some people offering support and empathy with their stand and others berating the men as cowards and traitors.



The public response to such men is a good way of judging the public's support for the system of national service. The fact that both positive and very negative reactions greeted objectors to conscription is indicative not only of the fact that in the 1980s there was a growing feeling that conscription was wrong, but also that there was a continued feeling in some quarters that conscription was entirely necessary and that to refuse was to betray South Africa. Indeed, even the moderately liberal opposition New Republic Party (NRP) espoused this view, publicly stating in 1984 'in our opinion conscription is a necessity at the present time. It is a dereliction of duty for people to

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<sup>49</sup> Julie Frederikse, *South Africa, A Different Kind of War* (Johannesburg, 1986), p.82.

<sup>50</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step, War resistance in South Africa* (London, 1989) pp.61-62.

<sup>51</sup> A rate of 10% of men not turning up for service can also be inferred from Nathan, who says that a 50% refusal rate in 1985 would mean a 500% increase on previous years, thus meaning that previous years saw about 10% refusals. Laurie Nathan, "'Marching to a Different Beat", a history of the End Conscription Campaign', in Jacklyn Cock & Laurie Nathan (eds), *War and Society, The Militarization of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1989), p.313.

<sup>52</sup> Foundation for Peace and Justice, *Facing Prison*, p.11.



call for the abolition of conscription right now.'<sup>53</sup> However the trials of the 1980s and the publicity they attracted, both positive and negative, do point to the fact that there was an increasing mentality in white society that resistance to conscription was valid, and that it was no longer the preserve of a few pacifists, 'cowards' or 'traitors' but was an issue for the whole of society. The limited public support given to objectors further morally justified their stand, and without a doubt encouraged others to follow in their footsteps. The quasi-hero status awarded to objectors by sections of the media proved inspirational to other young idealists, who maybe did not consider the full implications of taking on the SADF and the six year prison term that may follow.<sup>54</sup>

During the last decade of compulsory service the movement to oppose conscription, and active opposition itself, was highly evident in South Africa. It was not necessarily representative of the whole of white society, as objectors and resisters tended to be young English speaking liberals, but it was nonetheless evident. Afrikaner society as a rule was much less tolerant of draft-dodgers and of campaigns such as the ECC, though there were a number of Afrikaners who were involved in resisting conscription. The Afrikaans University of Stellenbosch is an example of the splits that occurred in Afrikaner circles, as a number of students attempted to set up a local ECC branch only to be frustrated by their more conservative peers, and finally banned from campus by the university authorities. It cannot be doubted that the vast majority of resistance to national service came in the last decade of the system, as the SADF was increasingly directly used to support apartheid policies and to wage a war of destabilisation on neighbouring countries.

A potentially major coup for the anti-conscription lobby came in 1988 when the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), previously a stalwart of the Afrikaner Establishment and a proponent of the security discourse, made a public statement in its official paper to the effect that the war in Angola was maybe not justified and that South Africa should consider withdrawing.<sup>55</sup> Little could have done more to strengthen the hand of the conscientious objection movement, or to undermine Afrikaner confidence in the righteousness of their cause, though fortunately for the government and unfortunately for anti-conscription campaigners this view was not widely announced

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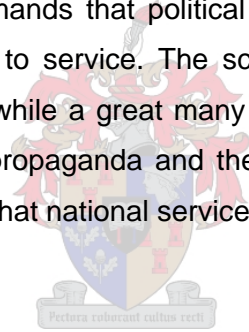
<sup>53</sup> UP Archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; Defence General 1985/86. NRP statement sent to Die Burger, Argus, and Cape Times, 21 November 1984.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Yeats, *Prisoner of Conscience* (London, 2005), p.17 and pp.56-57, Yeats admits that he saw Moll and Steele as examples to follow; also CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.83, Richard Steele confesses 'it was far more difficult than I anticipated'.

<sup>55</sup> The Economist, 23 July 1988, Vol. 308 No. 7560 p.40, *The ones who won't go to war*.

by the DRC or its clergy. In general, mainstream Afrikaner society continued to the end to be receptive to the government's calls for men to defend the nation.

Over the period of compulsory military service in apartheid South Africa, opposition to conscription evolved from limited, superficial, and generally muted complaints mainly from the English community about Afrikaner dominance or the unfairness of the ballot in the early 1950s, to protest campaigns and significant evasion of service by the mid-1980s. Vocal opposition to military service was intricately linked to opposition to the deployment and use of the Defence Force, and as the SADF was increasingly seen as sporting the political colours of the NP and supporting their policies so opposition grew. However, this opposition was generally limited to those who did not care for the NP, and to those who rejected the policies of apartheid. Much of the protest over the conscription era was centred on calls for men of conscience to be excused military duties. Initially such calls focused on the need for a legal system of religious objection, though when this was finally granted protest continued and evolved into demands that political as well as religious scruples be grounds for legalised objection to service. The scale of the opposition should not however be overestimated, for while a great many people may have been unhappy with conscription, government propaganda and the security discourse continued to convince much of white society that national service was an unfortunate necessity.



#### 4. The Acceptance of Conscription

Despite much being made of opposition and resistance to conscription in South Africa, over the whole compulsory service era only a small minority of the men eligible for service actually refused their military duties. The great majority of men fulfilled their military commitments to the state, and this chapter will discuss why the men did so and how the SADF kept its ranks filled despite increasing opposition.

It has often been stated that the government offered harsh penalties for those who refused to serve, and the choice of the conscript has been quoted as a choice between prison, exile, and the army.<sup>1</sup> This may have been the case for some of the conscripts, but for most this was not a choice that had to be made. For the vast majority of young men eligible for conscription in apartheid South Africa, service was not something to be debated but was simply something that had to be done. For many it was in a sense a rite of passage, the transition from boyhood into manhood. There was a sense for some of patriotic duty, of a service that had to be rendered to protect the country from its ever more powerful enemies, while for yet others it was seen not as an onerous duty but as a privilege to be able to serve their country as their forefathers had done. Often it was simply that there was no real reason not to do service, or that the consequences of refusal were too high.

For most young men the reasons for serving in the SADF were not simply nationalism, or anti-communism, or fear of reprisals, but a combination of many factors. For all conscripts a lifetime of anti-communist propaganda and later a government security discourse that underlined the necessities of service played a part. Some served in the SADF willingly, others less so. Some served with pride, others with a growing sense of shame. Yet all served, for reasons as diverse and complicated as the individuals themselves. Many of the assertions made in this chapter are generalisations, and do not always apply to everyone equally. As another researcher into the military found, 'one can safely say that for every general statement about military life there will be at least one individual to whom it does not apply.'<sup>2</sup> With the possible exception of the propaganda fed to youths throughout their lives, none of the motivations mentioned were evident in all men, and maybe none of the motivations in isolation can explain why so many thousands of men did their national service. Taken as a whole however they do show how a generation or more

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<sup>1</sup> *Die Burger*, 30 October 2006, letter by Anton Steenkamp.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Jolly, *Military Man, Family Man: Crown Property?* (London, 1987), p.viii.

of South African school leavers were coerced, cajoled, encouraged and groomed to give years of their lives in service of the state.

The question of how men are persuaded to conform to the requirements of compulsory military service in any society is necessarily a complex one that no-one will ever be able to answer truly satisfactorily, simply due to the diversity of opinions that such a mass of different men must inevitably hold. The question of how men in such a convoluted society as was South Africa's could be brought into service is even more complicated. It involves not only the attitudes of individuals, their political persuasions, moral codes, and their hopes and ambitions for future life, but it must also involve the collective psyche of the whole nation and society. The societal view on military service is crucial to how men will feel about performing it. Basically, if society is set against the military, then men will feel they are justified in refusing to serve. If society believes the military to be an absolute necessity, then most young men having come through that society's education system will share that view, and many of those who do not will feel a great deal of peer pressure to conform and do their service in any case. However, no society is generally either totally for or totally against the military, and so elements of both of the above scenarios are found. South Africa is no exception to this, though the overall social mindset in South Africa was often different for the English-speaking and Afrikaner societies and also sometimes different in separate geographical areas.



On a broad scale, it is a well documented psychological phenomenon, known as 'normative influence',<sup>3</sup> that in any society the majority of people will obey the structures of authority, even if they have misgivings. Stanley Milgram<sup>4</sup> is one of the more well-known researchers into this area of psychology, and was responsible for a series of experiments to examine why people obey unpopular or immoral commands, with a view to specifically understanding the reasons behind the compliance of Germans with some of the obviously wrong policies of the Nazi party. Through his experiments, Milgram found that 'if commands of a potentially harmful or destructive sort are to be perceived as legitimate they must occur within some sort of institutional structure. But it is clear from the study that it need not be a particularly reputable or distinguished institution.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Don Foster, Paul Haupt, & Marésa De Beer, *The Theatre of Violence, Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict* (Cape Town, 2005), p.57.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (London, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, pp.69-70.

The results of Milgram's experiments, which involved ordinary members of the public being persuaded to inflict huge levels of pain on others in the name of a 'good cause', cannot of course be entirely translated into the situation of military service in apartheid South Africa. They do, however, help to demonstrate that within an institutional environment people will comply with orders even if they believe them to be wrong or suspect, simply because a person in authority tells them they must. There is no threat of punishment nor is any particular incentive offered, it is simply that a person who has unquestionable authority issues the command. When the government therefore ordered all men to report for military service, the majority did so simply because of the nature of the authority which issued the orders.

The level of obedience or compliance to be expected is dependant on the received view that exists of the institution that is giving the orders. Milgram further stated that 'our compliance with the imperatives of others is tied to particular institutions and locales in our day-to-day activities',<sup>6</sup> indicating that the more commonplace the authority the more likely it is to be obeyed. In the case of a government, obedience is as a rule endemic. The legislation governments produce and the duties they impose are generally unquestioningly obeyed by the public, and so in South Africa it would be expected that whether or not other motivations existed, the majority of the population would comply with military service requirements.

The level of government authority did change over the years that conscription was in force, and it is partly the diminishment of their moral authority which made widespread resistance to conscription possible. When conscription was first introduced during the 1950s the government's authority in the white population was unquestioned, but by the 1980s it had lost the battle for the moral high ground and was held in varying degrees of contempt by certain sectors both within and without the white population. Nonetheless the government retained enough authority to get most unwilling men into uniform. One conscript who served from 1988-90 admitted to being a committed opponent of the NP and to believing that national service was a waste of time, but he still served simply because it was his legal obligation.<sup>7</sup>

The authority of the government to impose conscription was helped by the fact that society as a whole tended to regard military service as a necessity that should be performed. By the 1960s military service and the Defence Force in which it was

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<sup>6</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, p.68.

<sup>7</sup> Personal Correspondence with Stewart Kramm, (email correspondence, 2007).

rendered was becoming more acceptable to the whole spectrum of white South African society. Military service seemed to have entered a stage where it was socially acceptable to both Englishman and Afrikaner,<sup>8</sup> and yet it had not yet acquired the stigma that was later attached to it for being the instrument of the government's racial repression. In this environment there seemed to most of society to be little or no reason, on a broad scale, for a man not to do his service. Some individuals may have good reasons not to serve, but in general service was seen as a positive thing, or at worst something that could not really do any harm. In these circumstances it is unsurprising that the vast majority of men reported for service without protest.

The lack of parliamentary opposition to the phenomenon further helped society accept that the government had instituted conscription because it was necessary for the national good. This can partially explain the lack of any real opposition to universal conscription when it arrived in 1967, as society expected men to obey their government and serve their country. There is little sense that people were actively glad that universal service had been instituted, but there was a definite acceptance of the new system. As well as the effects of 'normative influence'-style obedience to authority, the social attitude of the time was not to try to avoid service but to simply go and do it.

Much of the reason that compliance was a social norm, and that it remained so despite the later vociferous national and international criticism of the SADF and the system it was widely seen to be supporting, was that years of anti-communist education and government propaganda began to take effect, and the government security discourse was commonly accepted by the wider society. Government propaganda played a massive role in getting men into the military. It was not so much the propaganda aimed at the men about to be conscripted themselves but the fact that virtually from birth white South Africans were subject to the government discourse, that helped most men to join the SADF without demur.

Children were the primary focus of the government's propaganda efforts. They provided a captive audience and were receptive to what they were taught in school and in church was their duty; that is to defend Christian Civilisation in South Africa against the atheistic communist aggressor. Children of both sexes were given regular

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<sup>8</sup> See Rodney Warwick, 'The South African Military under Verwoerd: SADF popularisation amongst the White community, 1960-66', *South African Historical Society Conference*, (UCT, 26-29 June 2005).

'Youth Preparedness' classes, and institutions such as 'veld schools', where children went to a rural camp for a week, were often little short of indoctrination processes.<sup>9</sup> From an early age children were taught that communism was the enemy and that if they were not careful and failed in their duties the enemy would triumph. The process of anti-communist indoctrination continued right up until matriculation, from where most young men went straight to the army.

Although the aim of the lessons was to teach of the communist threat to society, there could also be a racial aspect. As one participant in Catherine Draper's survey of national servicemen states, 'From school right into the army. They had it worked out so nicely. You just did not have a chance. As a child, you just did not have a chance, [of] walking out of there without being a racist.'<sup>10</sup> The racial aspect was often found more within the training of the SADF than within the school system, but racism was nonetheless part of the received notions of white society and thus entered, inevitably, into propaganda.

As the conflict between the white government and the anti-apartheid movements intensified, the government began to promote its theories of 'total onslaught' and 'total strategy'. Children, and society in general, were informed that to refuse a call to military service was to play into the hands of the enemy whose 'total onslaught' included plans to undermine the SADF.<sup>11</sup> There was no nationwide counter-view to balance this government discourse, and the mindset pervaded the whole of white society. From the viewpoint of the modern world of mass-media and communications it is possibly difficult to conceive of such total control of information as existed at the time, but the government had a virtual monopoly on the media at the time and censorship stopped any effective counter-propaganda. The only opposition to the government's message that children might receive would be from their parents or from their church.

In the Afrikaner community especially, both parents and church were more likely to repeat the lessons taught by the government, though in the English-speaking community which was traditionally more liberal and which was generally politically

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<sup>9</sup> Jacklyn Cock, *Colonels and Cadres, War and Gender in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1991), p.72.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Draper. *Psychological Experiences of Military Conscripts in South Africa During the 1970s and 1980s* (Honours thesis, UCT, 1999), p.12.

<sup>11</sup> This was not just NP paranoia; the ANC did indeed count undermining national service as part of its strategy. *Sechaba*, (August 1986), p.24.



opposed to the NP government, parents might encourage their children to think less narrowly and question the government's discourse. English-speaker universities could also influence some students who had yet to be conscripted with a sense of liberalism or even radicalism that led to a rejection of military service, though a number of English-speaking students maintained a pro-Establishment stance, as was shown by the existence of such conservative organisations as the National Student Federation, or more locally the Durban Student Alliance.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to propaganda in the classroom, the government also instituted the cadet system whereby schoolboys were encouraged to get a taste for the military life while still young. They were given extra lessons on such things as the communist threat, and were allowed to handle and fire weapons, take part in 'training' and learn things like field craft and map reading skills. It was meant to be a pleasurable experience for the youngsters and an advert for the SADF. The objectives for the cadet system given by the SADF and quoted by Cock were '1. For the youth to develop a sense of responsibility and love for their country and national flag; 2. To instil civil defence in the youth; 3. To train them in good citizenship as a forerunner to national service'.<sup>13</sup>

How successful this was in promoting the military is impossible to determine, but the officers in these cadet units did provide role models for their young charges which would encourage them to look upon the military in a favourable light.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as a measure of the success of institutions such as cadets Margaret Nash, a committed Christian and opponent of apartheid militarism, wrote somewhat dispiritedly in 1982 that 'most young men assume that they must conform to the military demand, little as they may like the prospect. At school the cadet corps and at university the OTC condition them into such conformity'.<sup>15</sup> Again there is the English-Afrikaans dichotomy as English speaking schools often rejected the cadet system while it was embraced in Afrikaner areas, but this is symptomatic of a wider concern among the English population that their children were being 'brainwashed' by the Afrikaner dominated military and Establishment.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Michael Graaf (ed.), *Hawks and Doves, the Pro- and Anti-conscription Press in South Africa* (Durban, 1988) for more on how these organisations promoted conscription.

<sup>13</sup> Jacklyn Cock, *Colonels & Cadres*, pp.69-70.

<sup>14</sup> See for example Barry Fowler (ed.), *Pro Patria* (Halifax, 1995), p.1.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Nash, *Christians Make Peace* (Durban, 1982), p.74.

<sup>16</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; W Vause Raw Collection. A series of letters appear in various files in the WV Raw Collection expressing this very concern.

Propaganda outside of the classroom was also effective in keeping the young prospective conscripts on the right tracks. Certainly in the last decade of conscription English-speaking university campuses became hotbeds of agitation against the government, some of it aimed at undermining conscription. A conscious effort was made by the government to stop students, who were believed to be idealistic and easily swayed to an exciting cause, from being seduced by anti-conscription movements such as the ECC. Apart from smear campaigns against their detractors, the government and SADF issued a great deal of positive propaganda aimed at exhorting men to do their patriotic duty. Alongside media broadcasts, SADF personnel often made appearances to call on men to do their duty, to defend their homes, families and girlfriends.

The overall impact of the government's security discourse, propaganda, and anti-communist teaching was substantial. The fact that so many people believed the government's assessment of the threat to South Africa without a doubt helped men to accept the need for conscription, and helped families come to terms with their loved ones spending months away from home in the service of their country. However, while men may have accepted the need for conscription on a conceptual level, this did not always make them amenable to it on a personal level. One former conscript calls this the 'dichotomy of conscription', and says that while propaganda and the prevailing circumstances played a big part in shaping his perceptions of the necessity of service, it did little to make it more palatable on a personal level.<sup>17</sup>

Outside of the general reasons of obedience to authority and exposure to a discourse that made military service a natural and necessary part of life, many men had personal motivations for joining the military. For some young men a sense of national pride, and even a pride in the military, was also at play when they went to join their units. It is true that this pride was stimulated and enhanced by the Establishment's propaganda, but it was still something separate from merely joining the military because of a belief in the 'total onslaught' discourse. The conscript generation of the later 1960s and early 1970s was almost unique in that for both English and Afrikaans speakers there was an incentive in terms of nationalism and national pride to join the SADF. For the English speaking community the Defence Force still represented an institution that many thousands of men had loyally served in the two World Wars, and despite the changes wrought since the NP's 1948

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Louis Esterhuizen, (Stellenbosch, 2006).

election victory there was still a great deal of pride in the SADF to be found amongst English-speakers. Many of the UP members of parliament, who are firmly identified with the English-speaking community, served during the Second World War, including the Leader of the Opposition Sir de Villiers Graaff and defence spokesman W. V. Raw. Veterans associations, with predominantly English membership, existed across the country, and they kept alive English interest in the Defence Force.<sup>18</sup>

The conscripts going into the SADF in the late 1960s were often the sons of men who had fought for South Africa in the Second World War and who were proud of their military heritage. This logic can be applied equally to English-speakers and Afrikaners as it has been demonstrated that, despite the very public denial of the allied cause by some of their leadership, Afrikaners did volunteer in great numbers during the Second World War,<sup>19</sup> and that the experience of the military persuaded some of the next generation that national service was not only their duty but was a way to follow in their fathers footsteps and live up to their achievements. This is essentially the scenario given by one ex-serviceman in Fowler's book *Pro Patria*, who says 'My Dad was in North Africa and Italy during the Second World War...Probably the first photograph I ever saw of my Dad was of him in a uniform.'<sup>20</sup>

For some Afrikaners there was also another, possibly more compelling, nationalist reason to do military service. The Republic of South Africa came into being on 1 May 1961, against the wishes of many English speakers but fully in line with the wishes of the Afrikaner population. The NP government throughout the period also meant that the nation was under firm Afrikaner control. The Republic was therefore seen in some circles as the final achievement of the dream of the Afrikaner Republic, and it was the embodiment of this dream that much of the Afrikaner youth was intent on defending.

The *volk en vaderland* style patriotism that existed in the Afrikaner community held quite some sway, and was a major factor in encouraging compliance with conscription in that constituency. A strong national pride was fostered in the community and as has been shown virtually from birth children were taught at home, in school and in church about the struggles of their people. For young Afrikaner boys,

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<sup>18</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; Sir de Villiers Graaff ; non-political, Air Force Association.

<sup>19</sup> See A Grundlingh, 'The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force During the Second World War, 1939-45', *Journal of African History*, Vol. 40, Issue 3, (1999), 351-65.

<sup>20</sup> Fowler, *Pro Patria*, p.1.

a position in the military and in the service of the *volk* was often something to aspire to and a sacrifice to be made willingly. An English-speaking conscript recalled a conversation with a young Afrikaner national serviceman who told him '*Van klein af was dit my droom om 'n staatspresidentswag te wees.*'<sup>21</sup> This young man's dream is, if not completely typical, at least demonstrative of how the nationalism of the Afrikaans community could play a part in getting men willingly into uniform. In some Afrikaner circles a position in the military was not only a position of pride, but also a way to climb the social ladder, as for members of the Afrikaner lower-middle class especially, an officer rank in the Defence Force was something to be sought after that would bring a higher status in society.<sup>22</sup>

The idea that service was a patriotic duty and a sacrifice for the nation was most likely to be held in Afrikaner circles, but it also held some currency among English speakers. In 1978, for example, W. V. Raw, himself something of a hawk on security matters,<sup>23</sup> replied to a complaint that national service pay was appallingly low by saying that 'this service is regarded as a sacrifice for the country rather than a job for which men are paid', something he agreed with and he considered the matter closed.<sup>24</sup> The attacks on South Africa, both verbal and physical, also helped to create a nationalist sentiment across English-Afrikaner lines, as both were in it together and both felt the same need to defend their land and people. Clive Holt, writing of his experiences in Angola in 1988, said 'call it patriotic pride or whatever, some age-old emotions were definitely starting to stir in these young men destined for battle',<sup>25</sup> indicating that a South African national spirit was definitely at play by this stage.

However, while patriotism undoubtedly played a part in making conscription acceptable, it could be used not so much as a positive argument in favour of service, but as an excuse to avoid objection. C. G. Weeramantry claimed in 1980 that concerned conscripts who 'choose to philosophise, sweep their qualms of conscience under the carpet of their duty to the state',<sup>26</sup> almost using patriotism as an excuse for a service about which they had reservations. Similarly patriotic duty could be something that was accepted only if there were no other possibilities. For

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<sup>21</sup> J.H. Thompson (ed.), *An Unpopular War, from afkak to bosbefok* (Cape Town, 2006), p.11.

<sup>22</sup> Philip H. Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians, Civil-Military Relations in South Africa* (Cambridge, 1984), p.144.

<sup>23</sup> C. Barron, *Collected South African Obituaries* (Johannesburg, 2005), p.283.

<sup>24</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; W Vause Raw Collection; National Service Correspondence 1970-1978. Letter from WV Raw dated 18 May 1978.

<sup>25</sup> Clive Holt, *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter* (Cape Town, 2005), p.32.

<sup>26</sup> C.G. Weeramantry, *Apartheid, the Closing Phases?* (Melbourne, 1980), p.103.

anyone who did not want to clash with the authorities and did not have the ability to quietly leave the country, military service was the only option and so some men may have claimed patriotism only from lack of choice. A joke in the British publication *Spectator* in 1977 reflected this when it asked 'What's a South African patriot? A Houghton resident who hasn't managed to sell his house.'<sup>27</sup>

Whatever a conscript's political views on apartheid or on South Africa, it was still possible for them to see military service to the nation as a necessity which they were content to perform rather than as a burden they acquiesced to only under compulsion. Again this can be brought back to and tied in with the state's efforts to indoctrinate the country's youth, and their success in so doing. Many conscripts believed that they were fighting for their homes and their loved ones, and that if they did not hold back the threat on the borders their own families may be in danger. Larger than that, their country and their very civilisation may have been in danger. The threat of the *Rooi Gevaar*, the wave of Red communist danger that was sweeping through Africa, was hammered home to young boys and girls from an early age, and by the time national service came around young men were prepared to do their bit to combat it. Men often saw themselves as part of the wider struggle of the Cold War, though the view of heroically holding back the tide of unchristian and uncivilised humanity, or defending 'civilization against barbarism',<sup>28</sup> was and still is especially held in more right-wing circles.



Even those who were pro-political change in the Republic were prepared to militarily defend the current system of government, to ensure that change put power in the hands of responsible government. Typical of those who held these attitudes was a group of students at the University of Pretoria who were interviewed in the mid-1980s about their views on military service. Almost unanimously, they said they were in favour of service, as it was defending Christianity from the godless communist forces. The unanimity of their response may be artificial as the short interviews were published in an unashamedly anti-South African Establishment and anti-SADF book in 1986, and they may have been edited for stylistic effect. However, assuming that the author has not unduly changed their words the attitudes are worth examining. One of the students, Benny Viviers, is of the opinion that 'It is a Christian war. We are not the aggressors, they are the aggressors. We are only defending our property and our people'. Another, James Van Zyl, comments that 'I think there will be change in

<sup>27</sup> *Spectator*, 1 October 1977, p.8.

<sup>28</sup> 'Windbuks', <<http://www.praag.org>>, accessed 14 August 2006.

this country and the change will be peaceful – that’s why we’re fighting the war.’<sup>29</sup> Others give similar responses, and the attitudes of these students faithfully reflect part of the philosophy of self defence, and of the defence of Western Christian Civilisation, that pervaded White South African society until the fall of the communist world and subsequent removal of the communist threat in the early 1990s.

The idea that South Africa could be fighting a justifiable war despite her unjustifiable internal policies was not only expressed by young students, but also by people in positions of some authority. The well known liberal PFP MP Harry Schwarz stated in 1983 ‘I believe that South Africa is not fighting an unjust war...that does not mean, however, that I do not think there are things that are fundamentally wrong in this country’.<sup>30</sup> Even within the SADF some people expressed the feeling that they were fighting for evolutionary rather than revolutionary change. General Chris Thirion, a Military Intelligence officer who was dismissed on spurious grounds by President F. W. de Klerk in the ‘Night of the Generals’,<sup>31</sup> stated that ‘I never saw myself as defending apartheid’, and went on to say that he was fighting for a peaceful transition to the majority government that he saw as an inevitability.<sup>32</sup>

The defence of Christianity was an important ideal for most young men. In one opinion poll some ninety percent of troops questioned stated that they were fighting to defend their religion from the ‘atheistic communists’.<sup>33</sup> The idea that military service was also a Christian service was reinforced by the DRC which wholeheartedly supported the NP government on the issue for virtually the whole period of compulsory service. Although by 1988 the DRC was moved to express concern about the incursions into Angola, it remained a staunch proponent of conscription, so much so that the TRC found that the mainstream Afrikaans churches ‘openly supported the policy of conscription’.<sup>34</sup> The attitude of the Afrikaans churches to conscription is shown in a 1974 pamphlet published by the *Institut vir bevordering van Calvinisme* which concluded ‘Einge burger van die RSA wat reg gemotiveer is,

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<sup>29</sup> Julie Frederikse, *South Africa, a Different Kind of War* (Johannesburg, 1986), p.67.

<sup>30</sup> *Hansard, House of Assembly Debates* (Cape Town, 1983), Vol. 106, Col. 3640.

<sup>31</sup> In December 1992, President de Klerk sacked 23 senior SADF officers on the basis of unsubstantiated claims presented to him in a report by General Pierre Steyn. Many of the claims were later proved false and his actions caused some bitterness in military circles as they were seen to be politically motivated to ease negotiations with the ANC. See Hilton Hammann, *Days of the Generals* (Cape Town, 2001), pp.177-193.

<sup>32</sup> Don Foster, Paul Haupt, & Marésa De Beer, *The Theatre of Violence, Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict* (Cape Town, 2005), p.159.

<sup>33</sup> Gavin Cawthra, *Brutal Force, the Apartheid War Machine* (London, 1986), p.42.

<sup>34</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (7 Volumes, Cape Town, 1998), Vol. 5, p.257.



*wat intelligent meeleeef met wat in Suid-Afrika en die wêreld aangaan, met die regte vaderlandsliefde in die hart, sal militêre diensplig as 'n dringende noodsaak insien.*<sup>35</sup>

The backing of the Afrikaans churches gave the government some moral legitimacy over the issue of conscription, and was without doubt influential in making it seem more of a duty and less of an imposition within the Afrikaner community.

As well as those fighting for Christian ideology or in defence of their homes and wider communities, there were undoubtedly some who were influenced to join the SADF because it was a pillar of apartheid, or of white civilization as it would have been seen.<sup>36</sup> The support gained by the ultra-conservative political parties during the late 1980s is indicative of the support that the defence of apartheid had in the wider community, and it is inconceivable that no national servicemen were influenced by this. Even supporters of the mainstream NP can still be considered partisans of apartheid, albeit reformed apartheid. It is true that most conscripts did not necessarily consider themselves or their units as tools of apartheid but instead as servants of South Africa, but for some national service provided a way to directly support the racially divisive political system. Cock talks of the 'Kaffir syndrome' that was found in the SADF, whereby blacks were portrayed as the enemy and as lesser humans, and while officially the SADF spoke of the communist threat, it was very much tied up in racial ideology.<sup>37</sup> However, the official ideology was ambiguous enough for partisans of apartheid to feel that they were supporting it, and for political opponents of apartheid within the SADF to feel that they were doing nothing but defending their homes and people from godless communists. An example of racial ambiguity in SADF terminology or thought is the line of the official 'Border Song' which says 'Dark are the forces that menace our country'.<sup>38</sup> This could be interpreted to simply mean evil, but it also has an 'unavoidable hint of racial classification'.<sup>39</sup>

The wish to uphold apartheid for some conscripts would have been strengthened by the experiences of certain African countries to the north, which had seen economic collapse, coups and civil war since the advent of majority rule. These countries were often held up as examples of black mismanagement and would have done nothing to

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<sup>35</sup> J.F. Potgieter, *Militêre Diensplig en Diensweiering* (Potchefstroom, 1974), p.13.

<sup>36</sup> *The African Communist*, No.103, (fourth quarter, 1985), p.86.

<sup>37</sup> Cock, *Colonels & Cadres*, p.56; also Diane Sandler, 'The Psychological Experiences of White Conscripts in the Black Townships', in Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan (eds), *War and Society, The Militarization of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1989), pp.84-85.

<sup>38</sup> *Paratus*, Vol. 32, No. 2, (February 1981), p.49.

<sup>39</sup> David Chidester, *Shots in the Streets, Violence and Religion in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1991), p.99.



allay concerns about non-racial democratic government in South Africa,<sup>40</sup> while atrocities against whites such as were seen in the Belgian Congo in 1960 would have made men anxious to protect themselves and their families from a similar fate.<sup>41</sup>

How many men actually joined the SADF because they believed in perpetuating the system of apartheid will probably never be known, as in the current political climate they would be reviled for revealing such motives. Nonetheless, for some conscripts the defence of white society, and therefore white domination, would have figured somewhere in the reasoning for doing national service. This is not to suggest that men joined with evil intentions of causing degradation to members of other population groups; indeed General Jannie Geldenhuys stated 'I do not believe that a single soldier ever joined the Defence Force with the purpose, or even the vaguest notion, of becoming a champion of evil.'<sup>42</sup> Many people were however committed to white political domination, which had been in force for their entire lifetime, and was what they associated with responsible government, security, stability, and indeed normality. It would be implausible to suggest that those who were inclined towards apartheid did not think of military service as defending not only their society but also the racist system on which it was based.

Some men regarded national service as positive not for any political motive but because it offered them a chance to get out on their own, it promised to be an adventure, and it gave a man time to consider his options. Some men did not think of the politics or morality of service, but instead simply considered it for what it was; a year or later two away from home, becoming your own man and getting sent to places you had never been before. 'Chris', a national serviceman called up in 1979 and a participant in Barry Fowler's study, is typical of this. He remarked 'I thought national service would give me the opportunity to look around and get some idea [of what to do in life]...it was like going with my buddies on this extended adventure. I certainly didn't think about the morality or the rightness or the wrongness of the prevailing political situation.'<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, ed. Dene Smuts, *The System and the Struggle, Reform, Revolt and Reaction in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1989), pp.52-53.

<sup>41</sup> Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners, Biography of a People* (Cape Town, 2003), pp.524-25.

<sup>42</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys, *A General's Story from an Era of War and Peace* (Johannesburg, 1995), p.302.

<sup>43</sup> Fowler, *Pro Patria*, p.64.

Contemporary commentators often remarked on the fact that some young men and their parents appreciated the opportunities offered by the national service system, and that it proved a formative period in a man's life. In 1990 the *Pretoria News* carried a story about proposals to end conscription and commented 'this denies young school leavers the opportunity to spend a year in the military, an opportunity eagerly grasped by some youngsters and their parents.'<sup>44</sup> The sense of adventure and of getting out on your own would probably not last farther than the gates of the training camp when the NCOs began their screaming, but it was without doubt a factor that existed in some men's minds as a worthwhile reason to perform national service. Neither of these motivations would have applied to CF members who had already completed their initial service, but would have been evident in some of the initial intake. These aspects were useful by-products of the system rather than overwhelmingly compelling motivations to do national service, but they did without doubt help some men accept conscription.

For some, joining the SADF gave them a sense of community, inclusion, and security that they craved, or that they thought they would miss out on if they did not do service. Men rejected on medical grounds were known to complain that they wanted to be involved in the Defence Force, and to wish to avoid the feeling of being an outsider that came with not having done national service. In 1984, for example, a mother wrote to W. V. Raw begging him to use his influence to get her son into the military even though he had been rejected on medical grounds. She claimed that her son felt rejected and worthless.<sup>45</sup> This aspect of a search for inclusion also applies to a very small minority of conscripts whose experiences of society were hitherto of marginalisation and rejection, such as children at reform institutes or in children's homes. The SADF actively welcomed them in and wanted their participation, and while it is beyond the scope of this work to discuss the psychology behind this issue, such people were often grateful for the inclusiveness that the army offered them. An example of this is found in the boys at Reformatory School, who had until 1977 been excluded from military service because they were thought to be too ill disciplined. It was at the instigation of some of the boys themselves that their case was reviewed, and that from 1977 they were permitted to render military service.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Pretoria News*, 30 January 1990, article 'In times of peace, prepare for war'.

<sup>45</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw collection; National Service 1984. letter from Raw dated 1 February 1984 and attached case notes.

<sup>46</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; National Service. Correspondence concerning National Service for Reformatory School inmates.

While the majority did national service out of pride, patriotism, or simply obedience to the institutional authority of the government, there were those who did not conform to the social norms and were inclined to disobey governmental commands. For these men the choice to do national service was taken mainly because the cost of not doing it was too high. To counter potential resistance the government had a series of increasingly harsh penalties institutionalised to provide a disincentive to draft-dodging and objection, and it was the threat of these punishments that forced some men into uniform. Section 126(a) of the Defence Act made refusal to serve an offence punishable by a prison term initially of two years, later three years, and finally in 1983 the sentence was increased to three times the remaining service owed, or a maximum of six years.<sup>47</sup> As Robert Robertson of the SACC said in 1981 'the three year Detention Barracks spell is a formidable (if crude) deterrent to the dodger'.<sup>48</sup>

A man refusing to partake in military service was also likely to find himself marginalised by society and demonised by the establishment. National service was in a sense a rite of passage that had to be completed in order to become a man, especially in the Afrikaner community. One man stated 'military service...was an obstacle that I would have to overcome to be "accepted"'.<sup>49</sup> Clive Holt shows that men who had not completed national service could experience less acceptance than their peers when he states 'He [an acquaintance] had somehow managed to dodge National Service, so I had very little respect for him to start with.'<sup>50</sup> It certainly took a kind of courage to stand up to the authorities and to social expectations; Larry Schwartz, a young man with strong anti-apartheid sentiments, admits to more or less drifting into doing national service because he lacked the courage to do otherwise.<sup>51</sup>

Not only was there disdain and vitriolic verbal attacks from all quarters accusing resisters of dereliction of duty and cowardice, there was also a question mark almost automatically placed on the sexuality of a man who refused to perform military service. Daniel Conway writes 'The South African government regularly associated men who objected to military service with effeminacy, cowardice, and sexual

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<sup>47</sup> According to Cock, South Africa had the harshest penalties for objectors in the world, Cock, *Colonels & Cadres*, pp.66-67.

<sup>48</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; Defence (General) 1977-81. Letter Robertson to WV Raw dated 11 February 1981.

<sup>49</sup> Fowler, *Pro Patria*, p.150.

<sup>50</sup> Holt, *At Thy Call*, p.133.

<sup>51</sup> Larry Schwartz, *The Wild Almond Line* (St Leonards, 2000), p.219.

“deviance”<sup>52</sup> and it was a fear of such accusations and potential social ostracising that undoubtedly led many would-be objectors to relinquish their opposition. Cock also makes a lot of concepts of masculinity affecting men’s willingness to serve, saying effectively that men felt social pressure to conform and avoid accusations of effeminacy or even homosexuality.<sup>53</sup> The vitriolic attacks on objectors could not easily be brushed off, and were of such intensity that the TRC concluded that ‘the State’s vilification of conscripts who refused to serve in the SADF... constitutes a violation of human rights.’<sup>54</sup> This assessment, however, applies mainly to the later years of service, and especially the 1980s, when the government was obliged to step up its efforts to bring men into the military, rather than the earlier decades when the overwhelming majority of men complied with the service requirements without protest.

In all probability the numbers of men who were truly forced into the SADF solely out of fear of the consequences are likely to be fairly low. Most young men would be more likely to concede to the government’s authority without the threat of punishment, especially as they had lived their whole lives subject to authority figures at home and in school. Nonetheless repressive measures and the threat of social rejection probably weighed on many men’s minds, and working in combination with other factors compelled men to acquiesce to the government’s wishes.

For the men of the CF, many of whom were disenchanted with the system and did not wish their lives to be interrupted by further military duties, the threat of punishment was more of a motivation to serve. Many of these men had jobs, families and children, and were unwilling to leave any of them for a service that was often held to be at best pointless and at worst harmful.<sup>55</sup> However, as a great deal of the CF soldiers’ objection to service was that it disrupted their normal lives, the measure of lengthy prison terms for draft-dodgers was effective in drawing the men back to their regiments, as it was far preferable to complete a month long ‘camp’ than to spend a couple of years in prison. The threat of becoming a social outcast was also present for CF resisters, but as was shown by the case of Dr Ivan Toms, a CF lieutenant who refused to give further service, efforts to demonise and demean men who had already given two years or more of their lives to the country often failed,

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<sup>52</sup> D. Conway, “‘Every Coward’s Choice’? Political Objection to Military Service in Apartheid South Africa as Sexual Citizenship’, *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, (March 2004), p.25.

<sup>53</sup> See Cock, *Colonels & Cadres*, chapter 3, pp.54-95.

<sup>54</sup> *TRC Report*, Vol. 5, p.257.

<sup>55</sup> Frankel, *Pretoria’s Praetorians*, p.137.

especially in later years when the support system for objectors was so much stronger.<sup>56</sup> It is impossible to accurately quantify the extent to which it was coercive measures rather than normative influence which led reluctant men to complete their CF obligations, but given the level of complaints that existed surrounding the CF it is likely to be, compared to the initial intake at least, fairly substantial.

One motivation to do national service that was noticeable by its absence is that of direct and immediate material gain. Conscript soldiers did not enjoy particularly good benefits within the SADF, although facilities were improved over time, and the pay was extremely low compared to civilian wages. The PF members were paid considerably more, and any person seeking a wage in the military would be more likely to volunteer than wait for conscription to come around. It has been shown that many of the South Africans who served in the two World Wars did so to escape poverty,<sup>57</sup> but it is impossible to claim that men would have been driven to national service simply due to impoverishment. It is however certainly the case that some joined the PF for that reason. One example of this is a man who applied for a PF position but heard nothing back. In desperation he wrote to his MP, begging for help in securing the position, saying 'these long delays are crippling me financially'.<sup>58</sup>

Every man who found himself conscripted into the SADF during apartheid had his own personal reasons and motives for allowing himself to be drafted into that body. Some were positive reasons that made men actively want to serve, and others were more negative that saw men coerced into service. For most people obedience to conscription was not a conscious decision, nor a choice, nor a preference, but was simply something that had to be done, a kind of rite of passage to manhood but also as naturally part of a white South African male's life as going to school or getting a job. For most young men a lifetime of propaganda and obedience to authority led them to do their duty without seriously considering any wider implications such as the maintenance of the system of apartheid or the occupation of Namibia. For some men

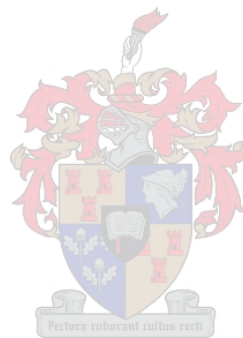
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<sup>56</sup> At Toms' trial the prosecution tried to discredit him and made mention of Toms homosexuality, but neither the magistrate nor the press sought to make an issue of this. Both did however mention prominently Toms' previous service to the state. Daniel Conway, 'Masculinity, Citizenship and Political Objection to Military Service in Apartheid South Africa', in A. Gouws (ed.), *(Un)thinking Citizenship: Feminist Debates in Contemporary South Africa* (Aldershot, 2005), p.107; Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*, p.66; and CIIR, *Out of Step*, pp.125-26.

<sup>57</sup> Neil Roos, *Ordinary Springboks, White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa* (Aldershot, 2005), p.33.

<sup>58</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; Defence (General) 1977-81. Letter to Raw dated 18 May 1981.

the idea of being able to serve their people and their country led them to willingly perform national service, while a wish to follow in the footsteps of their forebears and defend their land could play a part. Service in the SADF offered various people a sense of belonging and inclusion that they craved, or else was seen as a chance to get out on their own and live a life of freedom and excitement. Other men had to be more coerced or persuaded to serve, either through propaganda or through a fear of the alternative to serving. Whatever the reasons men held for giving their time to the military, compliance with conscription was endemic in apartheid South Africa, and over the four decades of compulsory service hundreds of thousands of normal young men unresistingly did their part to defend the state.



## 5. Motives and Methods of Resisting Conscription

While conscription in South Africa was never universally resisted, it was still a period that saw a degree of rejection of state-imposed military duties. Having already examined the evolutionary process of increasing rejection of national service, this chapter will aim to look in some depth at the reasons held by white South Africans for opposing conscription throughout the compulsory service era, and the manners in which service was avoided.

There were numerous strands to what is termed resistance to national service. First and most obvious were the vociferous campaigns that emerged towards the end of the national service era, most notably the End Conscription Campaign (ECC), which very publicly came out as opponents to the system and raised awareness that conscription could be a contentious issue. Also there were some members of the public who were not liable to conscription but still felt that it was their duty to oppose it, usually on the grounds that by doing so they were registering protest at the SADF's perceived support for the National Party's racial policies. These people and groups can be largely labelled as conceptual opponents of conscription, whose objection was based on morality or political theories.

As well as conceptual opposition there was also physical opposition from the conscripts themselves. There were individual draft dodgers, most of who did not make a public stand, but who did not want to join the military for personal reasons and did not respond to their call-up papers. Some remained in South Africa, either in hiding, or in open and public defiance of the SADF, which often ended in imprisonment. Others took more drastic action and emigrated in order to avoid their military obligations. There were numerous men who declared themselves conscientious objectors to military service, either for religious or political reasons, most of whom silently spent some years in prison for their objection and others who generated a large amount of publicity and interest in their stand.

Although most of the opposition to conscription can be broadly labelled as ultimately apartheid inspired, the forms it took were numerous and diverse. Much opposition to conscription centred on the lack of provision for conscientious objectors that existed from 1957 to 1983, and for a number of years this was the major source of public dissatisfaction with the system, even though the actual number of objectors was comparatively small. Another major reason for the rejection of conscription by many



people, including some sections of otherwise pro-government society, was the experiences of some conscripts who returned sickened and disenchanted from their service. While not all of these phenomena existed throughout the conscription era, all were evident to a lesser or greater extent at some time over the four decades that compulsory service existed.

A major reason throughout the period that men physically rejected their military duties was due to qualms of conscience. In the early years of conscription the only men who refused to serve were members of religious congregations who rejected not only military service but service to any temporal authority. By the last decade or so of conscription, opposition to apartheid was the main reason for men to resist their duties to the state. For universal pacifists and in later years committed opponents of apartheid, issues of conscience were generally the sole factors in pushing them to resist. These men were however a minority, and for most men conscientious misgivings combined with more personal issues or circumstances to lead to objection. However, while the vast majority of individual draft dodgers had personal motives to avoid service, opposition to conscription amongst the general public was much more conceptual and theoretical.

Probably the most pressing concern among the general public about the national service system from 1967 was simply the universality of it which gave men no freedom of choice of whether to render military service or not. The largest point of contention was the lack of provision for conscientious objection to military service in the SADF. The demands from church groups that an arrangement be reached for religious objectors were based generally upon the 'just war' doctrine, which says that a man should only participate in a military conflict if he believes his cause to be right and just. The SACC Hammanskraal Declaration was based on this principle, as the SACC congregations came increasingly to believe that the 'wars' the SADF was engaged in, which at various times included the internal deployments, border duty, the Angolan incursions, the police deployments in Rhodesia, and the campaigns of destabilisation of neighbouring countries, were neither morally nor ethically justifiable. The Roman Catholic Church, not a member of the SACC, also showed some support for the principles of 'just war' objection, as the Pope had in early 1971 indicated his acceptance of conscientious objection.<sup>1</sup> The demand from churches for legal

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<sup>1</sup> DDDC; Ministry of Defence (Group 5), Box 210, File ref. 61/14/1, vol. 1, "*Gewetensbeware: Beleid*" ("*Conscientious Objections: Policy*"); Church and Society Committee, Western Province Council of Churches, Memorandum dated December 1971.

conscientious objection due to just war principles existed at its height essentially for the decade from the Hammanskraal Declaration in 1974 to the introduction of limited conscientious objection in 1983. However even thereafter church opposition to military service on this principle endured as the Defence Amendment of 1983 failed to cater fully for objectors with just war convictions, instead reserving the right of exemption from military service for members of universal pacifist congregations.

Still, while churches broadly called for conscientious objection to be legalised, this does not mean that they or all of their members were necessarily against military service. Warwick Webber, MP for Pietermaritzburg South, wrote to the Minister of Defence in 1975 to pass on the views of a Methodist chaplain from his constituency, who argued that theology students and religious ministers should not be exempt from national service, as if they were they would not understand what their congregations had been through and would therefore be unable to satisfactorily minister them.<sup>2</sup> Especially in the early years of conscription, churches broadly accepted that some form of national service may be necessary, and their members were even willing to participate, but they simply believed that others who had solid reasons not to participate should have the option to be exempt. Individual members of the public and non-church organisations also expressed concern that pacifists who were obviously not a threat to the state were being treated like criminals.<sup>3</sup> Most of the complainants were devout Christians, though others who emphatically did not share pacifist convictions strongly believed that provisions for conscientious objection must be made, although these people often believed that non-military national service should be rendered instead.

For universal pacifist churches, the opposition to military service was based on a rejection of all forms of military service, regardless of the perceived moralities involved. Some members of pacifist congregations themselves were deeply worried by the provisions of the 1974 Defence Act which criminalised the encouragement of others to avoid national service. As they believed that the Bible taught that rendering military service was wrong, they could not help but encourage their children to object to conscription, which would technically place them outside of the law in the practice

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<sup>2</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; National Service. Letter to PW Botha (copy to WV Raw) dated 11 August 1975.

<sup>3</sup> DDDC, Ministry of Defence (Group 5), Box 210, File ref. 61/14/1, vol. 1, "*Gewetensbeware: Beleid*" ("*Conscientious Objections: Policy*"), letter to Minister of Defence, 9 April 1984, concerning a resolution passed by the National Council of Women of South Africa in 1971. UP archives; Private Collections; DE Mitchell Collection; Military Affairs. Letter, 25 May 1956.

of their faith.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately the state chose to make a different interpretation of the Defence Act, and avoided a major clash with pacifist groups over the issue. Universal pacifism caused problems for the SADF and the government throughout almost the entire national service era, though after the legalisation of conscientious objection along these lines in 1983 the specific problem of universal pacifist opposition was ended. The challenge posed to the state from universal pacifists was not a deliberate act on the part of the latter group to undermine the government or the apartheid system, but was the result of them being placed in a situation whereby they either opposed the temporal authorities or compromised on their spiritual beliefs. Once pacifist objection was legalised and these congregations could reconcile their obedience to the government with their religious beliefs, they were generally content to cease their protests about the conscription system. The problems pacifists caused for the government over the national service issue were not enormous, but they were still significant, especially considering the large amount of negative press the small numbers of men involved in this type of opposition to service were able to generate.

While the issue of conscientious objection was the primary cause of complaint about conscription for some years, the actual numbers of objectors were never particularly high. The 1991 Gleeson Report stated that 'Conscientious Objectors create more problems than their numbers justify',<sup>5</sup> and this was even more the case during the first decade or so of universal conscription when as a rule only universal pacifists went through with refusals to serve on the grounds of conscience. Even in the 1980s, when conscientious objection was legal and therefore at its highest, numbers of committed objectors to service were relatively low. In an interview given for the Gleeson Report by Laurie Nathan, the some-time National Organiser of the ECC and something of an authority on resistance to conscription, Nathan was asked whether it would drain the SADF of manpower if alternative service were to be allowed for all objectors of conscience, both religious and political. His answer was 'No this has never been the case because only a very small proportion of the population are objectors.'<sup>6</sup> According to the same Gleeson Report, over an eight year period from 1984 to 1991 a total of 2129 men applied for conscientious objector status, though 415 of these agreed to serve in an SADF unit in a non-combatant role. Given that the annual call up was approximately 30 000 men, it can be seen that the issue of conscientious objection affected somewhat less than one percent of national

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<sup>4</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; Sir de Villiers Graaff Collection; Defence, Acts/Bills. correspondence with concerned parents from Port Elizabeth, October 1974.

<sup>5</sup> *Gleeson Report on Conscientious Objection* (1991), p.8.

<sup>6</sup> *Gleeson Report*, appendix B, p.1; Interview with Nathan by Lindy Heinecken, 3 July 1991.

servicemen. Of all the applicants for conscientious objector status, only 2.9 percent were refused, usually because the men applied in terms of political rather than religious objection. In the same period only 21 men, called 'selective objectors and anti-conscript campaigners' in the words of the report, were prosecuted for continuing to refuse conscription on the grounds of political conscientious objection.<sup>7</sup>

To say that the issue of religious and political conscientious objection caused the SADF great manpower problems would be something of an exaggeration. The main challenge posed by such opposition to service was the moral impact of the objectors, and the platform that it provided to spread anti-conscription messages. Once religious conscientious objection was legalised, problems were encountered in sorting religious objectors from political objectors and this caused some embarrassment for the government, which had introduced the 1983 Amendment to try to end the religious objection debate. Objectors could not be excused service on the grounds that they were opposed to apartheid or to the wars of destabilisation waged by the SADF in neighbouring countries, but instead had to show that they had well founded theological reasons for refusing to render military service to the state. Most objectors, whatever their true qualms, fell in with the Board for Religious Objection's expectations and presented themselves as devout religious objectors, though a few insisted on presenting their case for exemption in terms of political opposition to conscription and apartheid.<sup>8</sup> These applications were universally rejected, leading to a series of 'Conscientious Objector' trials when the men continued to refuse to serve, which did the government and the Defence Force no good in terms of public support and sympathy. However while the moral challenge of conscientious objectors to the government and the SADF was significant, and while the issue remained one of the major talking points and public relations problems for the military establishment throughout the national service era, in terms of physical objection to service in the numbers of men actually refusing to be conscripted, the challenge and the disruption caused were minimal.

While such conceptual moral opposition to conscription caused the authorities some problems, for the majority of the compulsory service era most complaints about the military from individual conscripts or the general public revolved around practical issues. There was a good deal of complaint that while men were obliged to put their lives on the line for their country, they were poorly rewarded or recompensed for

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<sup>7</sup> *Gleeson Report*, p.4.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Yeats, *Prisoner of Conscience* (London, 2005), pp.74-84.

doing so. Many men who felt mistreated by the SADF over their national service were angered not only by their ill treatment but by the fact that they were legally obliged to submit to it, and while they had no qualms about rendering compulsory service to the state they believed they should at least be well cared for.

Such 'opposition' to conscription showed itself in letters to MPs, complaints to the Defence Force, and latterly in the memoirs of former servicemen. In 1978, W. V. Raw, the Opposition Spokesman for Defence, received a letter from a national serviceman who complained that to be paid 'R30 a month to defend our borders (we have no choice) is a disgrace'.<sup>9</sup> His anger was not directed at the fact that he was required to defend the border, which he seemed to understand was a necessity, but at the fact he and all other young men were obliged to do so for extremely low pay. Equally Clive Holt, a national serviceman involved in the battles of Cuito Cuanavale in Angola in 1988 and who later wrote a book about the experience, summed up his feelings about universally compulsory service when he described himself and his comrades as 'a bunch of ordinary guys who were thrust into a life-and-death situation without knowing what they were getting into, or being afforded the freedom of choice prior to becoming involved in something that would change their lives forever and haunt many for years to come.'<sup>10</sup> Holt comes across as a man who is proud of what he and his comrades achieved and who understands the necessity for what was done, but he is deeply embittered with the SADF for having obliged these men to participate in a war while offering no help for them to deal with the psychological consequences.

Throughout the entire period of compulsory military service there was evidence of some 'opposition' to the system from those involved in it because of the poor treatment of servicemen, because of feelings of marginalisation that occurred within the Defence Force, or because of the bad habits that men were seen to pick up in the military. These complaints do not indicate that there was a widespread wish to end conscription, any more than complaints about how the school system was run indicated a wish for education to be ended. They were simply criticisms about the poor conditions that prevailed, and in most cases demands for some kind of reform. Apart from the notoriously low pay and lack of support for ex-combatants, complaints about such things as telephones, accommodation and food were commonplace, and

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<sup>9</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; National Service Correspondence 1970-1978. Letter to WV Raw dated 11 May 1978.

<sup>10</sup> Clive Holt, *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter* (Cape Town, 2005) p.7.

transport for men who were on leave was usually woefully inadequate and overpriced, and W. V. Raw kept up a lively correspondence with the Minister of Defence and the military authorities in this regard.<sup>11</sup> The facilities in military barracks were also often inadequate, especially in the first decade of universal conscription, when some of the military camps used were simply unable to cope with the large influx of recruits that they now received. Bad conditions were an annoyance but on at least one occasion they led to greater problems; in 1979 between 60 and 70 men of 8 SAI in Upington staged a mass desertion in protest about poor facilities at the camp and a dispute over leave following border duty.<sup>12</sup> Criticism of facilities for national servicemen existed right up until the ending of conscription; in September 1990 *Resister*, the COSAWR publication, ran a story articulating conscripts' continued complaints about mistreatment, low pay, and barrack conditions.<sup>13</sup>

While poor facilities were an annoyance, parents were more concerned about the transformation of their boys that happened during military service. Violence, alcoholism and bad language were all readily picked up in the military environment, and indeed they were often actively encouraged as signs of newly acquired 'manliness'. The complaint that 'parents feel that this is where their sons get into bad habits' was common,<sup>14</sup> and while it was widely believed that a stint in the military was good for making men of boys, parents and society did not always appreciate the type of men that the system created, especially those men who came back from the border from the mid-1970s onwards. Of his experience of 'growing-up' in Angola, Holt says 'the transformation of boy to man had gone a step closer to madman'.<sup>15</sup> Citizen Force campers were also affected; one lady complained that her previously teetotal husband came back from a 'boring' stint on the border almost as an alcoholic, because he and his comrades had done nothing but drink for three months.<sup>16</sup> These complaints about conditions or the picking up of bad habits do not demonstrate any real objection to the overall system, but rather to aspects of that system which some would have liked to have seen changed. They do however show that the public did not uncritically view time spent in the SADF as a character building service to the

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<sup>11</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection. Correspondence on this issue can be found across all files relating to National Service in this collection.

<sup>12</sup> *Argus*, 26 October 1979.

<sup>13</sup> Gavin Cawthra, Gerald Kraak, & Gerald O'Sullivan (eds), *War and Resistance, South Africa Reports: The Struggle for South Africa as Documented by Resister Magazine* (London, 1994), pp.160-61.

<sup>14</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; National Service. Letter to Raw 13 August 1971.

<sup>15</sup> Holt, *At Thy Call*, p.121.

<sup>16</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.67.



state, and that they did question and complain about aspects of conscription that they saw as wrong.

A major issue about conditions in the Defence Force was the training that men were given, and especially the treatment of men during basic training, known as 'basics'. While it was accepted that training to prepare a man for war must be tough, basics in the SADF was rumoured to be fairly horrifying, and most men went to the Defence Force with a sense of trepidation. Basics was seen as rough, brutal and crude, and some men felt they were left unprepared for their postings to active theatres of operations.<sup>17</sup> Others felt the training regimes were not only cruel and punishing but also fairly pointless, and the NCOs needlessly vindictive.<sup>18</sup> The corporals and sergeants were widely feared, though tales of atrocities committed against conscripts were often apocryphal. Such is a rumour told by one conscript who gave an account of a fearsome drill instructor, *Rooibaard*, who harassed his recruits through basics; '*Rooibaard* was the Devil incarnate as far as I was concerned...I heard rumours he had drilled his nephew to death.'<sup>19</sup> While it is doubtful that *Rooibaard* or the SADF would have deliberately drilled anyone to death, not even as punishment or *pour encourager les autres*,<sup>20</sup> such stories did nonetheless spread and they did nothing to improve the image of the SADF or make people more amenable to the idea of national service.

Complaints reflecting the English-Afrikaner dichotomy of wider society were also common among English speakers, and some of them were worrying enough to give men reason to try to avoid service. From the mid-1960s onwards the SADF was increasingly seen as an Afrikaner institution into which English speakers were reluctant to enter, creating an almost direct inversion of the situation that had existed in the old UDF. Many of the complaints were relatively minor annoyances, such as language issues, but occasionally larger objections surfaced concerning extreme victimisation or the Nationalist 'brainwashing' that SADF instructors were accused of.

For national servicemen Afrikaans was frequently the language of instruction, sometimes ignoring official guidelines that men be instructed where possible in their

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<sup>17</sup> Barry Fowler (ed.), *Pro Patria* (Halifax, 1995), p.71.

<sup>18</sup> *Hansard, House of Assembly Debates* (Cape Town, 1967), Vol. 21, Col. 7419.

<sup>19</sup> J.H. Thompson, *An Unpopular War, from afkak to bosbefok* (Cape Town, 2006), p.6.

<sup>20</sup> 'To encourage the others'. This famous line is from Voltaire's satire *Candide*, when the eponymous hero enquires why the English Admiral Byng is to be executed. He is told that the English find it necessary to kill an Admiral from time to time, so as to encourage the others.



home language, and bullying of non-Afrikaans speakers was rife. The SADF instructors were said to 'hate the English boys at the best of times, particularly from Natal',<sup>21</sup> and there was a distinct disinclination among sections of the English-speaking community to participate in the Defence Force. It is highly likely that the portrayal of the SADF as an Afrikaner dominated institution caused some to directly link the Defence Force with the Afrikaner dominated NP, and thus strengthened their convictions that the enlarged force existed primarily to uphold apartheid and impose NP policies. Fears that the predominantly Nationalist PF would 'brainwash' young men also existed among some members of the English-speaking community, and one man wrote to his MP to complain that the commander of the officer training school at Oudtshoorn had promised that every English-speaker attending his establishment would leave as 'a good Nationalist, or at least embrace Nationalist policies'.<sup>22</sup> However such worries and complaints were held only in some sections of the English-speaking community, usually by those of British descent who resented Afrikaner dominance, and the very issues that concerned these people were likely to be taken as positive aspects to service by much of the Afrikaner community. The overall impact of these continued English-Afrikaner tensions within the SADF did not adversely affect the conscription process to a greatly significant degree.

English speakers were by no means the only people to be made to feel ill at ease with the Defence Force, and many other men from minority groups or communities felt discriminated against or out of place. Larry Schwartz recounts how he was on occasion victimised in the SADF for being Jewish, and how anti-Semitism was commonplace in the apartheid era Defence Force, although he also states that by the late 1970s the SADF was making more of an effort to be accommodating towards Jews.<sup>23</sup> Homosexuals also often felt that their sexuality counted against them in the Defence force, especially in light of the fact that homosexuality was still illegal in South Africa during the period.<sup>24</sup>

While problems of ill treatment, men acquiring bad habits, and the perceived victimisation of English speakers and other minorities possibly made individuals less

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<sup>21</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; Defence (General Correspondence) 1976-1982. Letter to WV Raw dated December 1981; also *Resister* No. 66 (September 1990), stated 'in many camps English speakers, especially those from Natal, receive much harsher treatment', in Cawthra, Kraak, & O'Sullivan (eds), *War and Resistance*, p.162.

<sup>22</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; National Service. Letter to Raw dated 12 August 1974.

<sup>23</sup> Larry Schwartz, *The Wild Almond Line* (St Leonards, 2000), pp.134-35.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.55.

amenable to military service, they did not call the need for national service into question. More damaging in this regard were complaints and accusations from conscripts that service in the SADF was a waste of time and talent. The idea that men wasted their time in the service was widely held, especially in the early years of universal service, and led to questions being asked about whether there truly was a need for universal conscription. The government was adamant that there was a need for such a bloated Defence Force to act as a deterrent to potential aggressors, but there was still a reluctance from a number of men, especially men of the CF, to put their normal lives on hold and render a service that would essentially see them do nothing for little pay and even less thanks.<sup>25</sup> Until the early 1980s some members of the public believed that the conscript intake was too high, though the feeling in political and defence circles was quite the opposite.<sup>26</sup>

Many men complained that their talents were not being most effectively used, and that the system was set up in such a way that men's civilian qualifications meant little within the SADF structure. Almost everyone with a qualification wanted to be employed in a role corresponding to their civilian career or status, but they were often denied the opportunity. The exception was medical students or graduates, who were normally employed in the SAMS if they disclosed their qualifications.<sup>27</sup> Even men without qualifications often believed themselves unproductively deployed. In 1971 W. V. Raw received a letter ending 'Everybody agrees that it is the duty of every citizen to undergo military training and to serve his country. Very few object to the whole year even, but they do object to wasted time and effort',<sup>28</sup> a view that faithfully reflects that of many other people during the national service era. However while men may not have been employed as they desired, the Defence Force denied that any men were unproductively deployed. *Paratus*, the official SADF magazine, stated that 'not one case' of unproductive deployment had been reported during 1982, and the March 1984 edition ran an article titled 'Guard duty: Boring possibly, but definitely essential' to try to convince conscripts of the necessity of perceived menial tasks.<sup>29</sup>

The complaints about the waste of talent reflect no desire to avoid or resist service, but simply a wish to be employed in a more constructive manner, and they existed

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<sup>25</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.66.

<sup>26</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; National Service Correspondence 1979-1984. Letter to WV Raw dated 9 August 1981 and reply dated 17 August 1981.

<sup>27</sup> SADF, *Your Guide to National Service* (Pretoria, 1982), p.16.

<sup>28</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; National Service. Memorandum sent to Raw dated 13 August 1971.

<sup>29</sup> *Paratus*, Vol. 34, No. 4, (April 1983), p.69; and Vol. 35, No. 3, (March 1984), p.2.

throughout all the years of conscription. The complaints that service was a waste of time were potentially far more damaging and were normally accompanied by calls to scale down national service, but the government's insistence that the potential threat to South Africa was very real, coupled with the fact that service requirements before the late 1970s were not particularly onerous, meant that demands for less national service on the grounds that it was simply a waste of time were never particularly widespread.

The complaints about the military system detailed above were damaging to the SADF and caused some individuals to reject conscription, but they do not necessarily explain why thousands of men avoided their military duties from the mid-1970s onwards. There were without doubt individuals for whom the knowledge that they would be brutalised during basics, ill treated and poorly rewarded during service, and employed in a fruitless and thankless task would have been sufficient motive to reject service. However, given the statutory punishment and the social ostracism that came with refusing to render national service, the cost of refusal would have been just as high as the cost of service, entailing a life on the run, in exile, or a spell in prison. The widespread complaints about conditions for conscripts in the Defence Force existed throughout the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, and yet no significant numbers of men refused to report for duty in these years. The reason that increasing numbers of men refused to serve from the mid-1970s was not the conditions in the military, but the ever increasing terms of service and the manner in which the SADF was beginning to be employed.

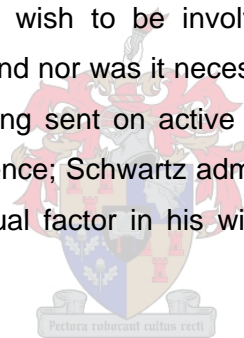
The deployment to Namibia, the intervention in Angola, and the likelihood following the Soweto riots that the military would at some point be called upon to control black unrest within South Africa were all proof to some white men that the SADF was an oppressive force, and they wanted nothing to do with it. Initially few men objected that these deployments were immoral, but later opponents of apartheid began to see more clearly that the government would be willing to supplement the Police with the SADF to enforce racially based policies, and the image of the SADF began to slide from the defenders of the whole nation to the guardians of white minority rule. The balance finally tilted irreversibly against the SADF with the township deployments from 1984 onwards,<sup>30</sup> and combined with the heightened profile of military men in government and decision making circles such as the State Security Council, it was

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<sup>30</sup> See for example Laurie Nathan, 'Troops in the Townships, 1984-1987', in Jacklyn Cock & Laurie Nathan (eds), *War and Society, the Militarization of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1989).

seen that the apartheid system was being upheld primarily by the use of military force. By no means all men rejected the oppressive use of the SADF, and indeed some revelled in it. Some people in any society will tend to oppress those below them, and as one conscript somewhat crudely stated, 'even if you are the most put-upon, dumb son-of-a-bitch, you are still better than a kaffir and can beat him up to prove it.'<sup>31</sup> However many conscripts did feel morally uneasy about the SADF deployments from the 1970s onwards, and this is without doubt a major cause of the increasing resistance to conscription over that period.

However, while morals featured for many men in their decisions not to serve during the years of conflict, it was unlikely to have been the only factor. A major and yet largely immeasurable cause of men not serving was fear, or at least an unwillingness to be involved in a conflict. The fact that the mass of individuals not showing up for service in the mid-1970s coincided with the SADF's first invasion of Angola, and yet was not accompanied by a commensurately large anti-war protest, indicates that many objectors simply did not wish to be involved in a war themselves. Their opposition was not conceptual and nor was it necessarily conscientious; it was rather a pragmatic desire to avoid being sent on active service. The desire to avoid war could also combine with conscience; Schwartz admits that while he did have qualms of conscience, fear was an equal factor in his wish to avoid service (although he ended up serving anyway).<sup>32</sup>



For most men, moral objections would in fact be subordinate to other, more personal, considerations. While racial oppression was perceived as wrong, to most white South Africans it was still an abstract idea. Although they lived in the same country as the oppressed black masses, the majority of young whites had never been in a township and knew no black people unless they happened to have a maid or a nanny.<sup>33</sup> The degrading essence of apartheid was lost on most people, which is part of the reason that many conscripts believed township duty to be so terrible, because it was the first time that they came face to face with the implications of what had hitherto been simply a theoretical idea to them. While some men were willing to take the altruistic step of putting themselves beyond the law to take a stand for the black masses, for most men the potential personal costs of service had to outweigh the

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<sup>31</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.52.

<sup>32</sup> Schwartz, *The Wild Almond Line*, p.26.

<sup>33</sup> Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels*, p.186.

certain personal costs of refusing if they were to take the step of not reporting to the military.

Not all objection to national service came from the political left or from anti-apartheid sympathisers. In the early 1980s, two men refused to do camps 'demanding that the state first implement extreme anti-black and ultra right-wing policies'.<sup>34</sup> These men were not typical of the right-wing response to the security threat, which as a rule tended to be as hawkish as the government's, but it does show that people on both sides of the political divide were beginning to see conscription as an issue which could be used to bring pressure to bear on the government.

Not all opponents of apartheid were driven to reject national service, as not all saw it as a vehicle to the indefinite propagation of minority rule but instead as the shield behind which peaceful reform could take place. Others were content to have a system of national service, even one with a racial basis, but were deeply concerned about the manner in which conscripts were being employed. Nonetheless it is incontestable that from the late-1970s and especially into the mid-1980s there was a large rise in the numbers of men refusing military service. The vast majority of these men did so without publicising their reasons, but either applied for exemption on study or medical grounds or simply quietly ignored their call-up papers. Between 1974 and 1978 there was an increase of some 8 000 applications for exemption,<sup>35</sup> and thousands of men each year, representing about ten percent of conscripts (see chapter 3), failed to report to their units.

There were in fact some legal avenues to avoid conscription. Medical exemptions accounted for the vast majority of men who were not required to serve, with around one in five men exempted on these grounds.<sup>36</sup> While most men so exempted were genuinely medically unfit to serve and so cannot be counted as necessarily opposing conscription, some other men took steps to get themselves exempted. There is some evidence of collusion between medical practitioners and would-be conscripts, with false diagnoses and phoney certificates issued to help men escape from service, or at least escape active duty.<sup>37</sup> Other men apparently resorted to self-mutilation or deliberately injured themselves to avoid service.<sup>38</sup> How far these corrupt practices

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<sup>34</sup> Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*, p.34.

<sup>35</sup> Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*, p.7.

<sup>36</sup> *Hansard, House of Assembly Debates* (Cape Town, 1967), Vol. 21, Col. 7427.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, pp.54-55.

<sup>38</sup> *Sechaba*, (December, 1985), p.22.

extended is obviously impossible to determine as it was in the best interests of everyone to keep quiet about it, but the military authorities never seemed concerned about them and so it can be inferred that they were not widespread.

Men who served in the Police, Railway Police, Prison Service or Merchant Navy were also exempt from military service, provided that they completed at least an equal amount of time in one of these organisations as they would have done in the military.<sup>39</sup> Pastors of recognised religions were also not required to serve, and this exemption also extended to theology students. Students in general were able to apply for a deferment of service until the completion of their studies, and some men were motivated to continue onto university so as to delay the draft for as long as possible.<sup>40</sup> Others however chose to go to university before national service simply to grow up a bit and increase their chances of being given a useful and responsible role within the Defence Force.<sup>41</sup> While getting exempted from service in this fashion cannot again be definitively counted as opposition to military service, it is certain that some men chose to avoid service in these ways.

If no legal opportunity for exemption presented itself, some men felt strongly enough about conscription to publicly refuse their duties. Those who made public rejections of national service universally did so on the basis that the SADF was supporting an immoral, illegal, and unjust system of government, as well as bringing war and destruction to its neighbours. From the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s a small number of men were tried, with great publicity, under Section 126(1)(a) of the Defence Act for refusing to render military service, and to government and Defence Force embarrassment these men used their trials as a floor from which to voice their disgust at apartheid and the SADF.

The campaigns that sprang up in the early-1980s, such as the ECC or UCT's Conscription Action Group, also based much of their objection on these principles that apartheid and the SADF were intimately linked. For white people conscription was one of the few avenues open for them not only to register protest against apartheid but to actually strike a blow, however small, against the apartheid Establishment. In general it was English speakers who were more likely to refuse to fulfil their service obligations, and English-speaking university campuses were known

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<sup>39</sup> SADF, *Your Guide to National Service* (Pretoria, 1982), pp.17-18.

<sup>40</sup> S. Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels, Inside South Africa's Hidden War* (New Haven, 1987), p.187; and Schwartz, *The Wild Almond Line*, p.18.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Louis Esterhuizen, (Stellenbosch, 2006).



to be hotbeds of anti-apartheid and anti-militarist sentiment that would encourage men to avoid conscription. By no means all English-speaking students believed it was right to avoid service but the anti-militarist bodies were nonetheless influential. It was not only in universities that young men were encouraged to avoid conscription. Sometimes parents brought their children up to believe that national service was wrong and encouraged them to reject it. One mother stated 'I've always been a pacifist. I resolved at the age of 20 that I wouldn't let my sons go into the army.'<sup>42</sup>

The organisations that existed to oppose conscription throughout the 1980s also contributed to some men refusing their military obligations by providing a sort of support group to help men with their objection, with COSG especially effective in this field. The organisations also brought groups of objectors together and by the late 1980s there were a series of mass refusals to serve.<sup>43</sup> The possibility for group action probably persuaded some men who may not have objected individually to go through with it, as it is easier to make a stand if support is available. Psychologist Stanley Milgram points out that 'revolt against malevolent authority is most effectively brought about by collective rather than individual action',<sup>44</sup> and it was the existence of the anti-conscription campaigns that made the collective action possible. Were the support structures not in place, the costs of publicly defying the SADF may have seemed too daunting for many men.

The costs of evading service in the SADF varied quite considerably depending on the manner in which service was evaded. Unless the Defence Force could prove that a man had received his call-up papers, they could not charge him with failing to report, and so changing address without informing the SADF (which was illegal but carried a very small penalty) was a relatively low risk way of trying to avoid service.<sup>45</sup> Simply ignoring call up papers and staying at home was also a possible strategy, but it was potentially less successful as the SADF knew where to look for their missing conscript, especially after the creation of the Army Non-Effective Troops Section from 1983 which was tasked with tracking down defaulters. It was also higher risk, as if the SADF had a man's correct address on file, this was accepted as proof that he had received his call-up papers, and he could be prosecuted for 'failing to report for duty',

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<sup>42</sup> Cock, *Colonels and Cadres*, p.207.

<sup>43</sup> Cawthra, Kraak, & Sullivan (eds), *War and Resistance*, pp.213-16.

<sup>44</sup> Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority, an Experimental View* (London, 1974), p.116.

<sup>45</sup> Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*, p.7.



for which there was a possible 18 month prison term or a fine, and after completion of the sentence the man would still be liable to the full term of service.<sup>46</sup>

Possibly the costliest strategy for avoiding service was explicitly refusing to serve, which for most of the period was punishable by a sentence of two years in prison and a fine, but which from 1983 onwards was punishable by a maximum six year sentence, or one-and-a-half times the remaining national service obligation. This charge could also be laid on people who simply did not show up, as unless they proved otherwise they were assumed to be refusing service, but given the severity of the sentence it was in practice reserved for those who publicly defied the SADF, as is shown by the extremely low numbers of prosecutions for this offence.<sup>47</sup> However, the costs of refusing to serve were not limited to those exacted by the government. Draft-dodging often meant the loss of friends, the estrangement of family, and the curtailment of career opportunities. It also sometimes meant that men were forced to leave South Africa if they wished to remain at liberty and not spend years of their lives in either the military or in prison.

Emigration was, for those who could afford it, an effective way to illegally avoid military service. Foreign travel in the national service era was expensive, and so emigration was not an option for most men, although some found refuge in neighbouring countries.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, the number of men who emigrated before their military service was fairly high, though whether their decisions to emigrate came solely or mainly from the prospect of being conscripted or from other motivations is difficult to determine. The fact that emigration due to worries about conscription and military service did occur to some extent is proved by the existence of the Committee on South African War Resistance (COSAWR), which was formed in London and Amsterdam in 1978 by emigrants with the express aim of opposing South Africa's wars from abroad, and to lend a helping hand to others who emigrated to escape the apartheid war machine.

Some commentators were in no doubt that conscription was a major factor in encouraging emigration. David Shandler claimed 'while factors such as the state of political stability within the country as well as career aspirations of potential emigrants are key motivations for individuals to leave the country, conscription plays a major

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<sup>46</sup> Foundation for Peace and Justice, *Facing Prison, a Handbook for Conscientious Objectors* (Bellville, 1988), p.10.

<sup>47</sup> Foundation for Peace and Justice, *Facing Prison*, p.10.

<sup>48</sup> *Spectator*, (2 July 1983), p.12.

role as well'. He later says that for 82 percent of English speaking students who had yet to do military service and were considering emigration, conscription was a major factor in their decision.<sup>49</sup> The Gleeson Report however estimates that emigration of objectors to conscription 'should not have exceeded more than 500 per annum',<sup>50</sup> while COSAWR stated that 10 000 men emigrated to avoid conscription from 1978-1991.<sup>51</sup> *The Sunday Times* in 1988 went even further, estimating that 53 000 people had emigrated since 1983, one third of whom did so to avoid military service.<sup>52</sup>

A major difficulty in attributing emigration to national service is that avoidance of conscription was not recognised by many foreign countries as a valid reason for seeking residence. Although, in December 1978, the UN General Assembly called upon member states to 'grant asylum or safe transit...to persons compelled to leave their country of nationality solely because of conscientious objection to assisting in the enforcement of apartheid through service in the military or the police',<sup>53</sup> not all countries complied. In 1980 the UK High Commission in South Africa informed Dr Brand Fourie of the Department of Foreign Affairs that 'unwillingness to perform national service alone would not normally be adequate grounds to support an application to enter and reside in the UK',<sup>54</sup> indicating that emigrants from South Africa had to have other grounds, at least officially, for their departure. However while some men who may have wished to emigrate to avoid conscription were unable to do so for lack of 'adequate grounds', many of those for whom it was a possibility did not do so; many SADF soldiers had access to foreign passports (a 1989 estimate claimed the numbers were as high as one in three<sup>55</sup>) and could have left the country had they wished, but chose to stay and do military service instead.

However, while emigration was seen as a problem by the government and SADF, conscientious objector Charles Yeats claims that the SADF seemed happier for objectors to 'quietly leave the country...sparing the military the unwelcome publicity

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<sup>49</sup> DDDC, Verslae (Reports) (Group 2), Box 375, File ref. 97/4, "Gleeson Committee – Conscientious Objection (1991)"; Memo by David Shandler, *The Conscription Drain: National Service in South Africa*, (n.d.), p.3 & p.6.

<sup>50</sup> *Gleeson Report*, p.4.

<sup>51</sup> Cock, *Colonels and Cadres*, p.82.

<sup>52</sup> *Sunday Times*, 7 August 1988. Although this gives a figure of almost 18 000 people, it probably includes families who emigrated so that one member could avoid conscription.

<sup>53</sup> Cawthra, Kraak & O'Sullivan, *War and Resistance*, p.191.

<sup>54</sup> DDDC, Chief of Staff Personnel (Group 6), Box 1884, File ref. 107/7/5, *Uitstel/Vrystel van Diensplig, Geloofsbesware (Postponement/Exemption from Military Service, Religious Objections)*, (09/08/77-08/10/82); Letter J Lealy of UK embassy to Fourie dated 17 April 1980.

<sup>55</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.108.

of a trial.<sup>56</sup> In this he may have a point as it was certainly easier for the military to rid themselves of certain individuals who may cause a great deal of trouble by seeing them go abroad, but there is no evidence of a concerted or acknowledged policy within the Defence Force to allow or encourage emigration.

The serving men of the SADF, and especially CF campers, were often during the last decade of national service a primary source of discontent with the system of conscription, often because it required them to continue to render service that they believed to be wrong. Men deployed in Namibia, Angola and in the townships of South Africa itself felt great resentment at being put in these positions, especially in the townships where they were required to act against their countrymen, albeit countrymen of a different race. Indeed the general consensus among servicemen was 'it was far worse doing township duty than border duty'.<sup>57</sup> Often the complaints were about the ethics of the situation, especially in view of continued international condemnation of the SADF deployments, though sometimes the complaints were of a purely practical nature. The South African Chamber of Business submitted a complaint from its members that township service was unpopular amongst CF and Commando units because of 'the ever present possibility of a confrontation between employer and employees',<sup>58</sup> while others complained that due to a technicality a three month period spent on the border with the CF before 1982 was only credited as a one month camp, a fact which caused universal dissatisfaction.<sup>59</sup>

Military service also came under fire for the very practical reason that South African men were dying in increasing numbers in the conflicts they were sent into. Indeed some of the most damaging blows to the South African military were not struck by their battlefield enemies but by home public opinion, and the unwillingness of the white population to accept conscript losses. Conscript casualties were never a huge issue in South Africa but when they did occur, whether on the battlefield or from other causes, they generated a good deal of negative publicity, and highlighted the injustices of a system that sent ordinary men who had no choice to their deaths.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Charles Yeats, *Prisoner of Conscience* (London, 2005), p.23.

<sup>57</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.217.

<sup>58</sup> DDDC, Verslae (Reports) (Group 2), Box 375, File ref. 97/4, "Gleeson Committee – *Conscientious Objection (1991)*:"; Report by South African Chamber of Business Johannesburg, dated 13 June 1990, p.2.

<sup>59</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; National Service 1984. Letter to Raw dated 21 April 1985 from a disgruntled member of the Citizen Force.

<sup>60</sup> For example prominent articles run in the *Sunday Express* (5 November 1972) and *Daily News* (4 August 1972) heavily criticising the government over the deaths of seven conscripts.

One final factor that played a part in men being able to avoid service is simply whether the opportunity presented itself or not. It is probable that many men considered not reporting for duty or applying for an exemption, but as circumstances rendered their chances of success in doing so minimal, they saw no option but to serve. It is equally probable that some of the men who did not wish to serve made the decision to go on the run or into exile in large measure because the opportunity to successfully avoid service was there. It is also certain, however, that some men who applied for and were granted deferments or exemptions from service were not particularly opposed to conscription, but simply found that their circumstances prevented them from serving.

The reasons held by white South Africans for rejecting conscription were manifold and diverse. Opposition can generally be broken down into two categories; conceptual or theoretical resistance, engaged in by campaign groups and members of the public; and physical resistance, engaged in by young men who chose not to report for service. The most high profile opposition to conscription across virtually the whole period was conceptual objection on moral grounds. At first this centred on calls for the re-legalisation of religious conscientious objection, but by the last decade of compulsory service the moral issues of apartheid and militarism had taken over the conscription debate, with organisations such as the ECC instigating and maintaining debate. Religious objectors were few in number but existed throughout the conscription era, refusing service on the grounds that it clashed with the teachings of their faith. Some few men also resisted conscription to strike a blow, however small, against the apartheid state. Yet while the public face of resistance to national service had a foundation on moral grounds, throughout the period men continued to have misgivings for more personal reasons. Fear was an obvious factor; fear of both battlefield death or mutilation and fear of military life, as the SADF was always seen as a tough or even brutal environment. Accusation of ill treatment, poor conditions and little reward dogged the SADF throughout the period and naturally made some men reluctant to serve. The increasing service requirements were also a factor; while some looked on a stint in the military as an adventure, others resented the intrusion into their lives and so the lengthier the intrusion the more likely men were to attempt to avoid it. However while personal motives may have driven men to avoid conscription, it was not until the 1980s when four year service requirements, relatively widespread anti-SADF feelings and significant operational deployments came about that significant numbers of white South African men felt sufficiently compelled or sufficiently justified to resist national service.

## 6. Organised Opposition to Conscription

Opposition to conscription in South Africa was for most of the compulsory service period low-key, disjointed and unorganised, but from the late 1970s onwards a series of groups and organisations sprang up to deal with the issue. While the organisations only existed for a small portion of the national service era and while they never gained widespread support from within the white community, their existence was still an important factor of the South African national service experience.

To begin with the conscription debate was maintained sporadically by existing anti-apartheid groups but from the early 1980s it was felt that national organisations concentrating specifically on conscription were required, and to this end the Conscientious Objectors Support Group (COSG) was created in 1980, to be followed by the wider reaching and more multi-issued End Conscription Campaign (ECC) three years later. Outside of South Africa groups such as the Committee on South African War Resistance (COSAWR) in the UK and Netherlands, and the less well known South African Military Refugees Fund in the USA, appeared to promote resistance to national service and to the SADF from abroad, and to provide aid and sanctuary for people fleeing South Africa to avoid the call-up.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to discuss these organisations, to look at the motivations behind them, and to consider how and why they were able to gain a foothold, albeit limited, in the white community. This chapter will argue that although campaigns such as the ECC were opposed to conscription and they succeeded in creating and maintaining debate on the topic, their rejection of the system stemmed more from the fact that it was being used to uphold apartheid than from any natural indisposition towards national service. The members of the campaigns, and especially ECC members, generally saw the fight against conscription as part of a wider fight against apartheid. Conscription as an issue only became a topic for debate once the military began to increasingly lend its support to the apartheid state, and it was anti-apartheid activists who made up the overwhelming majority of anti-conscription campaigners. It is telling that early resistance to conscription grew up not as an independent phenomenon, but as part of the protest over the government's racial policies, which the largely conscript SADF was increasingly seen as defending.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip H. Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians, Civil-Military Relations in South Africa* (Cambridge, 1984), p.133.

For the first two-and-a-half decades of compulsory military service, any opposition to conscription came only intermittently from existing organisations for which conscription was just one of many issues to campaign about. The SACC briefly addressed the issue in 1974 before relapsing into relative silence until the end of the decade, and the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) began by the 1980s to organise workshops and 'focus weeks' about conscription and conscientious objection.<sup>2</sup> Most of the early protest about conscription came from private individuals, and when organisations did turn to the topic it was normally due to their opposition to increasing apartheid militarism. The ANC occasionally made calls for whites to refuse to participate in the apartheid military, although due to their banning and the vigilant censors their calls were unlikely to be heard by the vast majority of white South Africans.

The first organisation that took on conscription as a major campaigning issue was the Committee on South African War Resistance (COSAWR) which was founded in 1978 in London and Amsterdam. The organisation's aims were to oppose apartheid militarism and to offer help and support for those who chose exile to avoid it. Quite naturally the organisation made calls for South Africans to reject military service, and it published the *Resister* magazine to highlight issues of resistance to the apartheid government and its military. However, COSAWR did not simply advocate non-participation in the SADF but said that this 'should be the basis on which to build active participation in the struggle to free South Africa and Namibia from racist and apartheid repression.'<sup>3</sup> The appeal of COSAWR was therefore limited to the small constituency that actually wished to fight to end apartheid, and its impact was further limited by the fact that it was operating from abroad and was composed by exiles who had left South Africa rather than stay and work within the country.

The first organisation devoted solely to an issue concerning conscription began in South Africa in 1980. COSG was formed with the aim of publicising the plight of religious objectors and supporting them through their trials and incarceration. The organisation also expressed discontent with apartheid and the militarism that was creeping into South African society but overall it was a pacifist organisation committed to helping those who refused to join the SADF for conscientious reasons,

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<sup>2</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step, War Resistance in South Africa* (London, 1989), p.82.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Graaf (ed.), *Hawks and Doves – the Pro- and Anti-Conscription Press in South Africa* (Durban, 1988), p.42, boxed text.



rather than an organisation that concerned itself too much with politics.<sup>4</sup> The COSG publication *Objector* lacked the vicious and vitriolic denunciations of the NP regime that characterised COSAWR's *Resister* magazine and limited itself more to issues surrounding objection to conscription. COSG rejected the provisions of the 1983 Defence Amendment for conscientious objectors as too narrow, and throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s it continued to campaign for wider scope and lesser punishments for conscientious objection. However while it supported conscientious objectors and rejected apartheid militarism,<sup>5</sup> COSG did little in the way of large scale campaigning against the overall system of national service, and it was the perceived need for such a campaign that led to the birth of the ECC in the 1983.

The ECC was launched in 1983 following the national conferences of the Black Sash, a fairly radical-liberal organisation that struggled for civil rights in South Africa, and COSG, many of whose members felt that focusing on conscientious objection was too exclusive and narrow to gain popular support.<sup>6</sup> It came into existence partly in response to a growing sense of unease about the national service system, as previously no organisation had focussed on the overall issue of conscription to any large extent as one of the main injustices in South Africa, and it was felt in the left wing circles that such an organisation was required.

The timing of the creation of the ECC is telling, as it came at a time when the SADF and its conscripted soldiers were being increasingly linked to the security and maintenance of the South African state (that is to say the government and its structures, as opposed to the territorial integrity of the country), which was generally equated to the maintenance of the system of apartheid. It also came at a time when a proliferation of anti-apartheid movements began to appear, most under the umbrella of the United Democratic Front, and in some ways the appearance of the ECC can be seen as a symptom of this penchant for organisation creation that was evident in South Africa in the early 1980s.<sup>7</sup> Most of the initial membership of the ECC was drawn from activists in other groups such as the Black Sash, COSG, and the NUSAS, and despite focusing on an issue that directly concerned only men, it

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<sup>4</sup> William Bellamy, *Une Identité Nouvelle Pour L'Afrique du Sud* (Paris, 1996), p.85.

<sup>5</sup> Gavin Cawthra, Gerald Kraak, & Gerald O'Sullivan (eds), *War and Resistance, South Africa Reports: The Struggle for South Africa as Documented by Resister Magazine* (London, 1994), p.212.

<sup>6</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.86.

<sup>7</sup> See Ineke van Kessel, "Beyond Our Wildest Dreams", *The United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa* (Charlottesville, 2000).

contained many female members.<sup>8</sup> The members were usually young, English-speaking and middle-class, and much of the ECC's activities were carried out in English dominated universities in Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg.<sup>9</sup> By 1988, 'According to national organiser, Nic Borain, the ECC has three major social roots; the church, conscientious objectors themselves, and the student left.'<sup>10</sup>

A problem when talking of the ECC is that it was never a strictly defined campaign with a centralised leadership, but rather an umbrella organisation of affiliates and regional branches that ran their own often widely different campaigns, linked together through a national organiser whose influence over the direction of the organisation was intended to be kept to a minimum. The ECC was in fact a multifaceted and heterogeneous organisation and even the national campaigns were carried out with greater or lesser degrees of enthusiasm depending on the outlook of the regional branches. However there was some overall policy direction and it is possible to talk of there being at least a loosely unified ECC policy, especially with the appointment of a national organiser from 1984 onwards. To complicate matters further, the individual members of the organisation often also belonged to other political protest groups, mainly anti-apartheid affiliates of the United Democratic Front, and elements of their discourse occasionally crept into the ECC's campaigns making it sometimes difficult to distinguish the specific calls opposing conscription from the wider calls to end apartheid. In 1988 the organisation voted for closer links (though not official affiliation) with the United Democratic Front, and by the time the ECC was banned in August of that year it had become a definite link in the chain of apartheid opposition.

The ECC as an organisation was seemingly totally opposed to conscription; their very name suggests it and leaves little to the imagination as regards their probable aims. Unfortunately though, ECC is a misnomer as the campaign was not simply committed to ending conscription, but rather aimed at ending the abuses and injustices perceived to be perpetrated by the predominantly conscript SADF. It was formed for the purpose of instigating and maintaining mainstream debate on the subject of conscription, and was tasked with publicising the issues surrounding the national service system. However over the half decade of effective operation the ECC's aims drifted from purely opposing conscription itself to demanding social

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<sup>8</sup> Jacklyn Cock, *Colonels and Cadres, War and Gender in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1991), p.174.

<sup>9</sup> Cawthra, Kraak, & O'Sullivan, *War and Resistance*, p.208.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Graaf (ed.), *Hawks and Doves, the pro- and anti-conscription press in South Africa* (Durban, 1988), p.36.

justice, an end to war, and an end to the internal deployment of the SADF. It was generally a deeply anti-military organisation, and would have been equally opposed to the SADF and its actions had that force been totally composed of volunteers. Despite the ECC having no formal links to the United Democratic Front, the ANC or to any mainstream anti-apartheid groups, bringing down the system of conscription was for some members simply a means to end. The rationale for the organisation provided by COSG claimed 'The alliance brings together those who reject the defence of apartheid as immoral, and are striving for peace and justice in SA. The starting point for reaching this constituency is by tapping their particular resentment of the militarization of our society.'<sup>11</sup> This can indeed be seen as a somewhat cynical use of the misgivings that some people had about conscription to draw them into a wider opposition to apartheid and militarism.

Merran Willis Phillips points out in her thorough work on the ECC that 'The initial expectation of the campaign was not so much to *end* conscription, as to use the issue to provide a legal platform from which to educate people about the relationship between militarism and apartheid.'<sup>12</sup> This is a far cry from simply opposing national service, and it can be seen that those who provide the name of the ECC as incontrovertible proof that conscription was responsible for creating a rift between the government and the people are presenting an incomplete picture. The ECC membership was already opposed to the government and for many of the members the issue of conscription was merely another angle from which to assault the institutions of apartheid and white dominance. Even the title of Phillip's study acknowledges this, labelling the ECC as 'White Extra-Parliamentary Opposition to Apartheid', rather than opposition to militarism or national service.

Although the ECC was opposed to conscription their initial opposition stemmed from the staple concerns of the liberal left about the state of South African society and the many injustices it contained. These concerns had existed long before 1983, but the military had not before been seen as playing a major role in racial oppression. However with the increasing military presence in civil government and the noticeably higher profile of the military in society,<sup>13</sup> along with the blurred distinction between the Police and the Army with both being referred to as the 'Security Forces', the

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<sup>11</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.86.

<sup>12</sup> Merran Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign, 1983-1988. A Study of White Extra-Parliamentary Opposition to Apartheid* (MA thesis, UNISA, 2002) p.40.

<sup>13</sup> Grundy, Kenneth, *The Rise of the South African Security Establishment, an Essay on the Changing Locus of State Power* (Johannesburg, 1983).

SADF began to bear some of the brunt of the anti-apartheid rhetoric. This was especially the case from 1984 when the township deployments 'provoked an upsurge in opposition to conscription.'<sup>14</sup>

The concerns expressed by the ECC reflected opposition to conscription from a somewhat theoretical perspective, in that few of the issues that concerned them directly affected white civil society, and those that did such as the lack of provision for conscientious objection affected only a small minority of people. The ECC's denunciations of conscription on moral grounds did not reflect some of the more practical reasons for opposing conscription that were held up and down the land, for instance that some men did not like spending much of their lives at the beck and call of the military, and parents did not like having their sons risk their lives on a distant border. White South Africa was largely ignorant of the plight of their black countrymen, and even among students who were considered the most politicised section of society only eight percent of whites had any contact with their black peers.<sup>15</sup> The ECC's demands for a 'just peace' or 'social justice' would therefore have had little practical meaning outside their own constituency. While moral qualms about military service were widely evident among conscription resisters, more personal reasons for avoiding service were at least as widely held, and ECC representations of these issues was often low-key to nonexistent.

The issue of the impact that the ECC and other campaigns had on the wider white public is open to different interpretations. In a cause-and-effect dilemma, it is hard to say whether the ECC sowed the seeds of discontent over conscription or whether they merely reaped the harvest of a society growing increasingly weary of conflict. It can be claimed that the ECC's opposition to conscription was widely responsible for increasing numbers of people rejecting the system, though it could also be argued that the ECC was merely a symptom of a society beginning resent the impositions of service. Both interpretations have some validity, as the ECC would not have been created had there not been an existing groundswell of support, and the organisation's campaigns lifted conscription from a modestly contested issue to a well publicised nationwide debate.

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<sup>14</sup> Laurie Nathan, "'Marching to a Different Beat": the history of the End Conscription Campaign', in Jacklyn Cock & Laurie Nathan (eds), *War and Society, the Militarization of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1989), p.313.

<sup>15</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (7 Volumes, Cape Town, 1998), Vol. 4, p.222.

While it is often acknowledged that the number of actual active anti-conscript campaigners was generally low, the organisation's message was undoubtedly farther reaching than its membership; just how much farther reaching can be debated. Both Phillips and Daniel Conway<sup>16</sup> ascribe a great deal of potential to the ECC's messages (see chapter 1 for Conway's interpretation), though their position flies somewhat in the face of the evidence. Both of these authors attribute to the ECC the capacity to launch a significant challenge to the state, though such a challenge could only have been made by an organisation such as the ECC if a broad based and widespread support for the organisation existed. This was, however, never the case, and though most works on the ECC have tended to glorify the campaign and its struggle against the odds, few have pointed out the limitations of the campaign's support in the wider community.

The ECC's message was certainly not universally heard, as even by the early 1990s there were conscripts, especially in the Afrikaner community, who did not know about the ECC.<sup>17</sup> These men were probably in the minority, but while it can be shown that a great many people heard the ECC's message, for example with over a thousand people attending a 'Troops Out' campaign concert in Cape Town in 1985,<sup>18</sup> whether they took heed of it or not is another matter. A constructively critical analysis of the Durban ECC group's newsletter *At Ease*, of which 7000 copies were distributed per issue, admitted 'it is impossible to say how much of the issue is favourably received, or indeed, even read.'<sup>19</sup> Laurie Nathan, the some-time national organiser of the organisation, admitted that when the ECC began 'the broader white community regarded it as irrelevant or subversive',<sup>20</sup> and in 1989 a member of COSAWR acknowledged that the anti-conscription groups were still 'a marginal force within the white community.'<sup>21</sup> This is possibly unsurprising, as in 1984 Philip Frankel commented that in general 'the activist anti-militarist groups in the churches and the English-speaking universities appeal to a very small and select community of liberals and mild radicals'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel Conway, "'Every Coward's Choice'?: Political Objection to Military Service in Apartheid South Africa as Sexual Citizenship', *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, (March 2004), 25-45.

<sup>17</sup> Personal Correspondence with Louis Botha, (email correspondence, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*, p.68.

<sup>19</sup> Graaf, *Hawks and Doves*, p.87.

<sup>20</sup> Nathan, 'Marching to a Different Beat', in Cock and Nathan, *War and Society*, p.308.

<sup>21</sup> *Sechaba*, (December 1989), p.25.

<sup>22</sup> Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, p.127.

When considering how far the ECC message spread it could be inferred from some evidence that despite the publicity that the organisation attracted, notions of what the ECC was and really stood for were sketchy for many people. The government's own banning order issued in August 1988 ridiculously failed to correctly name the organisation, calling it the End Conscription Committee, and an article appearing in the *Economist* in July of the same year said that ECC stood for End Compulsory Conscription and was vague as to the organisation's aims.<sup>23</sup> However this evidence of misunderstandings must be put into context, as although the ECC was misnamed both of the above mistakes retained the essential message of the group's name with the words 'End' and 'Conscription'.

A possible measure of the impact of the campaigns against conscription on wider society is the Establishment's response to the perceived threat to its own hegemonic militarist discourse. The government, the SADF, and right-wing groups with suspected links to the latter institutions such as Veterans for Victory, all came down hard on the ECC and their vicious responses can be interpreted as a back-handed compliment to the efficacy of the campaigns. Again this evidence must be tempered with the counter-argument that the attacks on the ECC were probably in a way pre-emptive strikes on the organisation aiming to cut it down before it was able to launch a valid challenge to the Establishment, rather than reactive counter-measures. Even the pro-ECC publication *Out of Step* admitted the government's response to the ECC was 'completely disproportionate to the size or effectiveness of the organisation.'<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, the fact that the government felt compelled to act against the ECC at all is an indication that it either did, or at least had the potential to, pose a reasonable challenge to the government in wider society and not only in its members' own anti-Establishment circles. The government's response to the ECC was a fairly well documented and widely reported series of verbal and sometimes physical attacks, while the Police and local councils were often obstructive to the organisation's attempts to run campaigns.<sup>25</sup> In 1988, the ECC was won a Supreme Court case against the SADF over their harassment of the organisation, although the ECC's banning turned this into something of a pyrrhic victory.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, the widely broadcast denunciations of the ECC by various government officials made the name

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<sup>23</sup> *The Economist*, 23 July 1988, vol.308, n.7560, p.40, *The Ones Who Won't go to War*.

<sup>24</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.10.

<sup>25</sup> See Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*, for a fuller description of anti-ECC acts.

<sup>26</sup> David Chidester, *Shots in the Streets, Violence and Religion in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1991), p.108.



of the ECC better known than it could have become by its own efforts. Certainly some of the governmental utterances placed the ECC on an anti-Establishment pedestal that its own campaigns did not merit, such as when Adriaan Vlok, the Minister of Law and Order, labelled it 'one of the South Africa's "four main enemies", along with the ANC, the SACP and the United Democratic Front.'<sup>27</sup>

The ECC tried hard to appeal to the broadest possible spectrum of the white population, but by the nature of their campaigns they unintentionally but inevitably limited their support base. The decentralised nature of the ECC made it difficult to pin down exactly where the organisation was politically. It was certainly a force of opposition to the government, but whether it was a loyal opposition or a partisan of the armed liberation struggle is a matter of conjecture, though the organisation's general tone suggests it was closer to the latter. Many individual members of the ECC were certainly proponents of the armed struggle against apartheid, but there were also pacifist elements who deplored all conflict.<sup>28</sup>

However, even in moderate-liberal circles some felt ill at ease with the ECC, and government propaganda helped fuel their disquiet. Facts such as the refusal by the leaders of the Durban ECC to condemn the ANC and their terrorist campaign were used as evidence that the ECC did not have the people's interests at heart and were in fact communist or ANC agents.<sup>29</sup> The primary base of support for the ECC came from those anti-militarists who disliked apartheid enough to see it brought down whatever the cost, and saw that ending conscription could only hasten the racist system's demise. Another group of people who generally had sympathy with the ECC's message were those who opposed apartheid, and who believed the security discourse about the communist threat to be an exaggeration. These people would have seen little risk in removing the bulk of the manpower from the SADF, and may have agreed with the ECC's conclusions that conscription was a waste of money and resources and was being used primarily to perpetuate racial oppression.

Outside of these anti-apartheid and generally anti-military constituencies, the ECC limited their potential support by making their stand on social justice and on reducing the military capability of the state, without giving too much evidence that they had thought about the potential consequences. Some of the lack of support shown for the

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<sup>27</sup> *The Economist*, 23 July 1988, vol.308, n.7560, p.40, *The Ones Who Won't go to War*.

<sup>28</sup> Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*, p.43.

<sup>29</sup> Graaf, *Hawks and Doves*, p.67, boxed text.

anti-conscription movement from otherwise moderate or liberal communities such as the PFP and its supporters can be attributed to the fact that although the campaign's points were valid, they failed to address the issue of white security and white self-interest. While many white people would have agreed with the ECC assessment that the occupation of Namibia and the SADF presence in the townships were wrong, these issues did not directly affect them, and despite the fact that almost everybody knew somebody who had done or was doing military service in these areas, the conflicts there remained distant and semi-obscure to much of white society.<sup>30</sup> This was even more the case because the total domination the government enjoyed over the media prevented a cohesive view of the security situation reaching the white public. On the other hand terrorist violence and the gruesome government warnings of communist inspired atrocities appeared very real to white society and government assurances that a strong presence in the townships and in Namibia would keep the conflict distant from white homes was enough for many whites to reject the ECC's message, even if they recognised on a moral level that it had some currency.<sup>31</sup>

Equally, the ECC's obvious and occasionally militant penchant for demanding social levelling may have been too much for some whites, who realised that there was deep poverty and sympathised, but who had no intention of seeing their own wealth redistributed. Had the ECC formulated a solid and realistic plan to ensure white security and a measure of dominance without recourse to the military, their support base would undoubtedly have been wider. However, as not only conscription but also apartheid and by implication white political and economic dominance were abhorrent to the membership of the ECC, there was nothing that they could offer as a sop to the self-interest of whites except calls to stop the sacrifice of young men in immoral conflicts, and nothing they could offer to allay white security fears except to claim that with apartheid gone the security threat would recede. As many white South Africans at the time fully believed the NP security discourse and were grateful to have the protection of the SADF, calls for resistance to conscription fell largely on deaf ears.

The ECC's support was further weakened by the effectiveness of the government's response to it, and by the very public punishments handed down to certain objectors associated with the organisation. Although the ECC was able to use the trials of conscientious objectors as a platform from which to attack the government, the

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<sup>30</sup> Cock, *Colonels and Cadres*, p.21.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Feinstein & others, 'Some Attitudes Towards Conscription in South Africa', *Psychology in Society*, Vol. 5, (1986), pp.70-71.

results of such trials also served to deter some men. One man conscripted in the late 1980s said that while he was strongly anti-government and anti-conscription, he did not consider joining the ECC because 'I heard that those guys ended up going to jail, so I did not want to be part of it.'<sup>32</sup>

For anyone who supported apartheid the messages of the ECC were utterly meaningless or even treasonous.<sup>33</sup> The aims of the ECC were so obviously in line with those of the various anti-apartheid movements that even the most anti-military of the partisans of apartheid could not completely identify with their message. However even those with anti-apartheid sentiments were often content for the government to maintain strong security forces to protect the nation from internal turmoil and external invasion, while continuing to hope for a negotiated settlement to end apartheid.

The NP government keenly reminded the people at every turn that avaricious Soviet eyes were always watching and at the first sign of weakness they would pounce. The fact that the Soviet Union's own troubles meant that this was not likely during the 1980s was not apparent to most white South Africans who continued to believe that a strong military was essential for peaceful transition. Indeed while many scholars now use the impressive power of hindsight to mock the concept of 'total onslaught', in the early 1980s the threat to South Africa was widely seen to be real enough.<sup>34</sup> Many political opponents of the NP who were worried about this threat expressed their distaste for the anti-conscription movements, seeing them as working against the best interests of South Africa, for example one NRP supporter who wrote 'We are so worried about the Draft Dodgers Campaign...I think that it is rotten.'<sup>35</sup> The Opposition parties themselves generally fell into this category, and throughout the period of national service expressed their support for the military and the government's defence policy while at the same time calling for an end to or the complete reform of the racially based system of apartheid. In the 1981 General Election the vaguely liberal NRP campaigned with the slogans 'Harmony, Strength, Security' and 'Vote New Republic Party for Real security'<sup>36</sup>, echoing the government's own security discourse, and in 1985 Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert, the leader of the PFP, called the

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<sup>32</sup> Personal correspondence with Stewart Kramm, (e-mail correspondence, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> For example the vicious response to the ECC campaigns by Veterans for Victory.

<sup>34</sup> In 1979 an observer wrote 'Soviet-Cuban intervention must now be considered a real possibility in the early 1980s'. Scott Thompson & Brett Silvers, 'South Africa in Soviet Strategy', in R. Bissel & C. Crocker (eds), *South Africa into the 1980s* (Colorado, 1979) p.144.

<sup>35</sup> UP Archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; Defence General 1985-1986. Letter to Raw, May 1986.

<sup>36</sup> W.A. Kleynhans, *SA General Election Manifestos 1910-1981* (Pretoria, 1987), pp.492-95.

ECC a 'dangerously naïve' and 'counter-productive' organisation,<sup>37</sup> indicating that he too felt the need for a strong security presence to ensure peaceful change.

On occasion the anti-conscription organisations also tried to branch out to people of other population groups. They were only partially successful in this, as for average people in those communities conscription was not a particularly important or relevant issue. In 1986 the Institute of Race Relations pointed this out, saying 'viewed from the townships, it does not matter whether the troops maintaining a dominating presence there are conscripted or not'.<sup>38</sup> Some blacks were also very suspicious of these largely young, white, middle-class activists, an attitude reflected in a letter written to *Frontline* magazine (admittedly not talking about the ECC) saying 'Blacks do not need some pimply, long haired, white child to "protect" us from the ideas that are "reactionary"'.<sup>39</sup> The cultural and symbolic aspects of the ECC campaigns were also largely designed to appeal to mainly white South Africans, and so were recognised to have little impact in other culturally different communities.<sup>40</sup> However while ordinary people may have found little relevance in the ECC, the black leadership were more receptive, with Nelson Mandela himself appearing as a keynote speaker and praising the organisation at the 1993 ECC peace festival.<sup>41</sup>

The organised resistance to conscription that appeared during the early 1980s was a response to the fact that the SADF was becoming increasingly linked to the apartheid state and to oppression in southern Africa. Organised protests against national service before this time came from groups campaigning against apartheid for which conscription was only one of many issues, but by the 1980s conscription had become enough of a controversial topic in its own right to merit its own campaigns. The first group to concentrate solely on an issue of conscription was COSG, formed in 1980 to provide support for conscientious objectors. This organisation had fairly limited aims and contented itself with raising awareness of conscientious objection without really tackling problems surrounding conscription, apartheid and militarism.

This task fell to the ECC, created in 1983, which in a half decade of campaigning turned conscription into a hotly debated topic and proved enough of a thorn in the

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<sup>37</sup> Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*, p.58.

<sup>38</sup> South African Institute of Race Relations, 'Conscription and Race Relations: the Institute States its Point of View', *Race Relations News*, (March/April 1986), p.6.

<sup>39</sup> *Frontline*, (August 1980), p.3, letter from Gilbert Makhoba, of Soweto.

<sup>40</sup> Graaf, *Hawks and Doves*, p.38.

<sup>41</sup> Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign*, p.118.

government's side to prompt its banning in August 1988. The agenda of the ECC however was not only to oppose conscription, but to oppose the deployments of the SADF, highlight militarism in society, and to a lesser extent to call for an end to apartheid policies. The organisation was an umbrella of regional branches and national affiliates, and it drew most of its support from other anti-apartheid groups. The impact of the ECC on white society was noticeable through its campaigns and through the government's often vicious responses, but in terms of membership it hardly managed to expand much further than the white English-speaking middle-class constituency from which it came. The organisation's members were anti-apartheid and anti-militarists, and their campaigns appealed only to those who shared these values or to a limited number of others with anti-SADF inclinations. The opposition to conscription by the ECC and other organisations such as COSAWR was in fact mainly based on their members' opposition to apartheid, and the anti-conscription movement was never able and indeed never tried to divorce its aims from those of the anti-apartheid struggle. Due to the relatively radical calls that entered some of the ECC's campaigns, it attracted as much criticism within South Africa as it did approbation, if not more, and its success was therefore somewhat limited. That it even achieved the small success that it did is, given the opposition that it faced from the government and SADF, possibly remarkable, but the fact remains that the organisation never achieved widespread support among the white population, and the pressure that it was able to bring to bear on the government was thus somewhat limited. However, while the ECC's impact on white society may have been limited, through its systematic and persistent protests about national service, its impact on the conscription debate was far greater.

## 7. The Impacts of Conscription

Military service was something that touched the vast majority of white people in apartheid South Africa in some way. This chapter aims to look at the impacts and to assess the lasting effects of conscription. The lives of the white men who were conscripted or forced to take action to avoid conscription, as well as the lives of their families and friends, were often heavily affected by national service. The military experience sometimes left conscripts mentally or physically scarred, and in many cases men were transformed by their SADF experiences. For virtually all conscripted men military service came at a formative period of life, and the Defence Force played a large role in turning often immature school leavers into fully-fledged adults, with both positive and negative consequences.<sup>1</sup> Conscription was also unfortunately responsible for the premature deaths of many hundreds of young South Africans through military combat, accidents, or suicides.

Society was also affected by conscription. The need to impose conscription led to a heightened profile of the SADF and the introduction of the military into schools, while in the years of universal service almost every white person had a family member in the military at some time. Economically, the removal of so many young men from the racially based South African economy meant that national service had something of a negative and damaging impact. The biggest and to many people the most heinous impact of conscription was that it provided the NP government with a large and well trained mass of men against whom the liberation struggle could not hope to prevail alone. While conscripts may not have been actively fighting for apartheid and while the SADF perceived itself as politically neutral,<sup>2</sup> their presence in uniform was a great bolster to the apartheid state.

For some four decades conscription was used to give the Defence Force sufficient manpower to perform its duties. During much of this period, but most especially during the 1980s, the SADF was accused of being a principal pillar of apartheid. Although the Defence Force has always maintained that it was apolitical and served South Africa, by defending the state it was in fact also inevitably defending apartheid. Part of the reason that a conflict of opinion about the SADF's role exists is the differing perceptions that were held about the nature of the threat to South Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Flischer, 'Some Psychological Aspects of Commencing "National Service" in South Africa', *Psychology in Society*, Vol. 7, (1987), p.46.

<sup>2</sup> Magnus Malan, *My Life With the SA Defence Force* (Pretoria, 2006), p.161.



The NP government tended to view the military threat to the nation as something separate from apartheid, while the rest of the world saw it as a result of apartheid. Furthermore, while the SADF saw the ANC and SWAPO as part of the Soviet-sponsored communist onslaught and thus sought to defend the state against this external attack, to most of the rest of the world the ANC and SWAPO were internal liberation movements looking to create racial equality and social justice. When the SADF opposed them it was therefore accused of opposing their desire for racial equality, and thus upholding apartheid. Whether the SADF was responsible for the perpetuation of apartheid or merely bought politicians time to ensure evolutionary rather than revolutionary reform is open to interpretation, but in either case national service was instrumental in giving the SADF the capacity to perform its duties.

One impact that might have been expected from having a military primarily staffed by conscripts and part-time soldiers is that operational effectiveness may be lower than in a professional volunteer army. However General Magnus Malan, sometime Chief of the Defence Force and then Minister of Defence during the 1980s, totally refutes this,<sup>3</sup> and evidence suggests that on the battlefield the conscripts and Citizen Force soldiers more than held their own against the forces pitched against them in Angola and Namibia. Members of the PF and even Special Forces also seldom expressed misgivings about the effectiveness of national servicemen.<sup>4</sup> However, during the escalating conflicts of the 1980s some conscripts did have misgivings about the morality of their cause and surreptitiously did all in their power to hinder the South African war machine. Acts of sabotage or deliberate dereliction of duty occurred,<sup>5</sup> and national servicemen provided espionage intelligence to the anti-apartheid movements.<sup>6</sup> Conscripted also meant that the SADF brought in men palpably unsuitable for the military, men who were more likely to turn to alcohol, drugs and theft.<sup>7</sup> However, subversion within the SADF was relatively uncommon, and the Defence Force ran remarkably smoothly with its largely conscripted personnel.

The public sensitivity to casualties among conscripts may also have had an impact on the efficacy of the SADF, although General Malan is again adamant that this is not

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<sup>3</sup> Personal correspondence with General Magnus Malan, (email correspondence, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Mathew Paul, *Parabat* (Johannesburg, 2001); & Jack Greeff, *A Greater Share of Honour* (Ellisras, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> *Sechaba*, (December 1985), p.23; and Gavin Cawthra, Gerald Kraak, & Gerald O'Sullivan (eds), *War and Resistance, South Africa Reports: The Struggle for South Africa as Documented by Resister Magazine* (London, 1994), p.160.

<sup>6</sup> Gavin Cawthra, *Brutal Force, The Apartheid War Machine* (London, 1986), p.45.

<sup>7</sup> Al Lovejoy, *Acid Alex* (Cape Town, 2005), p.191.

the case, as 'South African commanders have rarely fought any battle at any cost',<sup>8</sup> and former Chief of the Defence Force General Jannie Geldenhuys also espouses this view.<sup>9</sup> However, there was a definite need to keep losses to a bare minimum, and in the 1987-88 Angolan campaign General Meyer ordered that 'The need to minimise casualties would always be a limitation on the employment of the South African forces.'<sup>10</sup> It is believed even in anti-SADF circles that South Africa could have achieved much more at Cuito Cuanavale<sup>11</sup> had they been able to accept more substantial conscript losses,<sup>12</sup> and a man involved in the 1975-76 operations in Angola claimed that 'I'm sure that if they send in 15 000 guys, and if the South Africans took a moderate amount of casualties, they could have won the war.'<sup>13</sup> However this was never possible. The South African public was almost wholly unaware of the country's involvement in Angola at either time, and large scale conscript losses could simply not be sustained. Operational planning certainly was affected by this need to preserve life; whether operational efficiency was equally affected is a moot point.

The duties carried out by conscripts in the Defence Force often left a mark on the men involved. The impact of the Defence Force experience was evident from the first call-up in 1952 and would continue much in the same vein through the conscription era. Conscripts were as a rule looked down on by PF staff and the training they underwent was physically tough and mentally challenging. 'Basics' was a period where men were broken down from their civilian incarnations, and rebuilt as a soldier useful to the Defence Force and the nation. Men went through a 'depersonalization process', whereby 'you have the same uniforms, and haircuts and just become another number.'<sup>14</sup> Although personalities were not entirely destroyed, men were changed by their military training experience. Men came out of basics far fitter, tougher both physically and mentally, and often with a different perception of such concepts as violence and force than when they went in. Soldiers went through a dehumanizing process and almost universally accounts of conscripts' experiences of basics contain detail of inhuman and degrading practices, all part of the Defence

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<sup>8</sup> Personal correspondence with General Malan, (email correspondence, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Jannie Geldenhuys, *A General's Story from an Era of War & Peace* (Jo'burg, 1995), p.288.

<sup>10</sup> Helmoed-Römer Heitman, *War in Angola, The Final South African Phase* (Gibraltar, 1990), p.220.

<sup>11</sup> The SADF may argue that they did not need to achieve more at Cuito Cuanavale because they more or less achieved all of their objectives, Heitman, *War in Angola*, p.337.

<sup>12</sup> Cawthra, Kraak & O'Sullivan, *War and Resistance*, p.67.

<sup>13</sup> Barry Fowler (ed.), *Pro Patria* (Halifax, 1995), p.34.

<sup>14</sup> Jacklyn Cock, *Colonels & Cadres, War & Gender in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1991), p.64.

Force's attempts to harden the men and make them ready for war.<sup>15</sup> However, General Geldenhuys maintains that while men found it tough, basics was in fact 'the best time of their lives they would never like to repeat'.<sup>16</sup> Under the selective service system conscripts were never called upon to put this training to the test, and there is little evidence to suggest that the military experience caused them to behave more irrationally than other members of society, despite their schooling for combat.

Although conscripts brought into the Defence Force were not always called upon to enter an active service zone, from 1972 onwards when the SADF began to take control over northern Namibia from the Police, national servicemen routinely found themselves spending three months on a tour of duty in the operational area. However, duty in the operational area did not necessarily mean combat; Hammann estimates that 'probably 95 percent of all soldiers only ever fired their rifles on a shooting range',<sup>17</sup> and the TRC report acknowledged that 'the majority of South African troops were not involved in actual fire-fighting'.<sup>18</sup> Although the counter-insurrection role of the soldiers in Namibia was low intensity and actual combat was relatively rare, there were still noticeable effects of border duty. Even men who saw no combat lived for three months in a higher state of awareness than exists in normal civilian life, and most men spent their days armed and ready. The strain that this could put on men was considerable. Accidental deaths were not altogether uncommon, as could be expected with a proliferation of lethal weapons in the hands of edgy or extremely bored men. Men lost touch with civilian life and developed a new culture, which often lacked respect for other people and property.

This was especially the case when men went on patrol and came into contact with the local predominantly Ovambo population, who most soldiers believed were supporting the SWAPO guerrillas in some way, either from compassion or compulsion, and then hiding information about them from the SADF. 'Werner', a conscript recounting his experiences in Namibia, talked of houses being set on fire, villagers being beaten, goats stolen, and women being routinely abducted and raped by the local translators attached to his unit, all as part of or as a spin-off from the information gathering exercise. He simply states 'it is funny what you soon accept as normal.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> J.H. Thompson (ed.), *An Unpopular War, from afkak to bosbefok* (Cape Town, 2006), pp.1-9.

<sup>16</sup> Geldenhuys, *A General's Story*, p.20.

<sup>17</sup> Hilton Hammann, *Days of the Generals* (Cape Town, 2001), p.xii.

<sup>18</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Cape Town, 1998), Vol. 4, p.237.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.109.

The whole of the military experience, and most especially the border duty and township duties in the later years of conscription, could be something of a brutalizing experience and all men were trained to believe that violence was an acceptable way of problem solving. Some men returned from active duty in a conflict zone with a different outlook on life and often vastly changed personalities. Many conscripts witnessed death on the border even if they saw no combat, as the bodies of dead SWAPO fighters were regularly brought into camps to be shown to the soldiers, or taken into villages as part of the 'hearts and minds' campaign.<sup>20</sup> It is important to note however that acts such as these were more commonly performed by units such as *Koevoet*, a police counter-insurgency unit that was held almost in contempt by the SADF leadership for their unsavoury tactics.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, for the conscripts who witnessed these things it could be an affecting experience.

Although the majority of men returned from the border having seen no action, other men did see combat and did not always come out mentally unscathed. Clive Holt wrote his book *At Thy Call We Did Not Falter* not only to detail a conscript's experience of the 1987-88 war in Angola, but to demonstrate how it affected him, his family, and indeed his whole life afterwards. Holt's experience of fairly conventional combat in Angola, rather than counter-insurgency work in Namibia, was not at all typical of most national servicemen, but it is demonstrative of how combat can affect a man. He was one of thousands who had to deal with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a direct result of national service. It was not necessarily the men reluctant to be involved in the military who suffered most; one psychologist stated that the PF soldiers were the ones 'who weren't coping. They were the people flipping out.'<sup>22</sup> Men who saw combat in Namibia or experienced violence in the townships often returned noticeably affected, emotionally unstable and sometimes violent. Cawthra indicates that 'national servicemen returning or deserting from army service' were partially responsible for the increase in murders in the 1980s,<sup>23</sup> and the NUSAS documented a fivefold increase in crimes committed by men in uniform from 1979 to 1982, claiming this reflects a 'highly pathological society'.<sup>24</sup>

The effects of service on a man's life could last for many years, or not even manifest themselves for some time afterwards. One conscript said 'you have no bad dreams,

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<sup>20</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.112.

<sup>21</sup> Hammann, *Days of the Generals*, pp.64-66.

<sup>22</sup> Fowler, *Pro Patria*, p.103.

<sup>23</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p.60.

<sup>24</sup> NUSAS, *In Whose Defence? Conscription and the SADF* (Observatory, 1984), p.31.

no regrets, you don't feel bad about what you are doing or anything regarding that day. That all comes later, years later.'<sup>25</sup> In the aftermath of military service, men sometimes had problems sleeping, or experienced problems with recurring nightmares.<sup>26</sup> Psychologist Diane Sandler described the traumatised returning soldier as being hard to control and hard to connect to. 'He experienced resentment and anger towards authority. He felt disdain and mistrust towards loving, intimate relationships.'<sup>27</sup> The SADF did offer some limited psychological services to help men sent into combat to cope with their experiences, but the ethos of macho masculinity that was so carefully cultivated in the SADF precluded many from seeking help from health professionals. Nobody wanted to be seen as weak or, worse, as crazy and so most national servicemen eschewed the services of psychologists.

However while the Namibian experience was scarring for some, others were able to maintain a far more normal lifestyle on the border and so were less affected. One former conscript claims that the idea of all men seeing brutality, death, and unspeakable horror was invented by some returning conscripts to impress people back home. He calls this portrayal of border duty a myth, and says that men coming back from Namibia were expected to have had bad experiences, although most had not. 'Certainly there were those who were the core of the myth starting. They had had bad experiences. Mine was okay.'<sup>28</sup> By no means all men had damaging experiences and by no means all of the men affected suffered to a life changing degree. Studies in the aftermath of the Vietnam War suggested that US servicemen as a whole were not nearly as badly affected as popular imagination held,<sup>29</sup> and in some ways the same is true of South Africa. While many men had problems following their service, many others did not, and so unqualified generalizations about wide-ranging psychological effects of the conflicts that South African conscripts were engaged in should be avoided.

Even if men did not experience traumatic events in their military service it could still affect them. Boys entering the army aged sometimes as young as 17 were bound to grow up and change during their time in the military, and some came back from

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<sup>25</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.115.

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Draper, *The Psychological Experiences of Military Conscription in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s* (Honours thesis, UCT, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Diane Sandler, 'The Psychological Experiences of White Conscripts in the Black Townships', in Jacklyn Cock & Laurie Nathan (eds), *War and Society, The Militarization of South Africa* (Cape Town, 1989), p.88.

<sup>28</sup> Fowler, *Pro Patria*, p.79.

<sup>29</sup> See Jonathan Borus, 'The Re-entry Transition of the Vietnam Veteran', in Nancy Goldman & David Segal (eds), *The Social Psychology of Military Service* (Beverly Hills, 1976).

service quite different from when they entered. Drug use and heavy drinking were habits acquired by some men, although in the late 1980s one in four South Africans aged 12-25 were said to be in some way involved in drug abuse, whether they had done national service or not.<sup>30</sup> Some men saw their personalities change and they became either more boisterous and crude or more withdrawn and morose, though the discernable changes were by no means always bad. Some men gained in self-confidence or learnt self-reliance, and others became more sociable after having spent so long in the constant company of others.<sup>31</sup>

For many servicemen who had been away from home for some time it was not easy to revert back to civilian life. Some men experienced the feeling that they had missed something; a change in fashion perhaps, or music styles, or even simply the price of groceries in the local shops, and thus they felt a little out of place.<sup>32</sup> In the words of one conscript the army and civilian life were 'such different worlds',<sup>33</sup> and it took some time to adjust from one to the other. For many this would have been a superficial feeling easily overcome, though for others reintegration was a tougher process. The sudden ability to once again control every facet of life, the lack of enforced routine, and the lack of boisterous and bawdy company were all obstacles that men had to overcome to successfully reintegrate. However, these effects were usually of a comparatively short term nature and except in cases where conscripts suffered from a mental trauma from their experiences, men were normally able to fairly readily readapt once their initial service period was over.<sup>34</sup>

The military experience was not all bad or psychologically damaging. Much of it was simply boring and many men now look back on their military days with a sense of nostalgia, which is reflected in the way ex-conscripts tend to describe their experiences in the SADF in a light-hearted anecdotal style. The SADF acknowledged that men would be bored during service, and a booklet it published containing advice for national servicemen stated 'After you have finished your initial training you may expect periods of relative inactivity...When you experience one of these periods don't complain and remember that you also serve your country even if you stand and

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<sup>30</sup> Ben Turok, *Witness from the Frontline, Aggression and Resistance in Southern Africa* (London, 1990), p.159.

<sup>31</sup> Personal Correspondence with Stewart Kramm, (email correspondence, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, pp.226-27; and Clive Holt, *At thy Call We Did Not Falter* (Cape Town, 2005), p.171.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.226.

<sup>34</sup> *Frontline*, (August 1985), p.54.



wait.<sup>35</sup> Boredom is a constant theme when men describe their military service, and the fact that men see something as banal as boredom as a defining issue of their service indicates that by no means all men perceive that they were adversely psychologically affected by their national service.

The military in fact had some positive things to offer. Apart from personality development, the SADF offered opportunities to men that they may not otherwise have had. Some, admittedly very few, men were trained in skills that were transferable to civilian life,<sup>36</sup> and the self-reliance and discipline taught by the military stood men in good stead during later life.<sup>37</sup> Mr Van der Walt, MP for Pretoria West, went further and stated in parliament in 1967 that he believed universal national service would help to create 'better citizens and better men for South Africa'.<sup>38</sup> Although being in the SADF was not exactly a chance to 'see the world', men did get to travel to places they had never been to before, to 'look around' as one conscript put it,<sup>39</sup> and some found the travel experience extremely enjoyable. A conscript whose tour of duty in Namibia took him to the Skeleton Coast for two weeks said it 'was the most awesome trip of my life.'<sup>40</sup> Also friendships made in the military often lasted long after service was over. The benefits of service by no means always outweighed the costs, but they were evident and should not be discounted.

An obvious and tragic impact of conscription on national servicemen was the premature deaths or permanent injuries of a number of men while in the SADF. Exact numbers of conscript deaths are hard to determine as the SADF did not release separate figures for national servicemen, but estimates put casualty figures from one to three thousand, though including non-combat deaths the latter figure seems more likely.<sup>41</sup> While some estimates claim that proportionally three times more white South Africans died on border duty than American soldiers died in Vietnam,<sup>42</sup> this seems like a gross overestimate. Willem Steenkamp, an SADF officer and respected military journalist, says that according to official statistics, over the twenty-two year period up to 1 November 1988, 715 members of the South African security forces were killed in

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<sup>35</sup> SADF, *Your National Service Explained* (Pretoria, 1975).

<sup>36</sup> Malan, *My Life with the SA Defence Force*, p.177.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.172.

<sup>38</sup> *Hansard*, (1967), Vol. 21, Col. 7428.

<sup>39</sup> Fowler, *Pro Patria*, p.64.

<sup>40</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.173.

<sup>41</sup> *Die Burger*, 28 August 2006.

<sup>42</sup> Professor R. Green, (Institute for Development Studies, Sussex) in CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.31.

action.<sup>43</sup> Not all of these would have been conscripts, but would have belonged to the PF or police counter-insurgency units such as *Koevoet*, to the SADF regiments recruited from other population groups or have been Namibian SWATF members. Nonetheless, an appreciable number of these fatalities would have been national servicemen. However, some critics of the apartheid government accused them of hiding true battlefield casualty statistics by recording many of the deaths as accidents.<sup>44</sup>

Not only were national servicemen killed and wounded in combat zones in Namibia or Angola or the townships, but many more died in accidents in training or travelling to and from their units. The death of servicemen in road accidents was a cause of concern to all, with one troubled man complaining to his MP of 'boys being taken away from home and then hitchhiking around – sometimes getting killed doing it',<sup>45</sup> while the SADF publication *Paratus* ran a series of articles in the mid-1980s aimed at educating servicemen of the dangers of road transport.<sup>46</sup>

Even within the operational area many of the casualties were the result of accidents or fights that got out of control, and one helicopter pilot on the border guesstimated that only about one casualty evacuation in ten was due to enemy activity.<sup>47</sup> The operational area also saw some deaths from illness and disease, despite the excellent medical service in the Defence Force. In the 1987-88 operations in Angola, for example, six of the 37 SADF fatalities came from cerebral malaria.<sup>48</sup>

Other than accidents, illness and enemy action, a major and worrying cause of conscript deaths was suicide. White South Africa in general had a very high suicide rate, but even with that in mind experts found the suicide rate among national servicemen 'alarming'.<sup>49</sup> Figures provided for the years 1985-87, which were amongst the most stressful of the whole national service era, show that a total of 51 conscripts killed themselves and a further 976 attempts were made to commit

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<sup>43</sup> Willem Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War 1966-1989* (Gibraltar, 1989), p.185.

<sup>44</sup> Turok, *Witness From the Frontline*, p.158.

<sup>45</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection; National Service. Letter to Raw dated 13 August 1971.

<sup>46</sup> *Paratus*, Vol.35, No.7, (July 1984), p.48; Vol.36, No.2, (Feb 1985), p.61; and Vol.36, No.7, (July 1985), p.57.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.192.

<sup>48</sup> Hammann, *Days of the Generals*, p.97.

<sup>49</sup> Cock, *Colonels and Cadres*, p.80. Forder gives suicide rates in South Africa as 1:10 000 among the civilian population and 6:10 000 in the SADF, Jay Forder, 'Conscription', *South African Human Rights and Labour Law Yearbook*, Vol. 1, (1990), p.46.

suicide,<sup>50</sup> while in 1988 seventeen out of twenty-one suicides in the SADF were national servicemen.<sup>51</sup> While the factors driving young men to take their own lives would not always have been SADF related, the brutality and dehumanizing of training and combat experience, and the mental and physical exhaustion that came with it, contributed significantly to some men's suicide. Notably however the easy access of conscripts to weaponry does not seem to have contributed greatly to the incidence of attempted suicide, as an overwhelming majority of attempts involved drug overdoses or slashed wrists, and less than one in twenty-five involved a firearm.<sup>52</sup>

However, while national service was responsible for the deaths of a number of young South Africans, and without trying to downplay the importance or impact of these deaths, conscript fatalities need to be put in perspective. While four decades of military conscription in South Africa led to the death of up to three thousand national servicemen from various causes, in the single decade from 1982 to 1991 the country saw 118 000 murders, 15 000 of them 'political' and the rest criminal.<sup>53</sup> From 1968 to 1994, approximately the period that universal conscription was in force, over 230 000 people were killed in road accidents in South Africa.<sup>54</sup> As far as combat casualties go, while the fifteen year Border War claimed over 700 South African lives (not all national servicemen), in the thirteen years of combat in her African possessions Portugal lost over 11 000 dead and three times as many wounded or maimed.<sup>55</sup> It can be seen from this that although South Africa was affected by conscript casualties, the numbers of deaths cannot be counted as excessive.

A further unwelcome consequence of national service is that elements of the extensive and well trained reserve of manpower that it produced have on occasion sought continued militaristic employment as mercenaries. Although the heyday of mercenaries was in the 1960s, since the 1980s there has been a trend for certain states to employ 'security contractors', mercenaries in all but name, to aid or even run their armed forces. On other occasions anti-government organisations have recruited mercenaries with the aim of staging a coup. In both cases South African men have been heavily involved in the past decades. The attempted coups in the

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<sup>50</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.67.

<sup>51</sup> Forder, 'Conscription', p.46.

<sup>52</sup> CIIR, *Out of Step*, p.67.

<sup>53</sup> Don Foster, Paul Haupt, & Marésa De Beer, *The Theatre of Violence, Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict* (Cape Town, 2005), p.58.

<sup>54</sup> This figure is calculated from the yearly statistics given in the International Road Federation's *World Road Statistics*, (1972-1994).

<sup>55</sup> Hammann, *Days of the Generals*, p.2.

Seychelles in 1981 and the 2004 coup plot in Equatorial Guinea both featured many ex-SADF personnel (the SADF itself was in fact implicated in the 1981 coup attempt).<sup>56</sup> In 1989 the security company Executive Outcomes, which later took part in wars in Angola and Sierra Leone, was formed in South Africa and by the mid-1990s was employing up to 2 500 ex-soldiers,<sup>57</sup> at a time when, despite the stigma of apartheid, South African ex-servicemen were employed 'to bolster the armies of seven African countries'.<sup>58</sup> More recently, in 2004, an estimated 1 500 South Africans were employed as security contractors by the United States in Iraq,<sup>59</sup> although many of the men so employed were once professional soldiers in the PF. While it is impossible to determine how far conscription is responsible for turning South Africa into a fertile recruiting ground for security companies, the effect of all white men being militarily experienced and often combat hardened is likely to be considerable.

Continued willingness to fight is not just a problem for South African ex-servicemen abroad, but was also a problem within South Africa at the time of the transition to universal democratic government, and it remains a potential problem even today. Among the more right wing elements of ex-national servicemen there is to be found a large body of militarily well trained men who have little taste for the new South Africa. Former president F. W. de Klerk put much of the support that General Constand Viljoen was able to rally around him in the early 1990s down to the fact that many men had served under him as conscripts.<sup>60</sup> At the time of transition there was some fear that these men may take it upon themselves to thwart the process, and it was estimated that the right wing Afrikaner Volksfront (AVF) could claim the support of 100 000 ex-conscripts, many of whom were then still members of the Citizen Force or Commando Force.<sup>61</sup> The Defence Force itself was never seriously suspected of plotting a coup,<sup>62</sup> but men trained in the South African military were considered a potential problem. The military intervention did not materialise, but neither did every militarily trained man necessarily fully accept the new political dispensation.

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<sup>56</sup> P. Stiff, *Warfare By Other Means, South Africa in the 1980s & 1990s* (Cape Town, 2001).

<sup>57</sup> Guy Arnold, *Mercenaries, The Scourge of the Third World* (London, 1999), pp.115-17.

<sup>58</sup> *Economist*, Vol. 336, Iss. 7925, (29 July 1995), *We're the Good Guys These Days*.

<sup>59</sup> Barry Yeoman, 'Dirty Warriors', *Mother Jones*, Vol. 29, Issue 6, (Nov/Dec 2004).

<sup>60</sup> F. W. de Klerk, *The Last Trek, a New Beginning* (London, 1998), p.310

<sup>61</sup> Martin Schönteich & Henri Boshoff, 'Volk', *Faith and Fatherland, the Security Threat Posed by the White Right* (Pretoria, 2003), pp.24-25; and Allister Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country, the Inside Story of South Africa's Negotiated Settlement* (Johannesburg, 2003), p.156.

<sup>62</sup> Generals Malan, Viljoen and Meiring maintain that the SADF was a professional body which would not have stood for unconstitutional action such as a coup, Hammann, *Days of the Generals*, pp.209-212. F. W. De Klerk also says that he had no concerns about the loyalty of the SADF in the transition period, De Klerk, *The Last Trek*, p.326.

While there is no concrete suggestion that these men intend to pose a threat to the nation, their training, expertise and experience make the occasional rumblings from that quarter all the more ominous. The now infamous *Boeremag*, accused of plotting to overthrow the ANC government in 2002, has a number of ex-national servicemen in its ranks.<sup>63</sup> Other ex-servicemen also share their sympathies. The following conversation which took place on the chat-room of a right wing website in 2006 is typical of the implied threats that sometimes emanate from disgruntled ex-conscripts;

'Swerwer': ons het gat geskop, ons het so hard geskop dat hulle neuse vandag nog bloei. Kyk maar hoe bang is die ANC vir die boer en sy roer.

'Toffie': en ons kan dit vandag nogsteeds doen, kyk maar hoe maak die benoude hase, benoude spronge! You ain't seen nothing yet!<sup>64</sup>

How much of conversations like this is bark and how much is bite is difficult to say but the fact remains that owing to the national service system there is in South Africa, and will be for another decade or more, a generation of militarily trained and often anti-government men who may, or may not, be willing to yet cause trouble.

Conversely however, many ex-conscripts now have an extreme antipathy towards military service. A great many men feel that the SADF used them with little thought for their welfare and then cast them aside with little or no thanks and no help to readjust to civilian life or to cope with the experiences they had been through. Many were frustrated at the lack of thanks or appreciation shown, especially as regards the Pro Patria medal that was awarded to all men who undertook 55 or more continuous days of active service in an operational area. Some men did considerably more and risked considerably more than others in the operational area, yet all received the same award. One conscript's reaction was 'Was that it? Was that all there was?'<sup>65</sup> Others complained bitterly that they had to fight SADF bureaucracy as hard as they had fought the enemy simply to get what was owed to them.<sup>66</sup>

Another area of contention was the fact that on returning from military service young men were once more treated as minors until the age of 21. Holt 'found it deeply ironic that I was old enough to fight for my country and kill people, yet I had to get my

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<sup>63</sup> Schönteich & Boshoff, 'Volk', *Faith and Fatherland*, p.74.

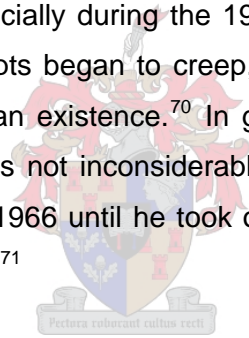
<sup>64</sup> <<http://www.praag.org>>, accessed 14 August 2006.

<sup>65</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.227.

<sup>66</sup> UP archives; Private Collections, WV Raw Collection; Defence General up to 30/4/1984. Letter from Raw to Minister of Defence dated 10 November 1978.

mom's authorisation to borrow a library book',<sup>67</sup> and another conscript was baffled that despite having served in Angola and dealt with brutality and death he was not allowed to see the film *American Gigolo* at the cinema.<sup>68</sup> An indication of how far the SADF had lost the respect of its former conscripts is a survey conducted in 1995, in which only 30 percent of all white men said they would definitely be willing to volunteer for further military service for a three month period in a time of need.<sup>69</sup> It seemed that a large proportion of people wanted nothing more to do with the military.

If the effects that national service had on individual conscripts were significant, the impact on wider society was hardly less so. In some ways it is impossible to isolate conscription from the growing sense of overall militarization that affected South African society on all levels during the 1980s, and it would to a certain extent be futile to do so. The issue of getting men into the Defence Force was not an isolated one but was intricately bound in the web of militarist tendencies that were increasingly evident until the arrival of F. W. de Klerk as President in 1989. The perceived militarization that occurred especially during the 1980s was widely written about as the military and militarist concepts began to creep, or sometimes stride boldly, into facets of previously solely civilian existence.<sup>70</sup> In government and decision making circles the military presence was not inconsiderable, and in P. W. Botha, who had been Minister of Defence from 1966 until he took over the premiership in 1978, the military had an ardent supporter.<sup>71</sup>



When compulsory service was first introduced in South Africa in 1952 the military was neither a particularly cherished nor a particularly feared organisation; indeed it was an institution that many South African's barely thought of at all. By the early 1990s as the last batches of conscripts were inducted, practically every white person in the land either had or knew somebody who had served in the SADF and, for better or worse, the profile of the military was infinitely higher than it had been four decades earlier.<sup>72</sup> People's feelings about the Defence Force ran from pride and affection to fear and downright hatred and it was very much at the front of white social

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<sup>67</sup> Holt, *At Thy Call*, p.132.

<sup>68</sup> Thompson, *An Unpopular War*, p.227.

<sup>69</sup> J. Cilliers & others, 'Public Opinion on Defence and Security Issues', in Jakkie Cilliers & Marcus Reichardt (eds), *About Turn, the Transformation of the South African Military and Intelligence* (Halfway House, 1996), p.240.

<sup>70</sup> McGill Alexander, 'The Militarisation of White South African Society, 1948-1990', *Scientia Militaria*, Vol. 30, No. 2, (2000), 267-89.

<sup>71</sup> See Kenneth Grundy, *The Rise of the South African Security Establishment, an Essay on the Changing Locus of State Power* (Johannesburg, 1983).

<sup>72</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p.41.



consciousness. Much of this was down to conscription, and much of the raised profile of the military stemmed from a need for people to feel closer to the force in which they or their loved ones were required to serve. From the 1960s and increasingly through the 1970s and 1980s the government and Defence Force made concerted efforts to make the military appeal to white society, both English and Afrikaner, though to begin with their efforts focused on the latter.<sup>73</sup> The need for people, and especially young people, to identify with the SADF meant that the military entered education and schools through the cadet system and indirectly in the veld schools. The SADF was pushed into white consciousness and military officers were often role models for children. A considerable effort was made by the SADF and by the state to promote military service as manly and to make people feel that only those who had done national service were real men.

During the 1980s especially, a whole social construct of militarism developed in which soldiers were highly esteemed, and in which the values of traditional warrior masculinity and obedience continued to be lauded at a time when most other Western societies saw their erosion.<sup>74</sup> Many South African businesses looked favourably upon those who had done national service both in terms of employment and in offering sometimes extensive discounts to servicemen.<sup>75</sup> This favouritism sometimes also extended to the families of servicemen; the Johannesburg City Council at one point refused paid maternity leave to any woman whose husband had not done military service.<sup>76</sup> The extent to which the military entered civilian consciousness in the latter two decades of national service was considerable, all the more so as many members of that society remained liable for service through CF camps. The success that the SADF had in raising its profile and raising its popularity among the Afrikaner population can be seen by the fact that by the 1980s 'Afrikaner students spoke of the government and the Army as *their* government and army',<sup>77</sup> a fact which may have held true for the government since 1948 but had by no means always been the same for the military.

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<sup>73</sup> Rodney Warwick, 'The South African Military under Verwoerd: SADF popularisation amongst the white community, 1960-66', *South African Historical Society Conference* (Cape Town, June 2005).

<sup>74</sup> See Cock and Nathan, *War and Society*, Part IV: Militarization and Culture.

<sup>75</sup> *Paratus*, Vol.34, No.1, (Jan 1983), p.29 for example has a Mazda advert saying 'You've done your bit for us, now we'll do our bit for you', offering a discount on cars, and Vol.34, No.12 (Dec 1983), p.57 contains an offer from Magnum airlines for free flights at Christmas.

<sup>76</sup> Jacklyn Cock, 'Manpower and Militarization: Women and the SADF', in Cock and Nathan (eds), *War and Society*, p.57.

<sup>77</sup> Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners, A Biography of a People* (Cape Town, 2003), p.595.

On an economic level conscription also had an impact on South Africa. It is impossible, given all of the variables, to quantify the effects of conscription on the South African economy over the four decades of compulsory service, but the effect can be generally stated to have been detrimental and not inconsiderable. General Geldenhuys went so far as to say that 'there was always criticism that the military and national service were killing the economy of the country',<sup>78</sup> though the effects were most noticeable in the last decade or so of national service. According to ex-US assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker, by the late 1970s between seven and eight percent of all white manpower between the ages of 18 and 45 was on active service with the SADF at any one time,<sup>79</sup> and given that job restrictions along racial lines were still in force and that businesses had to compete for white labour, this constituted a serious drain of labour from the private sector. Although the economic downturn of the late 1970s meant that the SADF could absorb more manpower without inordinately damaging economic growth, the removal of so many whites from the job market would always be a restriction on potential growth. During the 1980s when more men were called up for CF duties, the percentage of men in uniform would have been even higher than that stated by Crocker.

CF and Commando duties in fact constituted the biggest challenge for the economy. Young school leavers were of comparatively little economic importance except as potential workers, but older CF and Commando soldiers were the backbone of the country's productive capacity. Many white men called away for camps were managers, supervisors, artisans, professionals, or even owners of their own businesses, and their loss was not easily supported. The military was aware of the problem and in the early 1980s promised that conscription 'will be designed with a very careful eye to minimizing national economic damage and personal hardship'.<sup>80</sup> Within this however was a blunt acknowledgement that conscription was causing economic damage. The SADF was often sympathetic to appeals for deferment of service on the grounds that a business could under no circumstances function without a certain man,<sup>81</sup> but their primary concern was to fill their own ranks and they still found it necessary to call up thousands of important employees each year.

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<sup>78</sup> Hammann, *Days of the Generals*, p.170.

<sup>79</sup> Chester Crocker, 'Current and Projected Military Balances in Southern Africa', in Richard Bissel & Chester Crocker (eds), *South Africa into the 1980s* (Colorado, 1979), p.88.

<sup>80</sup> Philip H. Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians, Civil-Military Relations in South Africa* (Cambridge, 1984), p.143.

<sup>81</sup> UP archives; Private Collections; WV Raw Collection. Examples are found in many of the files pertaining to national service in this collection. Where the case was truly deserving deferment (though not exemption) was usually granted by the military authorities.

For private enterprise the loss of important personnel for short periods was difficult to overcome, as by the time a suitable replacement was found and trained in the position the original incumbent would have returned. It was illegal to dismiss or prejudice the career of a man who was fulfilling his military obligations, and although some companies flouted this rule most resigned themselves to the temporary loss of their employees. Not only did companies have to deal with this loss of skills for up to three months at a time and potentially pay for a replacement; as if to add insult to injury they were expected, although not obliged, to make up the difference in salary between the called-up man's usual earnings and his national service pay.

Although small firms were hardest hit, even the largest companies felt the pinch at repeatedly if temporarily losing key employees. A submission made to the Van Loggerenberg Committee by the Cape Town Chamber of Commerce in 1990 said that a survey they had conducted 'confirmed that business suffers materially as a result of disruptions caused by periodic camps' and that 'the overwhelming percentage of businesses do experience disruptions due to military service'. Similarly the South African Chamber of Business stated that 'the necessity for and purpose of these [CF and Commando] camps needs to be re-examined',<sup>82</sup> as they believed the costs were far outweighing the benefits. Businesses relying primarily on professionals were also hard hit; for example, a thesis written in 1992 about quantity surveyors found that 'current military conscription and service contribute, *inter alia*, to under-utilisation of manpower, poor time management and inept application of general resources.'<sup>83</sup> Skilled professionals simply could not be replaced on a short term basis and the call-up of such men proved highly disruptive. Even state-run departments were not unaffected; the national electricity company Eskom stated in 1984 that while the initial national service training caused it few inconveniences, 'the call-ups of other personnel for camps of one to three months does cause problems.'<sup>84</sup>

Another economically and socially damaging consequence of national service was the contribution it made to the 'brain drain' of skilled South Africans leaving the

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<sup>82</sup> DDDC, Verslae (Reports) (Group 2), Box 375, File ref. 97/4, "*Gleeson Committee – Conscientious Objection (1991)*"; Letter from Cape Town Chamber of Commerce, 2 March 1990, and Report by the South African Chamber of Business, Johannesburg, 13 June 1990.

<sup>83</sup> Nicolaas Buys, *Die Bourekenaarsberoep en Militêre Diensplig* (MSc Thesis, University of Port Elizabeth, 1992), p.xi.

<sup>84</sup> *Businessman's Military Newsletter*, Vol. 1, No. 3, (August 1984), p.3.

country.<sup>85</sup> Conscription was a factor in causing thousands of South Africans to emigrate, especially from the late 1970s onwards as operational deployments and the length of military service increased (discussed in chapter 5). The loss of graduates and skilled manpower to the economy had obviously detrimental effects, and the loss of graduates alone was estimated to 'cost taxpayers about R15 billion per annum'.<sup>86</sup>

However, while national service did undoubtedly damage the economy, in government circles it was held to be the most cost-effective and least economically damaging way of defending the nation. According to General Malan 'from a manpower utilization and economics point of view it was more cost effective to have a national service system'.<sup>87</sup> Without conscription the government would have had to recruit a greatly expanded PF, and they may have had to drastically increase the salaries for PF members, as Frankel pointed out in the 1980s 'the military is basically uncompetitive in the open market for white labour'.<sup>88</sup> Although some economists argued that an all-volunteer force would be more cost effective,<sup>89</sup> it would also have left the SADF well short of its perceived manpower requirements.<sup>90</sup> While the economic effects of national service were therefore detrimental, conscription was possibly one of the least economically damaging options open to the government while it was determined to keep up its military efforts.

One final and unintended consequence of conscription was that the drain of white manpower from the job market opened the door for people outside of the white hegemonic group to gain preference for employment. The fact that the majority of white men were liable to continued disruptive military call-ups made the employment of people other than whites a more attractive prospect to some enterprises by the late 1980s.<sup>91</sup> Ironically, the institution which is often accused of bolstering the system racial discrimination, may have unintentionally played some small part in bringing about a small measure of racial integration during the dying years of apartheid.

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<sup>85</sup> C. Lingle, 'On the Real Costs of Military Conscription', *South African Journal of Economics*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (September 1989), p.274.

<sup>86</sup> Jeremy Sarkin, 'Conscription', *South African Human Rights and Labour Law Yearbook*, Vol. 3, (1992), p.41.

<sup>87</sup> Personal Correspondence with General Malan, (email correspondence, 2006).

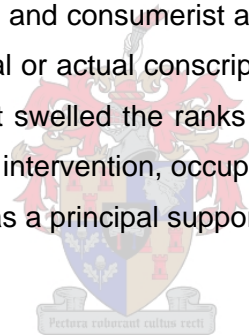
<sup>88</sup> Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, p.144.

<sup>89</sup> Lingle, 'On the Real Costs of Military Conscription', pp.270-78.

<sup>90</sup> *Frontline*, (December 1985), pp.15-17.

<sup>91</sup> Willem Steenkamp, 'The Citizen Soldier in the Border War', *Journal for Contemporary History*, Vol. 31, No. 3, (2006), 1-22.

The effects of national service were widespread and multi-faceted. On a personal level conscripts were almost universally changed by their military experience, in both positive and negative ways. Bad or traumatic experiences were common but by no means universal, and for the first two decades of compulsory service almost nobody spent time in an active theatre of operations and so almost nobody was exposed to traumatic events. Most men 'grew-up' and learnt a degree of self-reliance and discipline during their national service and for some the old chestnut that the military made men of boys was a reality. Other benefits of service were evident as some conscripts made lasting friendships, got to travel, and were able to enjoy themselves. Conscriptio also had some great drawbacks and was inevitably responsible for the deaths of a number of men, while suicide rates in the SADF rose to alarming levels by the mid-1980s. The effects of conscription on overall white society were largely detrimental. National service can be directly implicated in creating an increasingly militarised, less economically productive, and in some cases more violent or traumatised white community, and the pervasion of references to the SADF across such diverse areas as education and consumerist advertising was due to the need to appeal to the masses of potential or actual conscripts. Possibly the biggest impact of conscription however was that it swelled the ranks of the SADF to the extent that it could deter any potential foreign intervention, occupy Namibia, and later on police the townships, acting by the 1980s as a principal support for the embattled white state.



## 8. South African Conscription in an International Context

The experience of South Africa in the period of this study up to 1994 is utterly unique. Politically, socially, and militarily there is simply no direct parallel to the apartheid state that existed anywhere in the world. However as with any other country or regime through history it is possible to identify and draw some parallels between South Africa and other contemporary nations, and it would be worthwhile to look at these parallels so as to situate the South African context in some kind of international perspective.

The intention of this chapter is to shed some light on just how typical or just how unique the South African experience of conscription truly was. Given that the government and white population of South Africa saw themselves as belonging to the Western world, the comparisons that will be drawn will be with other Western countries. The UK, USA, and Israel will all be discussed, along with some aspects of the systems of other countries such as France, Norway and Rhodesia. Comparisons with Communist Bloc powers will be avoided simply because the social organisation was so different and the governmental authority so much stronger as to make any comparison of the social impact or societal reaction to conscription meaningless. It is not the intention of this chapter to make bland comparisons between the apparatus and workings of the various national service systems – such as whether conscription was universal or selective, the racial basis for national service, or whether men were called up aged 18 or 21 – but rather to examine the social view of conscription and to look at how each society accepted or rejected compulsory military service, to look at the effects that conscription had on each society in comparison with South Africa, to review the use of conscripts by each state, and to examine the experiences of the conscripts in each country compared to those who served in the SADF.

Modern conscription in the Western world was introduced, or rather re-introduced, in many countries in the aftermath of the Second World War as the Iron Curtain slid across Europe and the forces of communism were seen to pose a very real and numerically imposing threat. South Africa was firmly part of that Western world, as Crocker says 'South Africa emerged from World War II as a member of the victorious Allied coalition and a close Western defence partner through the British connection'.<sup>1</sup> However while the Cold War and increased manpower requirements were the

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<sup>1</sup> Chester Crocker, 'Current Projected Military Balances in Southern Africa', in Richard Bissel & Chester Crocker (eds), *South Africa into the 1980s* (Colorado, 1979), p.76.



general reasons on which compulsory military service was based, each state had its own trigger reasons or more individual motives for imposing the draft.

For the USA, the Korean conflict (1950-53) compelled the reintroduction of a selective draft, while the UK introduced universal national service in 1947 in order to create a force large enough to police its sprawling and increasingly unruly Empire, menaced by communist and nationalist inspired anti-colonial movements, and for both of these powers there was a need to maintain a large military presence in Central Europe.<sup>2</sup> Many other Western countries also had foreign imperial commitments, and most felt that they could only ensure their defence and fulfil their commitment to the new NATO alliance through a system of compulsory service. This was even more the case because in the post-war economic boom, stimulated in Europe by the American Marshall Plan, governments simply could not compete with the private sector for wages and so could not attract manpower on the open market. In introducing compulsory service in 1952, South Africa simply became the latest Western country to address its manpower needs by conscripting men.

However, unlike her larger Western allies, South Africa did not conscript men to fulfil requirements for active manpower in a military embroiled in conflict as did for instance the UK, USA and France, but rather intended to create a trained pool of men that could be called up in case of emergency. Until 1967 conscription was scrupulously referred to as 'training', rather than 'service',<sup>3</sup> indicating that conscripts were not intended to be used as combat troops in the course of their statutory time in the military. Only in an emergency would the men be recalled and pitched into combat. In essence South Africa was equipping herself with a sizable Defence Force for any possible future conflict without having the expense of maintaining bloated conventional forces in peacetime.

While the trained reserve was also a useful by-product of conscription in other Western nations, it was not generally the main motivation. Even smaller countries with few or no global commitments used conscription primarily as a way to create a large standing army rather than a large potential reserve, simply because it was believed that in the case of conflict in Europe reserves of manpower would be practically useless anyway. The task of the military in Norway, for example, was to hold out against Soviet invasion for as long as possible until substantial forces from

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Hickman, *The Call-up, a History of National Service* (London, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> *Hansard, House of Assembly Debates* (Cape Town, 1967), Vol. 21, Col. 7414.

their NATO allies could be brought to their aid, though it was unlikely that their resistance could last much longer than a week without substantial aid.<sup>4</sup> In this instance it would be impossible to recall and equip reservists in time to confront any invasion, and so the most immediate need was to equip the standing army with enough men to perform its duties.

The concept of the trained reserve drew much criticism from theorists, as they pointed out that this concept had failed to work in practice and was a costly and disruptive imposition. Much was made of the French experience in World War Two, when a trained reserve of over two million men was called up only to be swept aside with almost contemptuous ease by the German forces in 1940.<sup>5</sup> Yet while the concept of a trained reserve was somewhat discredited it still had some value, especially in cases where a country was unlikely to be invaded itself and would have the necessary time and space to prepare recalled reservists before pitching them into combat, and such a force if well maintained could act as a powerful deterrent.

Compulsory military service was a debated topic across the Western world in late 1940s and early 1950s. The use of conscripts by the UK and more extensively by the USA in conflicts like Korea drew criticism, as did the UK's deployment of national servicemen to troubled areas of the Empire to act as policemen or forces of counter-insurrection. Similarly the French deployment of the *Contingent* to Algeria from 1956 was deplored throughout the country and was a major factor in the following political upheaval that saw General Charles de Gaulle oust the Fourth Republic in 1958 on the pretext of keeping French Algeria, only to withdraw from Algeria himself by 1962.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless it was recognised that All Volunteer Forces (AVF, to use a phrase that became popular in the USA in the aftermath of Vietnam) simply could not provide the manpower requirements for the maintenance of far flung colonies, the continued occupation of Central Europe, and intervention against the forces of communism in such conflicts such as Korea, and there seemed to be a reluctant acceptance that conscription was a price necessary to maintain a global presence.

The deployment of national servicemen by the various Western powers differed, but they were generally used in the same manner and exposed to the same risks as

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<sup>4</sup> Personal Correspondence with Rifleman Øivind Lie, (Telemark Regiment 2000-2002), and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Hans Aleksander Bjerke (Norwegian Air Force), (email correspondence, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle, France 1940* (London, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Viannson-Ponté, *Histoire de la République Gaullienne* (Paris, 1971).

regular volunteer soldiers. For a time South Africa theoretically differed from most countries in this regard. According to provisions of the Defence Act of 1912, which were not altered until 1976, no South African soldier could be compelled to serve outside of 'South Africa', although if they volunteered they could be so deployed. The term 'South Africa' was left deliberately vague and while some interpreted it as meaning the territory of the Union or later of the Republic, others at various times saw it as anywhere south of the Zambezi or even the equator.<sup>7</sup>

No such restrictions were placed on the conscripts of other nations, except from France which following the Algerian War (1954-1962) decreed that the conscripts would be used solely to defend France's territorial integrity, while professional soldiers alone would be used to defend French interests abroad.<sup>8</sup> The USA and UK relied heavily on conscripts to fight in Korea and, for the USA, in Vietnam, and Portugal defended her African possessions with largely drafted manpower. South Africa did deploy conscripts in Namibia and Angola before 1976, but this caused a controversy that was largely responsible for the removal of restrictions on the deployment of troops.<sup>9</sup> However, although a disproportionate amount of combat in Namibia and Angola fell to professional soldiers, as with other nations South African conscripts were not deliberately kept away from fighting and were on occasion deployed offensively as well as defensively.

The major difference between the South African experience and that of other countries in this regard is the matter of timing. By the mid-1970s when South Africa began her unrestricted deployments of conscripts, almost all other nations had already or were about to abandon the practice. The UK ended national service in 1963, and the USA followed suit a decade later. Portugal gave up her African territories and major overseas military commitments in 1975, and as previously mentioned France restricted her conscripts to home defence from the mid-1960s. From 1975 Rhodesia and Israel were the only other Westernised nations with conscripted soldiers being used in existing war zones. Although the South African practice of using conscripts was little different from other countries, by the time she began to extensively deploy national servicemen she was almost alone in doing so.

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<sup>7</sup> See Kenneth Grundy, *Defence Legislation and Communal Politics, the Evolution of a White South African Nation as Reflected in the Controversy over the Assignment of the Armed Forces Abroad, 1912-1976* (Athens Ohio, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Jeffery Record, 'Implications of Likely Future Conflict Environments for US Military Manpower Policies and Practices', in Gregory Foster, Alan Sabrosky & William Taylor Jr (eds), *The Strategic Dimension of Military Manpower* (Cambridge, 1987), p.156.

<sup>9</sup> Grundy, *Defence Legislation*.

One respect in which South Africa was not alone was the resistance to conscription and militarism that was evident within the country. Every country and every society, to a greater or lesser extent, manifested some form of resistance to conscription. The resistance that sprang up to national service in South Africa was not entirely typical of international rejection of the use of conscription though some comparisons can be made. In South Africa, the opposition to military service was based for a number of whites on the rejection of the unique system of apartheid which the SADF and its conscripted ranks were seen to uphold, especially by the 1980s. While aspects of South Africa resistance to national service can be seen in other countries, notably the UK and the USA in the just war doctrine, nowhere in the world was a society faced with such a set of circumstances as prevailed in South Africa during the decades that followed the Second World War.

Resistance to and rejection of compulsory military service generally occurred in all Western nations, including South Africa, when popular sentiment held that the armed forces were no longer employed in a manner benefiting the country. The extensive use of British national servicemen to uphold an empire that was no longer desired by either the colonisers or the colonised was heavily criticised, and the USA suffered some well documented problems during the late Vietnam era as draftees were sent to fight a war that many Americans felt unjust and unnecessary.<sup>10</sup> In broad terms South Africa followed the pattern set down by these two countries, with resistance to conscription only becoming widely apparent as the perceived role of the SADF changed from a shield of the state to a weapon of racial repression, which began occurring by the early 1980s. However neither the UK nor the USA had to contend with the notion that their conscripts were acting against their own people (conscription in the UK ended well before the Troubles in Northern Ireland began), and nor did they have to contend with the fact that by merely existing the armed forces were widely seen to be aiding the perpetuation of an immoral system of government.

Unlike other Western powers, South Africa did not have the luxury of a distant vantage point from which to view the conflict she was embroiled in, and immediate security fears often overrode concerns about human rights or repressions. White South Africa largely saw the SADF as a force that was protecting them and was

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<sup>10</sup> M.K. Jennings & G.B. Markus, 'Political Participation and Vietnam War Veterans: A Longitudinal Study', in Nancy Goldman & David R. Segal (eds), *The Social Psychology of Military Service* (Beverly Hills, 1976), p.178.

prepared to give it at least grudging support. South Africa therefore never saw the same breadth of opposition to conscription as existed in the UK and USA, though the antipathy that anti-conscript campaigners in South Africa bore for the SADF comes across as far fiercer than the opposition to national service in the UK, and more multi-issued than the anti-Vietnam movement that brought an end to the draft in the USA. However, a feature in many Western countries that was also evident in South Africa is the membership of ex-servicemen in the anti-conscription organisations. The USA is most notable for this with organisations such as 'Vietnam Veterans Against the War',<sup>11</sup> but the phenomenon existed to a lesser extent throughout the Western world.

Conscientious objection to the perceived immorality of military service was also found in all Western countries, and in all countries the authorities were obliged to make provision for it. However, the extent to which conscientious objection has been tolerated by governments throughout the world is largely dependant upon the demand for it and upon immediate security concerns of the nation in question. Generally speaking conscientious objection on religious grounds will be permitted once it is recognised that the objection is based on devoutly held religious beliefs, but the possibilities for it will be severely curtailed when a nation or their direct interests are threatened. In the UK for example, which was not immediately threatened by invasion or insurrection during its national service era, conscientious objection was allowed and alternative non-military service was an option. Nonetheless while most people 'were reasonably well disposed towards conscientious objectors',<sup>12</sup> numbers of objectors were very low (an average of approximately four men in 1000) and the grounds for objection were not particularly wide, meaning that about 35 percent of applications for conscientious objector status were refused outright.<sup>13</sup> Conscientious objectors were never seen as threatening to the security of the state and so they were generally tolerated.

Yet while the UK may have been willing to tolerate men refusing service, in France no provisions for objection were made until after the end of the Algerian war.<sup>14</sup> To France, Algeria was not considered as a colony but as an integral part of the nation, albeit geographically separate. The insurrection in Algeria was therefore a direct threat to the security of the French nation, and the government and people could not

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<sup>11</sup> John Blair & Jerald Bachman, 'The Public View of the Military', in Nancy Goldman & David Segal, *The Social Psychology of Military Service* (Beverly Hills, 1976), p.217.

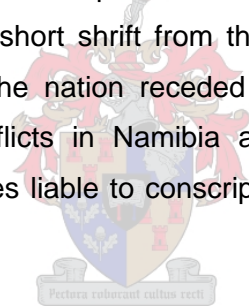
<sup>12</sup> Hickman, *The Call-up*, p.230.

<sup>13</sup> Hickman, *The Call-up*, pp.228-29.

<sup>14</sup> William Bellamy, *Une Identité Nouvelle Pour L'Afrique du Sud* (Paris, 1996), p.70.

allow the security forces to be undermined by men refusing to serve. Similarly the state of Israel is unfavourably disposed to conscientious objectors due to the existence, real or perceived, of threats to national security, and men who refuse service can expect a two year prison sentence for their troubles.<sup>15</sup> Israel's stance on conscientious objection can also be linked to the fact that Jewish Orthodoxy does not demand a rejection of defensive violence as some Christian denominations do, and so there is less spiritual authority for objectors to appeal to.

The experience of South Africa in respect of conscientious objectors generally fits the pattern shown in other Western nations. Until 1983 the South African government rejected calls to allow conscientious objection, before allowing it according to universal pacifist beliefs. However due to the threats to security and the need for manpower, the circumstances whereby one might qualify as an objector were severely circumscribed. The government tolerated objectors more from a pragmatic wish to avoid criticism and opposition than from any true acknowledgement of the justice of their cause, and anyone who questioned the morality of the particular policy of apartheid was likely to gain short shrift from the Board for Religious Objection. However, when the threat to the nation receded so did the harsh measures for objectors; the end of the conflicts in Namibia and Angola 'produced beneficial consequences for all white males liable to conscription, including conscientious and religious objectors'.<sup>16</sup>



An anomaly in the issue of rejection of conscription is Israel, where not only all men but women too were, and indeed still are, called up for military service. Superficially the situation of Israel in the last decades is quite similar to that of apartheid South Africa. Although 'Israelis are quite sensitive to comparisons of their country to...South Africa',<sup>17</sup> both Israel and white South Africa shared the experience of being surrounded by enemies, and both had to use military force to oppose the often violent demands for freedom from a people (or multiple peoples in the case of South Africa) that was ethnically different to their own hegemonic group. Yet while the social injustices and repressions in South Africa were more extreme and prompted extensive criticism both inside and outside of the country, the repression of the

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<sup>15</sup> *New Internationalist*, (July 2005), p.33, Making Waves, an Interview with Israel's Refuseniks.

<sup>16</sup> Edwin Cameron, 'Conscription', *South African Human Rights and Labour Law Yearbook*, Vol. 2, (1991), p.36.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Keren, 'Legal Professionals and Civil Disobedience in Israel', *International Journal of the Legal Profession*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (1999), p.105.



Palestinian majorities in the conquered territories of Gaza and the West Bank, as well as the occupation of the Golan Heights and the Sinai, provoked no discernable anti-militarist feeling among Israelis. If anything the occupation of territories captured and held in the four major Arab-Israeli wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 served only to remind Israel that there was a very real and very close threat to its existence. The widely condemned 1982 invasion of Lebanon was the first time that Israelis really began to question service to the state, and a conscientious objection organisation called *Yesh Gvul* was formed with between six and eight hundred IDF soldiers becoming members. However the members of this organisation were still willing to defend Israel, and only refused to fight in the offensive campaigns in Lebanon.<sup>18</sup>

A major reason for this is that the idea of military service is deeply embedded in Israeli society, and the defence of the country is seen as every citizen's duty. A 1989 study estimated that 72 percent of Israelis would volunteer for the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) even if it were not compulsory.<sup>19</sup> In this parallels can be drawn with some sections of South African society, especially the sections of society that believed in selfless service to the *volk en vaderland*. However the two cases are not entirely similar. South African society, even at its most militarist, still widely believed that conscripted soldiers were civilians and would return to civilian life. There was a civilian society that was very distinct from the military setup as half of the white population – the female half – was not liable to military service, but in Israeli society there was a much less defined distinction between the people and the military. According to a former Israeli Chief-of-Staff, 'the civilian in Israel is a soldier on eleven months annual leave',<sup>20</sup> while General Magnus Malan told the wife of a conscript that every South African man had a *second* (my emphasis) career in the military,<sup>21</sup> thus unconsciously demonstrating the mentality that South Africans were civilians first and soldiers of the state second, as opposed to the Israeli pattern of soldiers then citizens. Also, Israeli society and the IDF did not suffer such international ostracism as South Africa, but instead could rely heavily on the moral and material support of the US-led Western powers. Yet while there was not any large resistance movement to conscription within Israel, there was still anti-war unrest and like in South Africa

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<sup>18</sup> Gavin Cawthra, Gerald Kraak, & Gerald O'Sullivan (eds), *War and Resistance, South Africa Reports: The Struggle for South Africa as Documented by Resister Magazine* (London, 1994), pp.241-42.

<sup>19</sup> Amia Lieblich, *Transition to Adulthood during Military Service, the Israeli Case* (New York, 1989), p.113.

<sup>20</sup> Lieblich, *Transition to Adulthood*, p.112.

<sup>21</sup> Merran Willis Phillips, *The End Conscription Campaign 1983-1988: A Study in White Extra-parliamentary Opposition to Apartheid* (MA thesis, UNISA, 2002), p.225.

many of the soldiers felt uneasy about their role, especially in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Lebanon.

The experiences of national service soldiers from Westernized societies such as the UK, USA, Israel and France all have traits in common, and it is unsurprising that South Africa shares many of these traits. The background from which the conscripts in each of these countries came is, on a broad level, not overly dissimilar. In each of these societies the youth was brought up to believe in virtue and righteousness which occupy prime positions in both the Jewish and Christian faiths, but they were also exposed to a degree of militarism, which in South Africa and Israel was actively fostered in schools and which in the other countries derived from their history and from the high regard in which military heroes and ex-servicemen were held, especially those of the World War generations. Each of these societies also had traditions of freedom and an abhorrence of tyranny, although these lofty ideals were often only abstract notions to the post-Second World War youth, and in South Africa and Israel were generally only applied to the hegemonic groups who had in the past had to struggle against oppression. The young men brought into the military were therefore equipped mentally to be a force for 'good', with virtue, heroism, self-sacrifice and the protection of liberty as their received notions of what soldiering should entail.<sup>22</sup>

However conscript soldiers from each of these countries would find themselves facing a situation where they were not only the invader, occupier or aggressor in a foreign land, but where they were faced with a civilian population hostile to their every move and where the distinction between enemy fighters, enemy sympathisers, and civilians was often impossible to make. In each case many young conscripts were troubled by what they saw and by what they did. The experience of South Africans in the townships and to a lesser extent in Namibia bears similarities to the British experience in Malaysia or Kenya, the American experience in Vietnam, the French in Algeria and Israel in the occupied territories and Lebanon. All were unwelcome armies of occupation, though all felt they were there to police the area and make it safe from terrorists or insurgents so that normal people could go on with their lives. All of these experiences also share one possibly startling characteristic; in none of the above cases were the occupying armies comprehensively defeated

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<sup>22</sup> Even as late as 1989, a survey of Afrikaner students found that many held the Security Establishment in high esteem as it was 'good, honest, free, and just'. Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners, A Biography of a People* (Cape Town, 2003), p.623.

militarily. While some conscripts may have been unhappy with their duties, they were professional enough to carry them out regardless, and in every case any decision to withdraw the troops was taken for political and not military reasons.

A feature of the South African experience that can also be seen in some other countries is the reluctance of reservists or part-time conscripts, the men of the Citizen Force and Commandos in South Africa, to be called up for further service. Men who had completed their initial stint in the military were inclined to believe that they had done their bit and resented further intrusions by the military into their lives. When the Suez crisis began in 1956, Britain recalled some 20 000 reservists, whose 'collective reaction was one of anger and defiance.'<sup>23</sup> The same reaction was found from many South African men called up for extraordinary duties or for a three month border camp, especially as until 1982 these camps were only credited as 30 days. This was somewhat offset by the fact that the men expected to be called up for CF duties, but the foreknowledge of these commitments did not make them any more palatable. A noticeable difference again is Israel, where men called up for one month per year seem to accept the intrusion with more grace and fewer complaints than in other societies.

A trait found in all of the Western countries considered in this study is that while military service may have occasionally been unpopular, compliance rates with conscription orders were always high. Men may have grumbled and society may have complained but there was never such mass stay-aways as to make conscription impossible. South African society's acceptance of conscription is not particularly surprising in this sense, although the penalties for refusing to serve were some of the harshest in the world and there was perhaps more compulsion used in South Africa than elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> The factors that drove men into the military (see chapter 4) were usually similar for all Western nations. As well as a degree of ingrained obedience to governmental authority, all countries benefited from a degree of respect for the military, patriotism, a sense of inclusion that being part of the military brought, and young men's natural propensity to seek adventure and independence. Compulsion and oppressive measures were not widely used, and although statutory punishments existed relatively few men in each state were imprisoned for refusing military service.

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<sup>23</sup> Hickman, *The Call-up*, pp.211-12.

<sup>24</sup> Jacklyn Cock, *Colonels and Cadres, War and Gender in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1991), pp.66-67.

A final comparison that perhaps has to be made is that of South Africa to Rhodesia. The position of Rhodesia is superficially fairly close to South Africa, as both countries possessed minority white populations intent on keeping political power and were obliged to use force to maintain the status quo. Rhodesia however never had a military as strong as the SADF, and relied proportionally far more on the black population, upon whom a limited conscription was introduced, to man the army.<sup>25</sup> Rhodesian forces were not deployed in such controversial conflicts as the South African conscripts, and were constrained to defending the territory of their country from the insurgency rather than occupying foreign territory or attempting to quell large scale and concentrated civilian unrest. The security situation in Rhodesia was also far worse than in South Africa, as insurgents virtually controlled large stretches of the country, and with manpower extremely limited 'the call-up eventually encompassed all able-bodied white men between 18 and 60',<sup>26</sup> a situation which was never truly the case for South Africa.

The experiences of South Africa as a nation and the experiences of the SADF as a force during the years of apartheid were unique. However, the experiences of the conscripts and the social response to conscription were not altogether unique. There were idiosyncrasies and individualities to the South African system, such as the concept of the trained reserve and the comparatively late introduction of universal service at a time when many other nations were phasing out or scaling down their military commitments, but these were brought about by mainly local factors and circumstances and are to be expected.

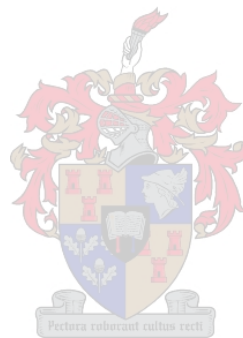
In broad terms the experience of national service in white South African society shared many traits with that of other contemporary societies. Conscription was accepted while the costs of compliance were low, but was opposed to a greater degree when the conscripted military was perceived as not longer acting in the best interests of the nation. Despite the existence of vociferous campaigns such as the ECC and COSAWR, South African conscription was never as broadly opposed as in the UK or the USA within the conscripted society, but this was mainly because of white fears over security and the apparent need for a large defence force. When resistance to conscription in South Africa did occur however, it was far more virulent than the opposition seen in other Western nations because it was intimately linked with opposition to apartheid. The South African conscripts themselves shared similar

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<sup>25</sup> J.K. Cilliers, *Counter-Insurgency in Rhodesia* (London, 1985).

<sup>26</sup> Cilliers, *Counter-insurgency in Rhodesia*, p.43.

feelings of dissatisfaction and disillusionment with their military service to those experienced by British, American, and Israeli conscripts, and in each of these societies ex-servicemen were prominent members of anti-war or anti-militarist lobbies, though to widely varying degrees. The major difference in this regard was the international stigma that was and still is attached to the 'agents of apartheid', as South African conscripts are now seen, but which was not attached to those who served in the other forces. Overall, despite the vastly different and unique social and political factors that existed in South Africa under apartheid, the experience of military conscription for both national servicemen and wider society can be seen as generally conforming to the pattern of other Western powers.



## Conclusion – Heroes or Oppressors?

For over four decades, from the first balloted men in 1952 to the last conscripts to leave service in 1993, South Africa used a form of compulsory service to draw men into the ranks of its Defence Force. Until 1967 men were randomly selected by ballot to perform military service; from that year onwards all medically fit white South African males aged 18-55 were legally obliged to render military service to the state.

In post-apartheid South Africa support for conscription and national service has all but disappeared, and the military conscription of the apartheid years is widely held as having been something of an evil. The TRC summed up its feelings on national service by saying 'the State's policy of conscription was immoral'.<sup>1</sup> It is unsurprising in this climate that national service is now increasingly believed to have been opposed and resisted by those required to perform it, and that those who did serve in the SADF put their service down to compulsion rather than inclination.

Yet despite all that is written about resistance to conscription, it was never widely rejected. The overwhelming majority of men called up in these forty years of service reported willingly to their units. A number of factors contributed to the high rates of reporting, from natural obedience to authority to patriotism, pride in the military, parental pressure, or simply fear of the consequences, both penal and social, of refusing. Yet while it is wrong to portray conscription as a wholly disliked and rejected institution, it was also never a celebrated or loved aspect of South African life. Conscription was largely accepted as a necessity and as a duty that had to be performed, and was a fact of life for almost all men born in South Africa in the decades following the Second World War. It is true that there were few who vigorously opposed the imposition of compulsory service in the 1950s; it is equally true that there were few who mourned the system's demise forty years later.

While some may be surprised by such high levels of cooperation with the now reviled apartheid state, and may ask what made men acquiesce to national service, for the majority of the era it would be more pertinent to ask why men may have refused their duties. Until at least the mid-1980s, apartheid was not the almost universally abhorred institution that it now is, but retained a relative level of support from both inside and outside of South Africa. Service in the SADF was not seen in such

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<sup>1</sup> *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (7 Volumes, Cape Town, 1998), Vol. 5, p.257.



negative terms as it is today and the morality of such service was not as questioned as it is today. For the larger part of the conscription era it was therefore not to be expected that men would reject their state-imposed duties, but rather that they would acquiesce like men in any other society. It was not until pressing reasons not to serve began to become apparent that men began to resist national service.

Opposition to conscription in apartheid South Africa was not a static phenomenon, but changed greatly over the years that compulsory service was in force. Chronologically, public opposition went through three general phases; that of insignificant opposition up until the mid-1970s, that of increasing but largely religious based public opposition up until the early 1980s, and that of increasing political opposition throughout the last decade of compulsory service. The opposition to the SADF and national service that did eventually evolve came in two main categories; conceptual opposition to the idea of conscription, specifically in apartheid South Africa, and physical opposition from men failing or refusing to report for service. The two often went hand-in-hand and were mutually supportive; conscripts refusing to serve were given legitimacy by the conceptual opposition, while theoretical opposition was given a boost by men rejecting their duties.

The scale and the scope of resistance to service throughout the period was largely limited to relatively young English-speaking liberals, although in later years opposition did begin to diversify. Although many Afrikaners showed discontent with the system, the overwhelming reaction of Afrikaans speakers throughout the period was conformity, though with varying degrees of enthusiasm or reluctance. This is not to say that some Afrikaners were not averse to conscription; no lesser person than Marike de Klerk, wife of the then President F. W. de Klerk, expressed in 1990 her desire that national service be ended.<sup>2</sup> In both English and Afrikaans speaking society, older men were generally more reluctant to be conscripted, and university graduates or men who had previously deferred their call-up provided a disproportionate number of objectors to service. Indeed, the reason that many surveys misrepresented conscription as being so widely disliked is because they dealt with students, who were by and large less keen on service than the school leavers who made up the majority of the conscript intakes. Politically, conscription continued to enjoy widespread cross-party support throughout the era, and was seen as a necessity even by many white opponents of apartheid who feared anarchy

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<sup>2</sup> Hilton Hamman, *Days of the Generals, the untold story of South Africa's apartheid era military generals* (Cape Town, 2001), p.182

should the various liberation armies take South Africa by storm. However, while MPs continued to support the government on security issues, by the 1980s they were less willing to do so uncritically.

As the costs to the white population of conscription, and indeed the costs of apartheid in general, increased, so did the incidences of refusal and public rejection of service. In the first two decades of compulsory service conscripts were called-up, trained, and then allowed to return to civilian life and become a member of the reserves. Their time in the military was statutorily a period of training rather than a period of service. Men were not sent to war and nor were they deployed in operational areas. Conscription was an imposition but not a particularly onerous one, and this is largely reflected by the lack of opposition to compulsory service.

This began to change from 1967 onwards. First, in 1967, a Defence Amendment Act not only introduced universal conscription but also changed the nature of compulsory military duties from a period of training to a period of 'national service', removing the legal impediments to the employment of conscripts in operational as well as training situations. Initially there was little practical change in the use of conscripts and consequently little change in the attitudes of people towards service. The first operational deployments came in 1972 when the SADF began to take control of northern Namibia from the Police and within a couple of years began to routinely send conscripts to occupy the operational area. This led to the first major public criticism of military service in the form of the SACC Hammanskraal Declaration in 1974, which questioned the morality of service in the SADF.

In 1975 the *cordon sanitaire* of states friendly to South Africa was breached when Angola and Mozambique achieved independence, leading the SADF to launch a militarily ineffective and unpopular intervention in Angola. It was the Angolan intervention that sparked the first large-scale resistance to conscription. Once the SADF involvement across the northern borders of Namibia became widely known in South Africa thousands of men, representing between ten and fifteen percent of conscripts, refused their duties by becoming draft dodgers. The lack of a concurrent public outcry against the war indicates that the majority of objectors were not politically motivated; it was rather a more spontaneous action from men who seemingly did not want to join the military during a time of war. By the time the SADF withdrew from Angola, other events dictated that the rates of men refusing to accept military service would remain relatively high.

From 1976 onwards a series of events made it increasingly evident that white South Africans faced some very real security threats. The eruption of violence in Soweto in June 1976 signalled to white South Africa and to the world that the aspirations of the black majority could not ultimately be held back except by force, and the 1977 mandatory UN arms embargo left South Africa militarily isolated. The blows continued to come; Ian Smith's Rhodesia became Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe in 1980 and by June 1986 internal unrest in South Africa had provoked a National State of Emergency that would last until February 1990. Whites increasingly saw that maintaining the status quo in South Africa would require sacrifices, and it was the white male youths who bore the brunt of that burden. As the burden increased throughout the last decade, so did the numbers of those who declared themselves unwilling to bear it. Nonetheless, despite increasing numbers of men refusing to serve, reporting rates remained high until the very end of apartheid, with some eighty percent or more of men continuing to perform the service required of them.

The changing attitudes to conscription in many ways reflect the changing perceptions of the nation's Defence Force. In the first decades of compulsory service the role of the Defence Force was the defence of South Africa and its territorial integrity, but from the early 1970s the SADF's presence in Namibia and later Angola saw questions asked about the role of the Defence Force. By the late 1970s the heavily manned SADF began to be drawn into the internal conflict in South Africa through its role in combating the ANC, and was henceforth increasingly seen as one of the main impediments to the fight against apartheid. Once soldiers were ordered into the townships from 1984 onwards this perception was largely confirmed in the eyes of the black majority and in the eyes of the world, and the SADF became seen as an integral cog in the security forces of oppression. Once service in the SADF began to be equated in some communities with the perpetuation of immorality, support for it began to diminish.

The 1980s saw a great deal of action around the issue of conscription. It saw not only the extensive internal deployment of conscripts to directly confront black unrest, the continued occupation of Namibia and a large conventional invasion of Angola, but also a large increase of public anti-military and anti-conscription feeling in South Africa. In 1983 the End Conscription Campaign was set up, which over the next half decade would campaign against the SADF and national military service, and the numbers of men refusing service grew steadily. In the same year a long running but unorganised campaign calling for legal provisions for conscientious objectors

achieved a partial victory, as the government henceforth provided men with sincere religious scruples with either exemption or the possibility to perform national service in a non-combat capacity inside or outside of the SADF. The 1980s was a decade of upheaval that affected almost all aspects of society, and conscription and the debate surrounding it did not come through unscathed. However, while the momentous events of the 1980s have been fertile ground for those writing about national service in South Africa, this decade is not representative of the period of compulsory service under apartheid.

In the last decade or so a myth, or rather a series of myths, have begun to develop around the issue of national service in South Africa. The largest misconception is one that came about during the 1980s when the unpopularity of the SADF in liberal and academic circles was at its height. The relative unpopularity of military service that existed during that decade and that has persisted since has led to a situation whereby it is now largely unpopular to admit to willingly serving in the SADF. Writing about the Vietnam War, J. F. Borus found that people in the USA 'had overpoweringly supported the war in the early years and made a massive shift...until, by the war's end...one was hard-pressed to find supporters of the war or even those willing to admit that they supported it in the past.'<sup>3</sup> A similar phenomenon is evident in South Africa. Despite widespread support for conscription, even during the 1980s, few people in post-apartheid South Africa are willing to admit their support for it, lest they be labelled proponents of the regime which the SADF sustained. The resistance of the 1980s is exaggerated both popularly and in academic works, and compliance with conscription is often put down to the six year prison sentence that faced those who refused service. This despite the fact that the six year sentence was introduced only in 1983, and that over the entire four decades only 21 men were ever convicted of 'refusing to serve', with most objectors being charged for lesser offences. Also, while many works point to reasonably high refusal rates of between ten and twenty percent from 1975 onwards, few mention that by no means all of these refusals were explicitly political; indeed, in 1989, that is at the height of the resistance and with the draconian punishments for objectors in place, only four political conscientious objectors were incarcerated in South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan F. Borus, 'The Re-entry Transition of the Vietnam Veteran', in Nancy Goldman & David Segal (eds), *The Social Psychology of Military Service* (Beverly Hills, 1976), pp.41-42.

<sup>4</sup> Gavin Cawthra, Gerald Kraak, & Gerald O'Sullivan (eds), *War and Resistance, South Africa Reports: The Struggle for South Africa as Documented by Resister Magazine* (London, 1994), p.12.

There is much literature and other media which propagate the myth of widespread refusal, most of which was written during the dark years towards the end of apartheid when total objectivity was not the authors' main aim, and yet to a large extent they have been accepted as fact. Much of the literature pertaining to national service focuses on issues of rejection and specifically on the campaigns against conscription, notably the ECC. The impact of these anti-conscription and anti-militarist movements can be overestimated as they ultimately failed to gain the support of any large section of white society, but they did nonetheless cause enough problems for the government to feel it necessary to launch a vicious counter-propaganda campaign and eventually resort to trying to end the movement by banning the ECC in August 1988. While the ECC was committed to opposing conscription, its membership was equally committed to ending white dominance in South Africa and ending the injustices carried out by the conscripts of the SADF. The ECC campaigns and message often slanted more in this direction than solely opposing conscription per se. The organisation attracted as much criticism as it did support, and many of its activists saw the organisation as part of the wider campaign aiming to bring down apartheid. The existence of such campaigns is evidence of white discontent with national service; their small following is evidence that discontent was by no means universal.

Another issue that dogs the SADF and its former conscripts is the idea that those who served South Africa under apartheid were all responsible for the maintenance of the racist system of government. It is nowadays also widely accepted as fact that 'the SADF had always been used to maintain apartheid and white minority rule.'<sup>5</sup> However such blanket statements are misleading and should be guarded against, as for a long period of time the SADF was a largely redundant force, acting as a deterrent to any outside intervention and as a force for anti-communism in sub-Saharan Africa. It was not until the late 1970s that the South African government finally realised that the West did not necessarily hold communism as a greater evil than apartheid, and it was not until the 1980s that soldiers were extensively used within the country to control unrest caused by the government's apartheid policy. Equally, not all men who were part of the system did anything to support it, and many conscripts saw their job as the defence of South Africa from foreign aggressors, an apolitical shield behind which the government could operate as it and the electorate saw fit.

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<sup>5</sup> Jacklyn Cock, *Colonels and Cadres War & Gender in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1991), p.22.

Although the view that military service to the apartheid state could be apolitical, and therefore be no impediment to the end of apartheid, may today be dismissed as at naïve or disingenuous, it still does have some validity in the context of the attitudes held by servicemen during the conscription era. While the SADF can by no means be described as politically neutral due to the preponderance of NP supporters in the highest ranks, neither was it committed to upholding apartheid at all costs. When F. W. de Klerk announced that apartheid would be ending there were fears that the SADF might intervene to prevent this; on the contrary, the members of the Defence Force largely conducted themselves with the highest professionalism to help ensure that the elections of 1994 went ahead reasonably smoothly.<sup>6</sup> During the 1980s the SADF did act in a way that propped up the apartheid state, partly due to the fact that the Defence Force and white government largely viewed most opposition to apartheid as part of an international communist-backed attempt to seize the country, and not as a legitimate political movement per se. The SADF's actions were therefore, in its own eyes, the defence of the nation; to its opponents they were seen solely as an impediment to majority rule. Most conscripts would have subscribed to the establishment's point of view, and so could have willingly acted in ways that helped to uphold the apartheid state's authority, without that necessarily having been their intention.

That national service had a deep impact on South Africa cannot be doubted. Over time the government was obliged to develop a sophisticated system designed to attract men into the SADF by attempting to make service seem more palatable and more necessary. Schools, pro-Establishment churches, and the media were all used to spread the government's messages, which ranged from blood-chilling assessments of the security threat to stirring eulogies of heroes and explanations of the merits of military service. Conscription also played a major role in raising the profile of the military by bringing it into virtually every white household in the land. Economically conscription had a disruptive effect, with the Citizen Force and Commando call-ups proving an especial annoyance to both large and small business, and due to the racial job reservation policy and the competition for white labour it had a braking effect on South African economic growth.

Yet the impacts of conscription could be more personal too. Many conscripts were changed by their military experience, especially from the 1970s when many men

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Frankel, *Soldiers in a Storm, the Armed Forces in South Africa's Democratic Transition* (Colorado, 2000).



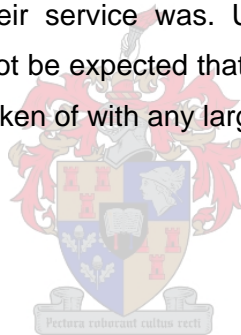
spent three month tours in operational areas, and returning men were in sometimes more morose, violent, and prone to alcoholism or drug use. Divorce and suicide rates among conscripts were high, and a number of national servicemen suffered from some kind of mental trauma following their service. The military gave a chance for the bullies, criminals and sadists that lurk in every community to come out and in the later years of compulsory service gave them power over others in either Namibia or the townships, a power which they sometimes greatly abused. However the impact of conscription was not universally negative, as many men grew up, learnt self-reliance and gained in self-confidence, while others acquired new skills, got to travel to new places, or made friendships that lasted for many years. Indeed even the most reluctant of conscripts often grudgingly admit that there were some positive aspects to having done military service.<sup>7</sup>

National service conscripts of the SADF have at different times been called different things by different people. Some have pointed out that the young conscripts sacrificed years of their lives to defend the borders of the country, risked life and limb to protect their people, both black and white, from both internal and external threats, sometimes making the ultimate sacrifice of losing their lives, and won some notable victories against the odds preventing the southward spread of Soviet and Cuban backed communism. Others have pointed out that national servicemen were the mainstay of a military that became involved in a brutal conflict in an illegally occupied land, a military that was ultimately used against the very people it claimed to be defending, a military for which torture, rape and murder were common weapons. Some call them heroes, others call them oppressors. There is in fact no way to reconcile the two views. Over the four decades that the Defence Force compelled men to serve in its ranks no doubt there were many heroes and no doubt there were many oppressors, but most men were neither one nor the other. The only generalisation that can be made about national servicemen is that you cannot generalise, but it should be remembered that national servicemen were just that; men serving their nation. To excuse all men for their acts on the grounds that they were conscripts and had no choice to be in the military would be wrong, but to accuse all men of being oppressors when their only 'crime' was to try to defend their country by obeying a government with racially discriminatory policies would be equally irrational.

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<sup>7</sup> Personal correspondence with Stewart Kramm and Louis Botha, (email correspondence, 2007) and interview with Wouter Pretorius, (Uniondale, 2007); and Larry Schwartz, *The Wild Almond Line* (St Leonards, 2000).

Despite this, the view of the SADF and its former conscripts as oppressors is widely held, and this has led to a situation where many men today feel almost compelled to justify their service to apartheid South Africa, to explain why they did not or could not object. Most will say they had no choice; many will tell of the terrible consequences of not serving. Yet while there was no choice and while there were unpleasant consequences to refusing, these were not the factors that at the time drove or drew men into the military. For the most part men joined without demur because that was what was required of them, and even those who were disinclined towards the military rarely seriously considered the alternatives. The post-apartheid unpopularity of service has led to the foregrounding of, and widespread acceptance of, justifications and excuses, almost to the extent that those who offer such explanations for their actions are recast in some ways as 'victims' of the system, while the others, those who offer no excuses or justifications, remain numbered amongst the 'oppressors'. In a situation such as this, it is to be expected that former conscripts will ever increasingly put their service simply down to compulsion and coercion, and recount how disliked and unpopular their service was. Until the scars of South Africa's apartheid past heal over, it cannot be expected that conscription and national service will be popularly looked at or spoken of with any large degree of objectivity.



## Appendix 1

### The Findings on Conscription of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

“The Commission finds that:

The state’s policy of conscription was immoral and denied conscripts the right to freedom of conscience and the right to refuse to serve in the SADF.

Through the policy of conscription, the state and the SADF used young men to assist, implement and defend the policy of apartheid, to maintain the illegal occupation of Namibia and to wage war against neighbouring countries.

The state’s vilification of conscripts who refused to serve in the SADF by labelling them ‘cowards and traitors’ constitutes a violation of human rights.

Some churches (in particular mainstream Afrikaans churches) openly supported the policy of conscription, thus creating a climate in which gross violations of human rights could take place.”



*Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report (7 Volumes, Cape Town, 1998), Volume 5, p.257.*

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