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ON CONTROVERSIES, BATTLES, RAIDS AND AN ELUSIVE TRUTH: OPPOSING PERSPECTIVES ON CASSINGA, 1978

BOOK REVIEW

Vilo Amukwaya Shigwedha, The Aftermath of the Cassinga Massacre: Survivors, Deniers, and Injustices. Basel Namibia Studies Series, no. 18. Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2017. (ISBN 978-3-905758-80-1).

Edward George McGill Alexander, *'The Cassinga Raid'* (MA thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 2003).

Jan Breytenbach, *Eagle strike! The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga.* 1978. Sandton: Manie Grove Publishing, 2008. (ISBN: 978-0-620-40614-7).

Abstract

The South African attack in 1978 on Cassinga, an alleged South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) base during the 'Border War', remains highly controversial. For some, Operation Reindeer, as it was called, was an undisputed military highlight, a most successful airborne operation and a victory over the SWAPO and its military arm, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). For others, it was an undisputed massacre of civilian refugees in an Angolan town far north of the Namibia/Angola border. The drifting dust and smoke of past battles interfere seriously with seeing a clearer picture. In this review article, works from different (even serious contradictory) perspectives by three authors are discussed in an attempt to get more clarity on this much-disputed event and its outcomes.

Keywords: Cassinga, Border War, Angola, SWAPO, South African Defence Force (SADF), Cassinga massacre, airborne operations, African conflicts, (national) liberation

struggles, airborne operations, apartheid destabilisation in southern Africa, People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN)

Sleutelwoorde: Kassinga, Grensoorlog, konflik (in Angola), Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag (SAW), Kassinga-menseslagting; lugoperasies; Afrika konflikte; nasionale bevrydingstryde; apartheid destabilisasie; PLAN

1. INTRODUCTION

The struggle for freedom and independence in what is now known as Namibia stems from long before the Border War/Angolan War.¹ It also stems from before the times of apartheid to an era when the Union of South Africa ruled Namibia with an iron fist.² The liberation struggle in Namibia saw many torturous permutations. The background to this particular article is the South African apartheid government's illegal occupation of Namibia until 1989. The focus is on one of the numerous trans-border operations into Angola. Namibia was a former German colony taken over after a South African invasion during World War 1 (WW 1). German (South) West Africa then became a Class C mandate in 1919 under supervision of the Union of South Africa. Despite several United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions to force South Africa to disengage from Namibia during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, little happened.³ South Africa's military

1 See for example, L Bothma, *Vang 'n Boer: Die stryd tussen Boer en Ovambo (Langenhovenpark: L Bothma/ABC Press, 2012)*, pp. 65ff, 78ff, 80ff; B Davidson, *Africa in History: Themes and Outlines* (London: Phoenix Press, 2003), pp. 286ff; H Drechsler, 'Let us die Fighting' *The Struggle of the Herero and Nama against German Imperialism* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966); I Liebenberg, "Herero en Massamoord in Hornkranz-skadu", *Beeld*, 5 May 2018, p. 16. Compare also I Liebenberg, "On our Borders: Namibia seeks its own Destiny", in I Liebenberg, Risquet J and Shubin V, eds, *A Far-Away War: Angola, 1975-1989* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2015), pp. 17-34. Also see J Sarkin, *Germany's Genocide of the Herero: Kaiser Wilhelm II, His General, His Settlers, His Soldiers* (Suffolk: James Curry, 2011). Another useful source is D Olusoga and Erichsen CW, *The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 2010). Peter H. Katjivivi also dealt at length with the German colonial conquest in his work entitled *A History of Resistance in Namibia* (London: James Curry, 1988), pp. 7ff.

2 Deon Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation: South African Foreign Policy Making* (Braamfontein: Macmillan South Africa, 1984), pp. 5-6.

3 For the saga of international developments and the extended political and legal battle between South Africa and the UN, consult Robert S. Jaster, *South Africa in Namibia: The Botha Strategy* (Lanham, University Press of America, 1985), pp. 3-7. See also J Faundez, "Namibia: Is There Still a Role for International Law?", in B Wood, ed., *Namibia 1884-1984: Readings on Namibia's History and Society* (Lusaka, United Nations Institute for Namibia, 1988), pp 733-737. Another helpful source is J Dugard, *Human Rights and the South African Legal Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 3-4, 347, 103-104.

presence in Namibia would lead to an escalating border war ('grensoorlog' in South African parlance) that spilt over into Angola.⁴

Following the withdrawal of Portugal as colonial power from Angola in 1975, the chaotic pre-independence period saw Angola divided between three liberation movements.⁵ The struggle between these movements and the involvement of political actors outside Angola would spawn a drawn-out war and a complicated multi-layered regional conflict. The South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) embarked on an armed struggle for liberation in 1966 operating from Angola and Zambia. SWAPO's armed wing became known as the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). The South African Defence Force (SADF) was fighting PLAN both in northern Namibia and in Angola and since the middle of the 1970s, military activities and conflict were to escalate increasingly in northern Namibia and southern Angola in this multi-layered conflict; a conflict that was further fuelled by the Cold War psychosis.

By 1977, South Africa had a more or less permanent presence in Angola. Conflict was to intensify on an annual basis. Foreign actors increasingly became involved; a situation that was only turned around when the South African forces were stalemated by the Cuban forces during the Battles of Cuito Cuanavale, the Tumpo Triangle and the Lomba River. After the United Nations (UN) supervised elections under Resolution 435, Namibia under SWAPO became independent in March 1990. The pivot for this extended conflict was SWAPO's struggle for liberation and the apartheid government in Pretoria's consistent refusal to allow Namibian independence.

2. ON BOOKS, PERSPECTIVES AND CLASHING INTERPRETATIONS

What happened (in history) can perhaps not be disputed. Whether there can be a lasting objective view is another question. Oscar Handlin argued that history-

4 For an excellent and recent summary on 'Border War' literature, consult A Wessels, "Half a Century of South African "Border War Literature: A Historiographical Exploration", *Journal for Contemporary History* 42(2), 2017, pp. 24–47.

5 James Ciment, *Postcolonial Wars in Southern Africa: Angola and Mozambique* (New York: Facts on File, Inc, 1997), pp. 44ff, 70ff, 95ff; P Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa, 1959–1976* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 246ff, 273ff; P Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington and Pretoria, 1976–1991* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2013), pp. 9ff, 65ff, 119; V Shubin, *The Hot 'Cold War' – The USSR in Southern Africa* (London: Pluto Press, 2008); M Wolfers and Bergerol J, *Angola in the Frontline* (London: Zed Press, 1983), pp. 1ff, 14ff, 26ff; V Shubin and Shubin G, 'The Soviet Involvement', in I Liebenberg, Risquet J and Shubin V, eds., *A Far-Away War: Angola, 1976–1989* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2015), pp. 83–100.

writing can be objective.⁶ Others differ. While not going as far as the historian Jan Romeijn who ostensibly said that one can only serve objectivity by being fully subjective, Wilfred Desan argued that one has to accept that (all) people view the past, present and future from what he calls an 'angular truth' or through 'angular optics' (pp. 50–51).⁷ Desan uses the term *angular optics* to explain multiple views held by different people on a specific case or development. Each observation may hold its bit of truth, yet cannot fully capture what is seen and described by the individual due to the fact that each person has a unique perspective on what is seen as definitive. In short; full objectivity, for example on a historical incident, is unattainable. At most inter-subjectivity, some convergence of interpretations can be attained. Dallmayr and McCarthy further complicated the argument when stating that knowledge creation about past or present 'is always knowledge from particular points of view' (p. 31).⁸ Peter Gay, by using Freudian insights on the writing of history, added to the debate by suggesting that tradition is socially determined, collective consciousness plays a role in history writing, clashing cultural values intervene and that objectivity in society and the individual is open to numerous pressures.⁹ He argued that interdisciplinary work may assist in getting closer to 'what happened' or some form of temporary but ever-shifting objectivities. It is then perhaps best to argue in this article that the author cannot claim to be 'objective' (or represents 'God's Eye') but rather writes in the spirit of invoking some *intersubjectivity* and dialogue (pp. 126ff, 142ff, 155ff).¹⁰

Within this ambit the article here discusses three books with each of them holding certain views, presenting different voices and viewpoints, and yet all three are worth reading and reflecting upon.

The large majority of publications on the Border/Angolan War in South Africa view the attack on Cassinga on Ascension Day, 4 May 1978, as a successful airborne operation.¹¹ In some circles, the day is commemorated annually by veterans, especially ex-paratroopers. It is said that the attack was executed with

6 Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (London: Belknap Press, 1979).

7 Wilfred Desan, *Let the Future Come: Perspectives on a Planetary Peace* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1987).

8 F Dalmayr and McCarthy T, eds., *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).

9 P Gay, *Freud voor historici* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1987).

10 W. Luijpen, *Inleiding tot de existentiële fenomenologie* (Utrecht: Uitgeverij Het Spektrum, 1980).

11 See W Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War 1966–1989* (Gibraltar, Ashanti Publishers, 1989), p. 74ff, where Steenkamp, a partially embedded pro-SADF journalist argued that: "Operation Reindeer had been an unqualified success, PLAN lost about a thousand members killed and 200 captured". The late Leo Barnard, a well-known military historian, remarked in an article that "South African military personnel ... regarded the battle as a magnificent victory – one of the best of the entire Border War" (Leo Barnard, "The Battle of Cassinga, 4 May 1978: A Historical Assessment", *Journal for Contemporary History* (special edition on the Border War, 1966–1989), 31(2), 2006, p. 146.

utmost precision and described as the largest airborne operation in Africa since the Second World War. In South Africa, the local media were under severe censorship or loyal to the ruling state and ideology. The apartheid authorities fed the media and (white) populace with their version of the event. In contrast, the international media soon hitched onto the story of the attack from different angles. In Cassinga the SADF was clearly involved and given the internationalisation of the Namibian conflict, there was little chance of 'plausible deniability'.

Cassinga is 260 kilometres north of the Namibian border, and by all accounts in 1978 there were around 4 000 civilians in the town and immediate surroundings. From the Namibian side (exiles, refugees and SWAPO alike) and most of the international media, the event was viewed as a massacre – a massacre of such magnitude that the day of that attack is still annually commemorated in Namibia as a day of collective remembrance and a reminder of the suffering of Namibian people during their struggle for liberation.

The books discussed here reflect three different perspectives or contrasting viewpoints on the same event, namely an aerial attack combined with an airborne operation to ostensibly wipe out a SWAPO training and operational camp at Cassinga in Angola. A contemporary work by Shigwedha, a masters' thesis by a former airborne commander and master-jumper, Major-General McGill Alexander, and a work by Jan Breytenbach, himself as a commander involved in the Cassinga assault, are discussed and compared with the view of gaining a clearer understanding of the violent event as but one incident during a border war that lasted from 1966 to 1989 and spilled over into Angola.

The book by Vilo Amukwaya Shigwedha deals with the experiences of victims and the perspectives/experiences from the side of the Cassinga survivors 40 years later. The master's thesis by McGill Alexander presents a critical reputable review of the SADF attack on the base. Alexander's work is based on solid archival, primary and, to a lesser extent, secondary sources widely consulted and well reflected upon. It also provides critical insights and criticisms on the airborne operation. Breytenbach's book considers a defence for the attack on Cassinga as seen from the perspective of a parachute commander that led the attack. These works represent drastically different perspectives, in certain cases contradicting each other. They do, however, provide an opportunity to grasp the raid against a whole new and broader collage of socio-political and military action, (human) experience and reflections on a disruptive violent incident during the Border War/Angolan War.

3. SHIGWEDHA'S NARRATIVE: VICTIMS, SURVIVORS AND THE VOICES OF THE PAST

Shigwedha's work, *The Aftermath of the Cassinga Massacre: Survivors, Deniers, and Injustices*, is based on the research for his PhD and investigates the event through secondary and archival sources and qualitative research (face-to-face interviews and photographic material). The work addresses both the raid by the SADF on Cassinga and its aftermath, especially the human side.

In the foreword to Shigwedha's book, Ellen Namhila, pro-vice-chancellor of the University of Namibia writes:

Shigwedha juxtaposes and contrasts different testimonies from survivors, oral and written narratives of perpetrators and photographs from different archives ... By doing so he intends and succeeds in opening a discursive space in which the dominant national versions of the Cassinga massacre that circulate in Namibia and the too long afterlife of the SADF version of the massacre, may be challenged and interrupted as to allow for more open-ended narratives. (pp. viii, ix)

The book consists of eight chapters, 13 appendices, listed figures, a list of abbreviations and an extensive bibliography. In addition, 45 face-to-face interviews were conducted with persons involved with the raid, including South African paratroopers that participated in Operation Reindeer. Nineteen of the 45 interviews were with survivors of the Cassinga raid. Photos of some of the scarred-for-life survivors add to the broader collage. The strength of the work lies in the human angle rather than background and analysis of the operation, its perceived rationale(s) and its planning and execution. In this regard, Shigwedha's book differs substantially from those of Alexander and Breytenbach.

The source list is impressive and is divided into published books, chapters to books, journal articles, documents from the SA Military Archives (including top-secret declassified documents), the SWAPO Archives in Basel Switzerland, newspapers of various orientations at the time, academic theses and relevant website-articles. The archival sources consulted at the SANDF Archive (or SANDF Documentation Centre) in Pretoria include numerous declassified top-secret reports. These documents were used fruitfully and contributed to a wider understanding of the SADF approach to Cassinga and the operation itself.

The book covers the following areas:

- The planning of the attack from the perspective of the SADF.
- The actual attack from the perspective of the SADF.
- The experiences of those who were under attack.

- The human aftermath and trauma of survivors.

The book also describes the rescue attempt by the Cuban forces from a nearby base and the direct action taken after the attack (searching for survivors, dealing with the dead and mutilated bodies, and caring for the wounded that survived the attack).

This publication stands as a stark reminder of the impact of war/mass violence on people at one specific place and time in history. It is not easy reading; the descriptions are 'in your face' and the experiences of people under and after the attack are disconcerting. One of the strengths of this work comes to the fore in the rich descriptions – one of the main characteristics of qualitative research. An edited work by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln holds valuable insights on narrative inquiry, oral history and the 'politics of evidence'.¹² Likewise, Neuman points out how qualitative research, if approached correctly and abiding by the norms of the social-scientific research community, can add to knowledge by producing studies that reflect internal validity and reliability.¹³ As author I argue here that qualitative research or works that reflect moments of qualitative research, i.e. interviews, can produce reliable findings about past experience and context that share with the reader the existential experiences and life world of the research participants ('interviewees') at the time of the occurrence, thus reflecting existential individual experience, choices and personal consequences – even years afterwards. I further argue that such knowledge gained can complement traditional historiography and military sociology.¹⁴ In this sense, Shigwedha's work illustrates that qualitative research can enrich historiography.¹⁵ The use of an extended series of interviews brings the context vividly alive.

The discussion of the long-term effects of the attack (what I call the 'memory aftermath') links the past to the present – richly informing us about a past (maybe not so) long gone. The contestation about the representations of the 'battle' versus 'massacre' from the different sides becomes not virtual, but real. The focus of one chapter moves between the real and differently perceived presentations and theory on representation and juxtaposition of sources. Lastly, the chapter on 'framed reconciliation and justice' and comments on truth-seeking, denialism and eschewed sharing of information, including disinformation and propaganda and manipulation of facts, is relevant.

12 N Denzin and Lincoln Y, eds., *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, 4th ed. (New Dehli: Sage, 2013), pp. 55ff, 119ff, 517ff.

13 WL Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 4th ed. (Singapore: Allyn and Bacon, 2007).

14 I Liebenberg, "Evolving Experiences: Auto-ethnography", in H Carreiras and Castro C, eds., *Qualitative Methods in Military Studies: Research Experiences and Challenges* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 23.

15 Neuman, *Social Research Methods*, pp. 40ff, 344ff, 392ff. See also my earlier notes on intersubjectivity.

The author finally returns to the title of the book, namely *The Aftermath of the Cassinga Massacre: Survivors, Deniers and Injustices*. The last chapter touches on the collective consciousness. The experience and collective memory and the impact of what one can call communal remembrance and, to an extent, trans-generational trauma, enters the already murky picture. Hiding the truth is another theme touched upon. Some reference to the value – or rather non-value – of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (SATRC) in the case of Operation Reindeer/the Cassinga massacre is weaved into the argument.¹⁶

The work by Shigwedha will be an eye opener to those that view Cassinga only as a successful military operation against a well-organised enemy of several thousands of PLAN soldiers. While exploring and profiling the official views of the SADF and, *ipso facto*, white South African politicians at the helm of the apartheid state, the work starkly describes the experiences of victims through an alternative narrative. Shigwedha's use of appendices is most useful. These appendices demonstrate how the South African government manipulated its position by playing politics in the then South-West Africa. For example, the statement of the then administrator-general of the illegally occupied Namibia, Judge M.T. Steyn, reads: 'I have consulted with the South African government and with their permission have asked the (SA) army to launch a limited operation in South Angola to destroy certain terrorist bases' (Appendix A, p. 125)¹⁷. The statement by the then Commander General, South West Africa, General Major Jannie Geldenhuys reads:

On request of the Administrative-General ... Southwest African troops and South African troops initiated a limited operation several hours (*sic*) in Southern Angola with the instruction to destroy bases occupied by terrorists. The troops (including parachute troops) received strict instructions not to act against members of the local population or against their property.¹⁸

16 The debate on the value of truth commissions versus 'forgive and forget' approaches such as followed in Namibia and its longer-term effect on civil-military relations in new democracies remains a debate – see I Liebenberg, *Truth and Reconciliation Processes and Civil-Military Relations: A Qualitative Exploration* (PhD thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2008), pp. 171ff, 177–179, 192, 193–198. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission chose to restrict itself to internal human rights abuses and not those inflicted upon Namibian and Angolan people, either directly or through apartheid subsidiaries such as the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (Unita) of Jonas Savimbi which benefitted immensely from South African and USA support (in the latter case especially during the era of USA 'constructive engagement'). Hence little came into the public discourse on South African human rights abuses in the countries towards which its military aggression was projected. Less so, were the political leaders and military hawks that planned and perpetrated as these were brought before international human rights courts.

17 Source: Chief of the SADF (Top Secret); PSYAC Planning Directive No. 3/78, Appendix B to PSYAC No. 3/78, SANDF Archive, Pretoria.

18 Chief of the SADF (Top Secret); PSYAC Planning Directive No. 3/78, Appendix B)

This argument is perplexing, given that the airborne strike was preceded by a massive aerial attack with houses and clinics burnt by the South African attackers, and thus was hardly an act of 'plausible deniability'. In the same source, the suggested approach for the minister of defence was that the 'first announcement of the operation comes from South West Africa' to ensure that the decision is 'primarily an SWA (*sic*) matter'. It 'places the matter in a low-profile regional perspective' and that such an approach 'allows the RSA government manoeuvre' and 'suit our ends'.¹⁹

The above reasoning by the apartheid leadership is extremely simplistic given the circumstances. In retrospect (or even then), regarding the attack on Cassinga, the mind boggles at how any informed observer could, two/three years after South Africa's first invasion of Angola (1975/1976) and a semi-permanent presence in Angola, 'place the matter in a low regional profile'. At the time, some frontline states had already experienced South African attacks on their soil and every action by South Africa was almost immediately known within the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and by the international media. Any aggressive military action in Namibia and beyond its borders would be picked up by the Angolan forces (FAPLA), the Cubans stationed there, journalists on African soil and the international media. Given the then subservient position of the administrator-general of Namibia (then SWA), who had been appointed by the apartheid government, the statement of a 'request' for action is both baffling and ludicrous. It demonstrates the misguided groupthink from which the South African political and the majority of military leaders at the time suffered. South African sources insisted that the camp/settlement was well protected by both trenches and anti-aircraft guns. The battle appreciation (Afrikaans: *gevegswaardering*), based on aerial reconnaissance photos, underplayed the numbers of civilians in the highly ideological context where communism – especially Marxism-Leninism and the perceived Moscow influence and hence fear and loathing of the Cuban internationalists – figured pre-eminently in apartheid security thinking.

One of the survivors mentioned that there were trenches (*omatelendja*) in the making as they feared a possible air attack. The interviewee stated that Cassinga was a networking site for transport and that at the time of the attack some PLAN combatants from Zambia were in transit *en route* to the Namibian border. According to eyewitnesses, there were two anti-aircraft (AA) guns, namely one double-barrelled and a single-barrelled gun in the camp. In his work, Alexander suggested that there were possibly three AA guns. The fact that there were only two (maximum three) of these guns on the site begs the question of whether Cassinga could be seen as a military base. If it was a major military base, one would have expected much more anti-aircraft protection as well as

19 Chief of the SADF (Top Secret); PSYAC Planning Directive No. 3/78, declassified 22 January 2007, p.127.

hardware such as tanks, armoured infantry-carrying vehicles, armoured fighting vehicles and fortified military dug-outs, with, for example, mortars, recoilless guns, radar institutions and artillery pieces.

In glaring contrast to the South African side of the story, Shigwedha's work provides a fundamentally different view. It takes one back to the 'then position and experience of the interviewees or 'participants to the study' (as it is now commonly known in qualitative research); it provides, so to speak, 'a slice of life'.

Shigwedha certainly succeeded in doing so by making use of the 45 face-to-face interviews. Expansive detail and real-life narrated experiences illuminate the attack; the results of the attack; the effects on the men, women and children caught up in the attack; and its bloody aftermath.

In the interviews, the survivors claimed that the attacking SADF airborne soldiers burnt the clinic, administrative office, food depots, accommodation facilities and a communal kitchen and that 'utterly everything that survived the aerial bombardment was set on fire' (p. 6). That the South African attackers had indeed done so, is confirmed by other sources. Shigwedha describes how some rescuers managed to get children to the river and one (Mbolondondo) actually succeeded in getting some children including some pre-schoolers (nearly miraculously so) to the other side of the Cubango River (p. 7). Helena Impinge (now living in Oshakati) said that one of the most difficult parts of the rescue was to deal with people of all ages who refused to leave the trenches where they would be seen as combatants rather than civilians when the enemy cleared the trenches. Indeed, this led to numerous deaths when the invaders embarked on trench clearing, a normal drill during an attack to secure the terrain once in an enemy base. Some children hid in pit toilets and others under their beds. The thatched roof dormitories suffered under the bombings (p. 7), leading to more losses.

The Cubans from their Oshamutete (often spelt Techamutete) base tried to assist but came under heavy fire. Some sources suggest that on that day the Cubans lost the most soldiers in a single day during the whole of the Angolan War. The Cubans took numerous wounded people to their camp clinic but cleared out by the evening. Some seriously wounded and maimed were flown out from Oshamutete/Techamutete to other hospitals including those at Luanda and Lubango. One interviewee stated: 'It was a long night of much pain, horror and of the stench of death' (p. 9).

The following day, some SWAPO soldiers arrived from Lubango (also known as Omakamufelendja) to assist in collecting (decomposing) corpses from all over the camp. One hundred and forty-four bodies were buried in a trench near the clinic, which served as a dumping spot for clinic disposals. This site was located between the clinic and the tailoring workshop which belonged to a Meme Veronica (p. 9). The second grave was much larger and was to be used as a future storage facility. Five hundred and eighty-eight bodies were buried there.

One survivor took on the task of counting the dead that were buried in the mass graves. His headcount reported that 727 people were in these graves. The survivor claimed that among those interred were a number of soldiers (SWAPO cadres) deployed to protect civilians in Cassinga, administrative staff and some cadres in transit, namely a group *en route* from Zambia to the Namibian border (p. 9).

It was difficult to assess the numbers of civilians that fled into the bush and went missing. Some died of their wounds and others who fled in the direction of the Cubango River drowned (some of the survivors witnessed drownings). Until today, there is no final certainty about the actual number of deaths. One source suggests 867 were killed and 464 wounded. It is said that in Ovamboland, northern Namibia, the majority of families lost family members, relatives or friends who had lived in Ovamboland before becoming refugees (p. 13). It can be said that excluding the physically wounded or maimed, hundreds were mentally traumatised by the events that they had witnessed (p. 13). The exact numbers of people that were wounded and later died will remain unknown because some of the seriously wounded people were evacuated to hospitals elsewhere in Angola and could not be traced administratively. Clear records were not kept about the movement of patients from removal on site and their death or recovery in another hospital or hospitals. There were suggestions at the time that a few of the most critically injured were later flown to Havana for further treatment. In the search for survivors that fled to the north or east (thus away from the river from which some of the attackers came), many may not have been found in the dense bush and were, therefore, not accounted for.

In his book, Shigwedha also focused on the stark difference between photos from the SANDF Documentation Centre on Operation Reindeer and others taken by the international media and showed photos of both sides to his interviewees (personally I am not sure whether I would have done it, keeping in mind the trauma of the past). Some interviewees/research participants reacted with deep rage when viewing the rather sanitised version of the SADF photos. References are made to a senior South African officer who acted highly unprofessionally during the attack and one of the interviewees said: 'A person like this one should come here to see the families of the deceased and face justice. His actions were inhuman...' (p. 60). Shigwedha mentions that Colonel Jan Breytenbach refers to an incident during which a senior officer acted highly unprofessionally at the time. Shigwedha considers that many of the (ex-) paratroopers of the SADF may also have suffered psychologically from the horrific event on Ascension Day 1978 and indeed comments that many of them were also victims – albeit from an entirely different viewpoint and existential experience (pp. 57, 62).

The last part of the book is dedicated to those who deny (the deniers) what happened, the survivors, and the injustices still perceived today. It makes for fascinating reading and calls for much reflection, dialogue, debate and

analysis. The argument implicitly begs further investigation and reflection on the relationship between colonialism and apartheid rule in Namibia as a 'special type of colonialism', as well as the glib way in which the SATRC dealt with the issue and what some see as evasion of justice. The author suggests that care should be taken not to portray Cassinga only as a heroic sacrifice, but rather to deal with the survivors and their children's trauma; in short, keeping the delicate and complex issue of intergenerational trauma in mind. The victim's trauma it is argued should rise above the concept of 'shared heroic sacrifice' (p. 123). If I interpret the author correctly, it does not seem to be a plea for monumentalisation or totalising liberation history, but rather for human remembrance. Clearly, the last words on the injustice done, images distorted, the experiences of those who survived Cassinga and the intergenerational trauma has not been voiced yet.

This work points to research lacunas in the field of collective memory, inter- and trans-generational trauma, re-remembering a past of violence perpetrated by myths nurtured by state ideologies and official memorialisation of the past. It opens a dearth of research options for social historians, military sociologists, anthropologists and other social scientists.²⁰

4. MCGILL ALEXANDER AND TAKING DISTANCE: A CLINICAL ANALYSIS OF THE RAID

McGill Alexander also touches on civilian losses and controversies, and in so doing, corrects an image of an unqualified purely military success at Cassinga. His work takes a professional stance and he revisits the raid and its outcomes with as little bias as possible.

SADF diehards and historians sympathetic to the apartheid cause frequently insist that Cassinga was a military base manned by hundreds of guerrillas ('terrorists' in the then parlance). Inside South Africa, one remarkable academic work (a master's thesis) by Major-General McGill Alexander, an ex-SADF master jumper and commander, ventures into a finely argued critique against the standard legend of Cassinga being a purely enemy (or rather 'terrorist') base and touches the human aspects expertly. In his study, Alexander refrained from calling the Cassinga event either a 'battle' or a 'massacre' and opted for the word 'raid', which clearly indicates the political, military and human sensitivities around the event.

20 In a valuable study reflecting on the issues of remembrance in a different era, the historian Albert Grundlingh pointed out the problems around and complexities of (re-)remembering the past of war. See A Grundlingh, *War and Society: Participation and Remembrance – South African Black and Coloured Troops in the First World War, 1914–1918* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2014).

McGill Alexander's work differs significantly from the dominant SADF narrative of a 'successful military operation'. Alexander is critical of Operation Reindeer and its outcomes as a military operation and offers numerous corrections to the dominant SADF discourse, including referring to some testimonies of victims. For doing so, he was – and still is – severely criticised by some apartheid veteran officers, especially some of the airborne commanders of the time.

Alexander assesses the propaganda claims of both sides. In terms of the number of parachutists as well as transport aircraft, he succinctly points out how the number of airborne soldiers was exaggerated and concludes that the closest one can possibly come to the correct number of soldiers involved at Target Alfa (Cassinga itself) was around 364 to 390. (The six aircraft which dropped paratroopers were capable of carrying a total of 384 for an operation of that nature.) The *Parachute Jump Record Book* that Alexander mentions, which was maintained at the Parachute Training Centre in Bloemfontein, lists in its entry for 4 May 1978: 'Cassinga, 364 troops with equipment.'²¹

McGill Alexander also provides information on Operation Reindeer that challenges the SWAPO liberationist narrative. The operation entailed more than just the raid on Cassinga. There were three separate operations, namely one on Cassinga (Target Alfa) by the paratroops, one on the Chetaquera complex by a mechanised force and the third on the Dombondola complex by an infantry force, namely 32 Battalion, a battle-hardened unit that participated in cross-border semi-conventional and penetrative operations. Alexander restricted his research to the airborne attack.

In his book, Alexander suggests that Cassinga was probably the incident where the 'greatest loss of life in any single action of the war which South Africa and the African liberation movements were engaged in between 1966 and 1989 occurred' (p. 58). Alexander offers that 'just how many were combatants and how many were civilians (were killed) will probably always be shrouded

21 The numbers of those who jumped will be disputed endlessly. Numbers mentioned differ from source to source. The late Leo Barnard, a highly rated historian, mentions 370 – see L Barnard, "The Battle of Cassinga, 4 May 1978: A Historical Assessment", *Journal for Contemporary History* (special edition on the Border War, 1966-1989) 31(2), 2006, p. 159. Steenkamp mentions 257 – see W Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War*, p. 74. Dave Becker states that 377 paratroopers took part in Operation Reindeer – see D Becker, *On Wings of Eagles: South Africa's Military Aviation History* (Durban, Walker-Ramus, 1990), p. 217. Dick Lord, South African Air Force Brigadier-General, provides the figure of 250 – see D Lord, *From fledgling to Eagle: The South African Air Force During the Border War* (Johannesburg: Thirty Degrees South Publishers, 2008). In his work, Alexander mentions that international media spoke of two parachute battalions or 1 500 men. This number is a clear overstatement. The aircraft dedicated to Operation Reindeer could not carry anything close to that number. Perhaps part of the confusion arose because during the operation a strong mechanised force and 32 Battalion attacked other targets to the south.

in controversy and will depend on the sympathies of the claimants and the definitions used for “combatant” and “innocent civilian” (p. 97).

Alexander claims that the SWA Tactical Headquarters (HQ) in Ondangwa received an urgent signal late at night following the extraction of the attacking forces by helicopter. It contained a request ‘from the Chief of the SADF for information about soldiers thought to be missing in the operation, but more significantly, asking whether there had been women and children at Target Alpha (Cassinga) and if any of them had been killed’ (p. 49). The reply to the latter part of the question stated: ‘Daar was baie vrouens en kinders op Alpha en ‘n redelike getal is gedood. Onder die dooie vrouens het ‘n redelike getal uniforms gedra. Baie van die dooie vrouens was binne in die loopgrawe’ (English: ‘There were many women and children at Alpha and a reasonable number were killed. Amongst the dead women, a reasonable number were wearing uniforms. Many of the dead women were inside the trenches’ (p. 49). This answer could hardly have put the minds of the top brass at rest. Senior and general officers were warned to avoid any reference of casualties to the media, especially regarding women and children, although ‘low profile’ reference could be made to women in uniform shooting from trenches (p. 66).

Concerning this issue, there is clearly some common ground between Alexander’s conclusions and Shighedwa’s information on civilian losses as well as the conceivable killing of civilians in trenches during trench clearing. Alexander argues that when the South African reaction to the Angolan news of the raid appeared on the next day, Friday, 5 May 1978, it was mainly couched in terms that appealed to white South Africans. The South African statements did little ‘to allay international fears of unbridled aggression against its neighbours’ (p. 101).

Alexander notes, for example, that Dirk Mudge, the chairman of the Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA), an internal political platform in Namibia (then called South West Africa or Suidwes Afrika) to advocate eventual independence, commented explicitly that he saw Operation Reindeer as a major blunder (‘groot flater’) on South Africa’s part.

Alexander views the raid in a wider context than just military affairs. To the chagrin of many, he argues:

The launching of the raid on Cassinga, even though it was regarded by the SADF as a military target of key importance, was a violation of Angolan territorial sovereignty, while the use of fragmentation bombs on a target known to include at least some civilians amounts to an indiscriminate and illegitimate use of force and a violation of Protocol 1 to the Geneva Conventions of 1949. The foreseeable killing of civilians at Cassinga was, therefore, a breach of humanitarian law. (p. 98)

Alexander offers important information: The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), with its area office in Brazzaville, after a visit to SWAPO refugee centres in Angola, produced a report just two days before the raid on Cassinga. Cassinga was described as 'becoming the first centre for grouping and sorting of refugees,' and the refugees were assembled for counting by the mission. Their numbers were put at between 11 000 and 12 000 people²² but 'invalids at the health centre were not taken into account here ... nor were the armed "freedom fighters," who were certainly numerous and who were responsible for protecting the areas surrounding the camp'. The report goes on to say that adolescents, children and infants constituted the majority of the refugee population, possibly as much as 70 per cent. 'The remainder of the population, that is to say, 30% is comprised essentially of adults with very few elderly persons'. A military component was mentioned: 'Men and women who are clearly guerrillas who acted as senior staff and providing protection for all the refugees' (p. 68).

In concluding his arguments around the controversial raid, Alexander suggests that whatever the benefits of the operation may have been was overshadowed at the time by the high number of civilian losses and the media attention by the international community, which further confirmed the pariah status of the South African regime. Alexander summarises:

Whatever benefits were to be gained by the attack on Cassinga in prosecuting the South African military strategy for the war in Namibia (and the indications are that there were such benefits to be gained), were lost in terms of the wider political strategy working towards an ultimate settlement of the Namibian independence issue. In a sense, the Cassinga raid signalled the start of the dominance of the military over the political in South Africa. Perhaps this was in no small way due to the military having clear objectives, whereas the politicians, particularly regarding Namibia, were evidencing ambiguity and ambivalence as to where they were going. (p. 2003)

22 These numbers may be inflated, or differently viewed, depending on how large the visiting committee considered the area around Cassinga to be. Certainly, one can assume that thousands of people attempted to escape conflict in the rural areas in southern and south eastern Angola. They flocked to places presumed to be safe, such as Cassinga, and were driven off the land by conflict. Much of the latter due to violent activities of the rebel movement, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) of Jonas Savimbi (supported by South Africa and intermittently the USA). These people were forced to migrate to perceived safe havens. Angola saw urbanisation with poverty and under-serviced shanty towns as people flocked to towns on the west coast of Angola, such as Benguela. Unknown numbers of inhabitants from northern Namibia, especially Ovamboland, caught between the jaws of SADF/SWAPO clashes in northern Namibia, (especially in Sector 10) also chose to move to safer havens across the Namibian border, one of these being Cassinga.

5. JAN BREYTENBACH'S NARRATIVE: THE EAGLE STRIKES SUCCESSFULLY DESPITE A LESS TALKED ABOUT COMMAND CONUNDRUM

The numbers of insurgents in Cassinga. were estimated as 1 200 guerrillas ('terrorists').²³ Jan Breytenbach, a commander during Operation Reindeer, tells the story of Cassinga from the viewpoint of the paratrooper and paratroop commander. Breytenbach criticises the negative political leadership of Verwoerd, Vorster and even P.W. Botha that led to a confrontation with Western politicians, yet he wrote his work in the broad ruling paradigm of the Russian-led communist onslaught against the West and in the African theatre (with predictably Castro's Cuba in tow).²⁴

Breytenbach, who is a straight talker, does not succumb to political correctness. He soon steps away from the criticism of apartheid politics to focus on the Cassinga story. His book is a soldier's story with all the detail of planning, execution, extraction and debriefing as well as some reflective thoughts on the operation and the tactical execution. The work also reflects the blood, guts, smoke and dust of close fighting on the ground.

Breytenbach's work also includes criticism of some senior officers who were involved in the raid; in a way, Breytenbach shared some inside information. Breytenbach shows how the operation, however well prepared for, nearly ended as a disaster.²⁵ Breytenbach's narrative certainly lets the cat out of the bag, indicating that even well-planned operations can go wrong, and that clarity on command and control is vital to any operation. As he explains, the needed clarity was not present in the planning and execution of the operation or, for that matter, the extraction of airborne troops following the assault.

One of the reasons for this, he argues, was as a result of confused lines of communication on who the real commander on the ground was.²⁶

23 W Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War*, p. 75.

24 Jan Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike! The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga*. 1978. (Sandton: Manie Grove Publishing, 2008), p. 4ff.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 308ff.

26 Disasters in military operations are easily borne from the start or during the execution of the operation plan. In an insightful work, Norman Dixon argues that in writing on war one should be aware that 'the interdependence between (things) necessitates keeping an open mind, however much one may like or disbelieve single trees (or singular research approaches – my insertion) postponing judgement until the wood is seen in its entirety is necessary' – see N Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London, Pimlico, 1994), p. 24. Dixon suggests that writing on the success and follies of war, the trials and tribulations of history and the politics of violence, other approaches can be useful besides leaving history to be written only by historians and soldiering to be described by soldiers, or for that matter generals and colonels (Dixon, 1994, p. 24). In short, he advocates a critical but inclusive and holistic approach in understanding

The uncertainty caused crossed lines of command, which can be dangerous if not disastrous in any military operation.²⁷

Breytenbach blames a specific commander that belatedly came on board, caught a lift with the aircraft about to drop the parachutists and was under the impression that he was the overall commanding officer. In his work, Breytenbach lambasts this senior officer as a meddling 'rubberneck'.²⁸

He criticises the academic work/research by Alexander and suggests that the publication of Alexander's work and its findings broke the 'Parabat' code of honour.²⁹ However, the research project by Alexander was not a soldier's narrative, nor a treatise on civilian losses. Rather, Alexander's research findings in turn act as a 'corrective' to both Shigweda's and Breytenbach's works.

Apart from a first-hand account of the story, Breytenbach's book shares valuable lessons learnt, namely: (i) the importance of pre-ops training; (ii) the vital role of unified command and absolute clarity around communication and command structures; (iii) the dangers of meddled communication and contradictory orders; (iv) the important role of trust and mutual respect between the men on the ground and their commanding officer; and (v) the importance of precise-to-the-second coordination between the air force and ground forces regarding the attack of the target, dropping the parachutists and final extraction of troops.

6. CONCLUSION³⁰

This review article has considered three different perspectives, with one of the works in the typical South African genre of the border war (Jan Breytenbach). Alexander's more academic and critical analysis as part of a master's thesis provided a critical angle that dispelled some earlier assumptions and became widely disputed by South African diehard veterans. Shigwedha's work acted as an informing background to a controversial collage. In the process of the review

history. The Cassinga raid nearly ended up as such an example that later on could have been seen as reflecting elements of military incompetence, if I understand Jan Breytenbach's claims in his book correctly.

27 The historian, Leo Barnard, interviewed the other commander (a general) in 2006. This officer claimed that he was involved in the planning yet could not recall whether Dakota aircraft took part in offloading paratroopers. There were no Dakotas involved, only C-130 (Hercules) and C-160s (Transall) aircraft. The interviewee said that there were only Puma helicopters involved in the extraction after the attack. However, French supplied Super Frelon helicopters were involved (For references to the interview with Major-General M.J. du Plessis in *Journal for Contemporary History* (special edition on the Border War, 1966-1989), 31(2), 2006, pp. 147-156).

28 Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike!* pp. 309, 311, 312, 315 and 351.

29 *Ibid.*

30 The author would like to acknowledge and thank the peer reviewers for their critical observations, questions, pointers and constructive remarks that proved to be most valuable in completing this article timely and I trust with much added value.

article, I attempted to get to and share with the reader some new insights and some (im)ponderables in reflections on an event that took place 40 years ago.

If Cassinga was a partial military base within an extended refugee camp or only held some smaller numbers of SWAPO combatants in transit and some SWAPO members for administration and protection purposes, the civilian casualties inflicted as corollary damage far exceeded the military deaths. One may refer to enormous asymmetric damage in the limited guerrilla warfare context of the Border/Angolan War. A question that is not addressed in this work, in fact not in any book or article that I have read, is whether Cassinga can be interpreted as an attack meant to spread terror amongst refugees on Angolan soil who may have been or would become sympathetic to SWAPO/PLAN. If so, the event was more a case of South African apartheid state terror to limit a growing SWAPO political influence, than hitting a strategic target. By a stretch, Cassinga was perhaps an example of an African Guernica. However, no such documents or any hint around this are to be found in South African military archives. However, such a mentality or even wish, given the hate for the 'Communist enemy', may have existed among some political and military leaders (even followers) and remains a likely possibility.

Different books, views and perspectives – even contradictory narratives – are possible. But perhaps through synoptic reading and analysis, we move a bit closer to what transpired on that fateful day despite the obscuring dust and smoke of the past. In doing so, we enhance intersubjectivity and the historical debate without end on a war that never should have been.