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Review Articles

The Life of a Uniformed Technocrat turned Securocrat

Magnus Malan, ***My life with the SA Defence Force***
Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2006
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This work is not a conventional autobiography or memoir. Even after more than 500 pages, General Magnus Malan's private life remains a closed book. His childhood, marriage and fatherhood appear almost incidental to what is essentially the story of a professional career. It reads like an institutional history of the South African Defence Force (SADF), wherein the subject inserts his own life story. As the author himself puts it, "42 years of my life were inextricably entwined with the Defence Force" (p 432). Malan's very identity is bound up in the SADF; it is the SADF that defines who Malan is and gives his life story meaning. This much is implied in the book's Afrikaans title: "*My lewe saam met die SA Weermag*". The English title, however, does not suggest quite the same degree of intimacy. Still, this close association means that Malan embodied the SADF's ethos during the 1970s and 1980s, and that the technocrat turned securocrat left an indelible imprint on the institution.

Malan's writing offers surprisingly little insight into his personality or character. The story is related without emotion and does not allow any human qualities that might endear the subject to his readers to emerge. Malan appears dour and humourless, notwithstanding the smiling profile on the book's dust jacket. There are few clues as to what makes him tick and next to nothing that reveals much about what fuelled his driving ambition. He admits to only one error of judgment which he comes to regret: when he ran away from home at the age of 13 and tried (unsuccessfully) to enlist in the Union Defence Force. With this streak of irresponsibility beaten out of him by his father (p 24), he acquires the necessary self-discipline that allows him to realise his aspiration to become a soldier and, later, to follow in his father's footsteps and become a politician.

The book's 26 chapters follow the standard chronological sequence of life stories from birth to retirement. However, the narrative is interrupted every so often with homilies on military topics and the text is peppered with platitudes. For instance, Chapter 9 is called "Basic requirements for a successful Defence Force" and includes a section subtitled "The Winning Formula". The assumption is that Malan moulded the SADF into a model army that is worthy of emulation. These "lessons" read like a training manual on how to manage armed forces and win wars (as opposed to how to win friends and influence people). The laboured style and pedestrian pace is possibly a product of Malan's authoring documents according to military practice for almost forty years. Thus both structure and style make reading somewhat tedious. I do not believe that it is any better in the original Afrikaans in which Malan wrote. Whereas

nothing is lost in translation, better editing might have eliminated needless repetition. So the reader should not expect a literary masterpiece. The book is by no stretch of the imagination Malan's *magnus opus*, the crowning achievement of a long and distinguished military and political career. Nor is it a *mea culpa*. Whilst Malan feels compelled to devote considerable space to salvaging his own reputation and defending the integrity of the SADF, the book is entirely devoid of self-recrimination or remorse. Indeed, the author seems altogether convinced of his own rectitude.

Malan portrays himself as an exemplary professional soldier who epitomised the honest and hardworking SADF officer corps. He enjoyed a meteoric rise up the ranks of the SADF that has been ascribed by some to P.W. Botha's patronage.[1] He became (by my calculations) chief of the army at the age of 43 and chief of the defence force at 46, the youngest ever SADF leader. With every step up the chain of command, he introduced changes to existing structures and ways of doing things. He also set about modernising the army to meet the needs of autonomy and self-sufficiency, which involved expanding Armscor and applying the latest available technology to arms production. He was undoubtedly a capable administrator and manager. He placed an enormous emphasis on thorough planning and efficient execution of its tasks, but I am not convinced that he was an innovative or original thinker. Nor am I persuaded by David Williams' characterisation of Malan as a "self-conscious military intellectual".[2] He may well have seen himself as such, but the lack of imagination and intellectual rigour on display in this book suggests a somewhat sterile mind. In fact, many of Malan's ideas were borrowed and adapted to meet the needs of the SADF.[3] Nor did Malan enjoy the unqualified respect of those in the know. General George Meiring notes that he did not have an operations background and was never involved as a commander in an actual combat situation.[4] He attained the highest rank before the Border War began in earnest and never had occasion to lead men in battle. Although it has been dubbed a "corporals' and lieutenant's war" because junior ranks did most of the fighting, generals such as Constand Viljoen, Jannie Geldenhuys, Kat Liebenberg and Meiring himself did have operational experience. Malan, then, seems to have been regarded by some subordinates as a technocrat rather than a tried and tested military leader deserving of the highest office in the SADF.

Malan bore overall responsibility for the SADF's code of conduct during his terms as chief of the army (1973-1976) and then of the defence force (1976-1980). Obviously he was unable to monitor each and every aspect of a growing army that was primarily a citizen force. Accordingly, he emphasised the need for cost-effective utilisation of the military's limited manpower resources, but such directives were not necessarily implemented according to plan and the SADF's wasteful use of part-time soldiers' time and skills was appalling. Permanent force (PF) NCOs who were

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1 H Hamann, *Days of the Generals: The untold story of South Africa's apartheid-era military generals* (Zebra Press, Cape Town, 2001), p 53

2 D Williams, *On the Border: The White South African Military Experience 1965-1990* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2008), p 20

3 SADF military analysts were equally incapable of developing an original theory for the country's defence For instance, the notion of "total strategy" which was routinised during Malan's tenure, was lifted from the work of the French military theorist Andre Beaufre See: J Sanders, *Apartheid's Friends: The Rise and Fall of South Africa's Secret Service* (John Murray, London, 2006), p 146

4 Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, p xiii

responsible for much of the SADF's core business of training conscripts and citizen force members were rarely respected for their professionalism. The motto "train tough to fight easy" touted by Malan meant that discipline became a pretext for *opfok*. It is for good reason that a stereotype of the PF instructor as someone who routinely abused his authority by literally pushing troops to their limit just for the sake of it, has become part of SADF lore.[5] Whilst troops were expected to obey all – including unreasonable – orders, abuses by sadistic instructors seldom resulted in any disciplinary action against offenders. Some instructors were literally allowed to get away with murder. This was not the only type of abuse in the SADF. Malan makes no mention of the alarming number of attempted suicides and the bizarre pseudo-medical and -psychological experiments to "cure" homosexuality. Neither is there any reference to the extensive recreational use of dagga, as well as the abuse of alcohol and hard drugs by troops. Nor is there acknowledgment that little treatment was provided for soldiers who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. All this is not to suggest that many national servicemen (NSM) did not enjoy their experience of the military and the camaraderie that it fostered amongst the men in uniform. On the contrary, published stories, as well as those posted on internet sites, reveal a fair amount of nostalgia for military life amongst the national service generation,[6] but when Malan fails to acknowledge abuses of the very soldiers whom he claims to have held in the highest regard, the hypocrisy is self-evident. From his position at the top of the military hierarchy, he seems unable to appreciate how the "ordinary" soldier experienced the SADF. Malan clearly chose to record very selective impressions of the SADF's institutional culture that was forged under his leadership.

Malan's discussion of the composition of the SADF is premised on the dubious claim that the SADF took the lead in eliminating racial and gender discrimination (pp 175-177). The SADF's record of fostering gender equality in a rabidly patriarchal environment was not surprisingly dismal. Malan might have bolstered his case for the erosion of racial discrimination by citing official figures that stated that by 1986, Africans, coloureds and Indians made up 12 per cent, 11 per cent and 1 per cent of the total full-time force, respectively.[7] He maintains that racially integrated units like 32 Battalion in which black and white soldiers fought, ate and slept side by side undermined segregation and promoted goodwill, but he omits to mention that most of the blacks who volunteered to serve in the SADF and its auxiliary forces were induced to do so through a combination of financial incentives and coercion. Malan also fails to note that the SADF did not manage to develop a cohort of black officers during his spell in charge of the army, nor change the perception that it provided sheltered employment for many white Afrikaners. This is not to suggest that Malan necessarily favoured Afrikaans speakers above their English counterparts when it came to promotion. On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that Malan was respected for his fairness by his colleagues, whatever their home language. However, the prevailing culture of the army, the branch of the SADF to which most of the 500 000 or so white male conscripts called up between 1967 and 1992 were deployed,

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5 See stories published in: J Thompson, *An Unpopular War: Voices of South African National Servicemen* (Zebra Press, Cape Town, 2006), and those posted on many SADF veteran's websites

6 G Baines, "Coming to Terms with the Border War in post-Apartheid South Africa", National Arts Festival Winter School Lecture, Rhodes University, 1 July 2008, http://eprints ru ac za/1023/01/Baines_borderwar pdf

7 South Africa Department of Defence, *White Paper on Defence and Armaments Supply 1986* (Houses of Parliament, Cape Town, 1986), p 17

was predominately Afrikaans Calvinistic. Thus Annette Seegers' statement that the SADF mirrored "minority rule, through both racially exclusive conscription and white Afrikaans speakers' domination of the officer corps"[8] is fairly accurate. The evidence also belies Malan's assertion that the SADF was at the cutting edge of social transformation in South Africa. In fact, the institutional memory of the old guard SADF arguably still prevails in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), despite the incorporation of select cadres from the liberation armies into its ranks.[9]

As chief of the SADF, Malan was accountable to the Minister of Defence, but there was a degree of reciprocity in the relationship, because he clearly had Botha's ear. According to Bernard Magubane,[10] Malan provided Botha with reading material about the experiences of revolutionary warfare of the French in Vietnam and Algeria, of the Americans in Vietnam, and of the British in Malaya and Ulster. Malan held that the key lesson to be drawn from these colonial contexts was that the government needed to win the "trust and faith" of the country's black population. He also insisted that the military did not have the means to maintain white power in South Africa. If this was the case and Botha heeded this advice, then both were possibly more flexible and pragmatic than their critics would allow. Both were convinced that state security trumped all other matters of national interest and adopted the "stick and carrot" approach in pursuit of this end. As far as they were concerned, reform and repression went hand in hand. Despite the occasional fallout, Malan was exceptionally loyal to Botha who entrusted him with his military and, later, political responsibilities. Theirs was a symbiotic relationship. There is little doubt that Botha solicited and often heeded the advice of his military clique in many matters while Minister of Defence, and that this trend continued when Botha assumed the office of Prime Minister and then State President. Moreover, Malan was Botha's chosen successor as Minister of Defence when he finally divested himself of the portfolio. Having been a close confidante of Botha, Malan was able to step into his shoes and ensure a high degree of continuity in the policies of the Department of Defence, and his management style was no less combative than his mentor, for like Botha he did not take kindly to being crossed.

Malan's draconian and authoritarian tendencies are especially evident in his handling of opposition to military service. He had nothing but contempt for those who sought to avoid such obligations. Employing objectionable sexist language that was commonplace in the SADF, he called conscientious objectors "mummy's little boys" and approved a smear campaign to discredit the End Conscription Campaign, before finally banning the organisation in 1988.[11] These were the actions of an intolerant and *verkrampte* politician who was not prepared to countenance what he regarded as the treacherous and unpatriotic conduct of disloyal young men. In fact, objectors made their stands in the face of enormous social pressure to conform to the hegemonic views on military service in white society. This required moral courage.

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8 A Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (IB Tauris, London, 1996), p 239

9 This is the finding of much of the demobilisation, demilitarisation and reintegration (DDR) literature on the SANDF See, for instance: D Everatt (ed), *Only Useful until Democracy? Reintegrating ex-combatants in post-apartheid South Africa (with Lessons from Kosovo and Zimbabwe)* (Atlantic Philanthropies, South Africa, 2007)

10 South African Democracy Education Trust (SADET), *The Road to Democracy* II*: the 1970s* (Zebra Press, Cape Town, 2006), p 95

11 M Drewett, "The Construction and Subversion of Gender Stereotypes in Popular Cultural Representations of the Border War", *in* G Baines and P Vale (eds), *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa's Late Cold War Conflicts* (Unisa Press, Pretoria, 2008), pp 104-105

Malan denigrates principled opposition to national service by maintaining that "the majority of these servicemen simply had political objections and used religion as a cover" (p 89). Even religious objectors and pacifists were regarded and treated as criminals and the amendments to the Defence Act passed during Malan's term of office did not allow the courts much room for manoeuvre in terms of defining the grounds upon which objectors might be made exempt from national service. Such a prescriptive approach was completely at odds with Malan's claim that he wished to accommodate those who preferred to render alternative forms of service.

Malan championed the "need to know" principle as essential to protect the security and interests of the South African state (p 304). To this end, he was not prepared to take the public into his confidence concerning the SADF's involvement in an undeclared war waged (for the most part) on foreign and/or occupied soil. Even soldiers involved in operations were sometimes kept in the dark about details such as locality, enemy strength, objectives, and more. Likewise SADF spokesmen rarely disclosed the full picture about the number and nature of their casualties.[12] As Minister of Defence, Malan's parliamentary statements in reply to opposition member's queries were frequently evasive and partial. Nor was public confidence improved by the handling of secret negotiations (via intermediaries) with Cuba about the release of POWs – an issue to which Malan does not allude. Malan's communications with the public were poor notwithstanding his claims to the contrary. He also treated the media with suspicion because of its apparent untrustworthiness. He would browbeat and intimidate newspaper editors and journalists into compliance when they were critical of the actions of the military, and tightened media controls (in other words censorship) established during Botha's tenure. Editors and military correspondents accorded accreditation by the SADF were sometimes given access to privileged information on condition that they did not divulge the same to the public. However, even these embedded journalists were not always taken into his confidence by Malan. All in all, the resort to plausible denial only served to alienate segments of the public that were being asked to sacrifice their sons in a war whose very secretive nature belies its legitimacy. For someone who claims to have been committed to creating good communication channels with "opinion makers" (p 179) and to promoting the public image of the SADF (p 183), Malan was probably his own worst enemy. However, he still seems oblivious to such shortcomings.

Malan was not simply a professional soldier who happened to serve the government of the day. His appointment to political office shows that he was not above, but involved up to his neck in party politics. Rather than accept nomination as cabinet minister, he stood for and was elected as a Nationalist Party (NP) candidate for the Modderfontein constituency on the East Rand (p 247). Thus, his position as Member of Parliament (MP) and Minister of Defence meant that he represented the interests of the white electorate and the ruling NP. Malan portrays himself as a team player who used his cabinet portfolio to implement the directives and pursue policies of the (apartheid) government. For instance, he adopted with alacrity and readily implemented the government's total (counter-revolutionary) strategy that Williams correctly describes as "a visceral anti-communism dressed up as strategy".[13] Malan may have sincerely believed that South Africa's security was imperilled by a

12 G Baines, "Introduction: Challenging the Boundaries, Breaking the Silences", *in* Baines & Vale (eds), *Beyond the Border War*, p 10

13 Williams, *On the Border*, p 20

"revolutionary onslaught". It was the subject of many of his parliamentary speeches and is a recurrent trope in his reminiscences, but he adopts a somewhat simplistic and contradictory position with respect to the role of the SADF in politics. Malan uses the propagandists' ploy of reiterating *ad nauseum* the line that the SADF was politically neutral perhaps in the mistaken belief that if repeated often enough it might come to be regarded as true. He insists that the SADF was the guardian of the constitution and not the upholder of apartheid. Is this an extraordinary claim or should we treat it seriously? Here it might be instructive to turn to the extant literature for the sake of perspective.

At the risk of oversimplification – and reifying binaries – there are two schools of thought about the nature of civil-military relations in South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. On the one hand, we have a coterie of scholars who subscribe to the view that under P.W. Botha, the military captured the reins of power and created a garrison or security state.[14] This amounted to a military coup by stealth, rather than a brazen takeover of the government. The consolidation of the so-called securocrats was affected by the streamlining of the State Security Councils into the fully-fledged National Security Management System (NSMS) that concentrated power in the hands of the Chief Executive and his inner circle, and was exercised by the President's loyal line managers via regional security councils.[15] These scholars stress the militarisation of white society that was reinforced by agencies such as families, churches and schools and, of course, the SADF itself.[16] They hold that the "revolutionary onslaught" and the threat posed by the Soviet Union to South Africa's independence were overstated in order to create fear and paranoia amongst white citizens. As a corollary, these like-minded scholars advance the destabilisation thesis, namely that the apartheid state used the security forces to sow a swathe of destruction in neighbouring states in order to create instability and warn off the frontline states from supporting or providing sanctuary to the armed wings of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO).[17]

On the other hand, conservative think tanks such as the Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS)[18] and right-wing scholars[19] hold that the Soviet threat to South Africa

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14 Condemnation of Botha's military state was virtually universal outside of the country and not confined to left-wing scholars who include: P Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians: Civil-Military Relations in South Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984); R Leonard, *South Africa at War* (AD Donker, Craighall, 1985); G Cawthra, *Brutal Force: The Apartheid War Machine* (International Defence & Aid Fund for Southern Africa, London, 1986); K Grundy, *The Militarization of South African Politics* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988); R Jaster, *The Defence of White Power: South African Foreign Policy under Pressure* (MacMillan, Basingstoke, 1988)

15 Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, p 306, holds that the NSMS was "not the military in disguise", but there can be no gainsaying the fact that SADF and other security force members held strategically important positions at all its levels

16 J Cock and L Nathan (eds), *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1989); J Frederickse, *South Africa: A Different Kind of War* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1986)

17 J Hanlon, *Beggar Your Neighbours: Apartheid Power in Southern Africa* (Catholic Institute for International Relations, London, 1986); P Johnson and D Martin (eds), *Destructive Engagement: Southern Africa at War* (Zimbabwe Publishing House, Harare, 1986); V Brittain, *Hidden Lives, Hidden deaths: South Africa's Crippling of a Continent* (Faber & Faber, London, 1988)

18 Scholars at the ISS, affiliated to the University of Pretoria, have included Michael Hough, Deon Fourie, Deon Geldenhuys and Dirk Kunert Founded in 1974, the ISS has since been scaled down to one full-time researcher

was real, that Cuba was nothing more than a Soviet proxy, and both backed terrorist organisations that sought the overthrow of a legitimate state and duly-elected government. Some consider Botha a genuine reformer who saw the need to convince the white electorate to shift its expectations in accordance with changing political realities and prepare for a democratically-elected (or even a black majority) government. They suggest that the SADF created a climate of security that facilitated the transfer of power by ensuring the necessary stability in the region. Their argument has been appropriated by retired generals – including Malan – who insist that the SADF was non-partisan and was committed to upholding the constitution, rather than a particular political party and its policies. This argument however is easily countered by noting that the SADF – like the SAP and the security forces at large – served as an arm of the apartheid state. Indeed, the SADF did not simply provide the SAP with support in maintaining law and order, but bolstered it in suppressing extra-parliamentary opposition and other forms of resistance. In other words, the SADF was being mobilised to deal with domestic security issues, rather than external threats. As such, the SADF became a repressive instrument of the state defending an unjust system of white power and privilege. Malan provides altogether unsatisfactory justifications for deploying the troops in the townships. It is not merely a blind spot, but a deliberate attempt to obfuscate the issues.

Malan believes that South Africa was not defeated militarily, but what for him was an unacceptable post-apartheid settlement, was the result of political blundering and incompetency by government negotiators. He blames F.W. de Klerk for this, because Botha's successor sidelined those with expertise in security matters. Notwithstanding his sanitised prose, Malan clearly harbours personal resentments against De Klerk. He was clearly chagrined when relieved of the defence portfolio and made Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry in 1991. He reckons that he went along with this demotion primarily to maintain a watching brief on security matters in the new cabinet, as his successor was uninformed. However, it seems that De Klerk's decision in late 1992 to sack 23 high-ranking SADF officers on suspicion of involvement in right-wing intrigue and/or third force activities, particularly riled Malan. He was prepared to vouch for their professional integrity. Consequently, he berates De Klerk for his inability to appreciate or understand the military culture and values to which these officers subscribed (p 355). This he essentialises as the view that the SADF "had been politically neutral, that is to say loyal to the Constitution and the Government of the day rather to a political party" (p 405). Whilst the officers in question might not have been plotting a coup and the SADF did not attempt to derail the transfer of political power to the ANC,[20] there is good reason to believe that their loyalty was to the NP for as long as it remained committed to white minority rule. Malan obviously feels himself betrayed by De Klerk, who by his reckoning capitulated when the military had secured victory over South Africa's enemies [sic].

Malan dismisses as demonstrably false the perception that the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), had achieved victories over the SADF and that the unwinnable war had forced the South African government to the negotiating table.

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19 J M Roherty, *State Security in South Africa: Civil-Military Relations under PW Botha* (M E Sharpe, New York, 1992)

20 Malan himself claims to have been approached by certain business leaders (captains of industry?) to organise a military coup against the GNU, but to have rejected these on principle because the SADF's tradition was loyalty to the government of the day See: Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, pp 212-213

He insists that the SADF had the military situation under control and that the government was not compelled by force of arms to negotiate with the ANC. He cites a declaration of 1997 by the then President Mandela to the effect that "… the military and paramilitary forces of apartheid remained undefeated when power passed to the ANC" (p 357) in support of his view. This is undoubtedly correct, but it is not the full story. Although "the SADF and MK never clashed operationally in any significant way",[21] this was partly because MK did not develop the capacity to wage anything but a war of insurgency and chose its battles accordingly. The entire country was declared an "operational area" by the State Security Council in 1985 (p 322) which meant that the full might of the security forces could be mobilised against cadres who infiltrated its borders. Malan obviously does not subscribe to the adage that "one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter". He expresses his moral repugnance for the ANC's tactical decision taken at the 1985 Kabwe conference to attack "soft" (civilian), as well as "hard" (military) targets. He speaks of "a lowering of the standards of the armed struggle" (p 328), but stops short of condemning it out of hand. Yet, SADF agencies were no less brutal and inclined to engage in egregious violence. For someone who fancied himself as a military commander, Malan's feigned ignorance of the activities of the Civil Cooperation Bureau (CCB), a secret SADF front organisation, has a hollow ring to it. Yet, whilst he is still not prepared to accept responsibility for the actions of the CCB, he is prepared to exonerate its operatives for illegal acts because of the context of the revolutionary climate (p 337). He condones "hit squads" and "dirty tricks" by arguing that the secret services of democratic states also engage in similar covert activities. Although Malan insists that the Military Intelligence Division was not involved in such operations, because it did not have the necessary capacity (p 333), the evidence suggests otherwise.[22] Moreover, slush funds also made it possible to outsource clandestine activities. Malan's sanctimonious tone seems to suggest that he believes that he occupies the moral high ground in this particular debate, and it is precisely this self-righteousness that causes him to deny responsibility and culpability for acts that cannot be sanctioned, even during war.

Malan also attempts to justify his approval of Project Coast, South Africa's chemical and biological programme established in 1981 under the leadership of Doctor Wouter Basson. Although he acknowledges that there were no measures in place to ensure how the project's funding was used, nor any controls over its experiments, Malan was prepared to sanction such a project on grounds that Basson was a "reliable man of great integrity" (p 392). He would have us believe his assessment of the maverick scientist nicknamed "Doctor Death" was vindicated by the court judgments that returned a verdict of "not guilty" on charges against Basson related to violent, commercial and drug-related crimes, but even the writer Hilton Hamann who is sympathetic towards the retired SADF generals, admits that Project Coast was used for sinister purposes.[23] Nonetheless, Malan insists that the SADF was an ignorant latecomer to chemical warfare, that it produced protective clothing to counter the use of the same by the country's enemies, that the SADF only developed non-lethal or incapacitating types of weapons, and that he never authorised the offensive application of chemical weapons. He reckons that, by contrast, the track records of the Cubans and Soviet Union show that they were well versed in the use of such weapons. He cites an instance of the use of chemical gas by FAPLA/Cuban

21 W Steenkamp, *Freedom Park: Roots and Solutions* (Just Done Publications, Durban, 2007), p 4
22 Sanders, *Apartheid's Friends*, pp 145-173
23 Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, p 171

troops during the battle of the Lomba River in September 1987, but claims that a change of wind direction rendered it counter-productive (p 269). Radio Luanda accused UNITA of deploying the gas, but Malan dismisses this as propaganda. Interestingly, he notes that the Cubans/FAPLA sterilised areas contaminated by chemical weapons in south-east Angola with napalm and incendiary bombs (p 398). This begs the question of whether the SADF did likewise. Malan makes no mention of the SAAF's use of napalm, but the practice is confirmed by reports of assaults on SWAPO bases in Angola.[24] Although not a chemical weapon, the use of napalm does reveal the SADF's propensity for unleashing a trail of devastation in neighbouring states. Malan notes that the SADF was successful in waging a war that left no ruins on South African soil (p 12). This statement, of course, overlooks the enormous human damage caused by the conflict, including its toll of those caught in the crossfire. It is not acceptable to dismiss such casualties of war by the euphemism "collateral damage", for the region and its peoples were purposefully subjected to destabilisation by the SADF, which has left a legacy of physical destruction, social dislocation and psychological trauma.

Malan has an enormous stake in the myth of the SADF's invincibility; that it was the most effective and efficient fighting force on the African continent capable of defeating whatever forces FAPLA/Cuba and their Soviet advisors deployed against it.[25] For most commentators, the reputation of the SADF rests upon how the outcome of the crucial battles of Cuito Cuanvale is to be determined. The SADF's version is that it won a tactical victory and withdrew from Angola and Namibia on its own terms. This version was put forward by the then chief of the army, General Jannie Geldenhuys,[26] and is reiterated by Malan in a chapter headed "The greatest battlefield victory of the SA Defence Force". The three phases of the operation which went by the codenames Modular, Hooper and Packer, was a protracted affair that vacillated between intense large-scale conventional engagements and standoffs that lasted from September 1987 to July 1988. Malan describes the entire campaign as an unqualified success, but more nuanced accounts by Edgar Dosman and Piero Gliejeses (both of whom had access to Cuban archives) reveal that the fortunes and objectives of the warring parties changed frequently.[27] The South Africans certainly won a victory against enormous odds at the Lomba River, where the MPLA advance on UNITA's headquarters was stopped in its tracks, but the repulse of its subsequent frontal assaults on well-fortified positions in the Tumpo triangle proved a decisive setback in the SADF's bid to capture Cuito Cuanavale. Malan reiterates previous denials that it was never the SADF's intention to occupy Cuito, but this is

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24 See, for instance, Department of Defence Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence archive, MV 77/1, Box 143, Operasies in SWA Volume 9, OPS/309/4 REKSTOK/SAFFRAAN, Special Sitrep, HSAW 3 to PM & MOD, 4 September 1979

25 This viewpoint has been perpetuated by the writings particular journalists and SADF reservists See: W Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War 1966-1989* (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1989); H Römer, *South Africa's Armed Forces* (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1988); H Römer, *War in Angola: The Final South African Phase* (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1990)

26 J Geldenhuys, *Dié wat wen: 'n General se storie uit n era van oorlog en vrede* (JL van Schaik, Pretoria, 1993) The book has been published in English as *A General's Story* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1995)

27 E Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale: Cuba's Angolan Campaign", *in* Baines & Vale, *Beyond the Border War*, pp 207-228; P Gleijeses, "Moscow's Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975-1988", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 8, 2, Spring 2006, pp 3-51; P Gleijeses, "Cuba and the Independence of Namibia", *Cold War History*, 7, 2, May 2007, pp 285-303

pure spin.[28] The loss of the SAAF's air superiority which Malan does admit to (p 273), meant that the ground forces had to withdraw or possibly have their escape routes cut off and face the likelihood of sustaining losses that would have been politically disastrous. Meanwhile, Cuban forces outflanked the SADF and advanced on the Namibian border while its Mig fighter planes bombed the Calueque dam, killing 10 NSM. Malan holds that the SADF then counter-attacked and inflicted heavy casulaties on the Cuban/MPLA forces, but his claim that the Cubans suffered a broken back (p 291) is questionable. Nor can it be said that the battle ended in a stalemate, because the overall situation in southern Angola was suddenly far more fluid and gave the Cuban/MPLA forces the edge. It was the SADF whose teeth had been broken.[29] For the first time ever the Cubans threatened the Namibian border and the SADF appeared vulnerable. The announcement by Geldenhuys of a massive call-up in mid-1988 attests to this. It was the South Africans who sued for peace and brokered the negotiations that culminated in their withdrawal from Namibia and of Cuban forces from Angola.

Malan reproduces figures from Geldenhuys' account that tabulates the losses in material sustained by the SADF/SWATF/UNITA and Soviet/Cubans/FAPLA forces, respectively. These figures would appear to confirm a South African victory. However, the outcome of a battle cannot be measured by such ratios or head counts. Moreover, the casualty figures cited by Malan fail to mention the UNITA losses. UNITA and other black soldiers fighting in irregular units ensured that the casualties sustained by regular SADF units, particularly amongst white conscripts, were kept to a minimum. If we wish to gauge the result of Cuito Cuanavale, we should pay heed to Clausewitz's *dictum* that "war is an extension of politics by other means". In other words, war is a second-order instrument of politics. The SADF subscribed to the formula (attributed to one of its strategic thinkers Lieutenant-General "Pop" Fraser, although it clearly became Malan's mantra) that the war was 80 per cent political and 20 per cent military.[30] This formula recognised that victory could not be won on the battlefield alone, but could only be assured by defeating the enemy by means of diplomacy, propaganda and psychological warfare. The SADF and its proxies might have won many battles, but did not win the war, because the government surrendered white power and privilege when it negotiated the demise of apartheid and minority rule in South Africa and Namibia. The SADF's claims of victory (or even "peace with honour") in Angola/Namibia would be analogous to insisting that the US won the Vietnam War, or that Rhodesia won its "bush" war. This is patent nonsense because the US withdrew from south-east Asia and the Smith regime conceded a transfer of power to ZANU-PF.

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28 R Kasrils, "Historic Turning Point at Cuito Cuanavale", Address to Public Forum "Commemorating the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale", Rhodes University, Grahamstown, 28 May 2008

29 This description borrows from Castro's metaphor See Dosman, "Countdown to Cuito Cuanavale", pp 219, 223 The boxing analogy suggests that the Cubans parried the SADF at Cuito with a left jab and then countered with a right thrust towards the Namibian border Ironically, such a strategy amounts to a variation on a theme of Soviet conventional battle tactics of which Castro was highly critical

30 Brigadier (later Lieutenant-General) C A Fraser was the author of the document *Lessons Learnt from Past Revolutionary Wars* that became staple reading for a generation of graduates at the Saldanha Military Academy This was translated and revised as *Revolusionêre oorlogvoering: Grondbeginsels van opstandsbekamping* (SA Weermag, Pretoria, 1958), and used as a textbook for courses on the subject of counter-insurgency tactical thinking

In his account of "the war for Africa",[31] Malan notes the appointment of a Soviet general named Constantin Shagonovich to command the combined Soviet/Cuban/FAPLA forces in December 1985. In keeping with previous accounts of the Angolan War, Shagonovich is identified as "an expert in counter-insurgency" and a "specialist in chemical warfare".[32] However, Vladimir Shubin of the Institute for African Studies at Moscow's Academy of Sciences reckons that these writers have it wrong. He holds that the confusion arises from the fact that the position of Chief Military Advisor to Angola's Minister of Defence between 1978 and 1980 was held Lieutenant-General Vassily Shakhnovich, and that one of his successors was known as "General Konstantin", although his family name was actually Kurochkin and not Shagonovich. So Shakhnovich and Kurochkin have morphed into the imaginary Konstantin Shagonovich. The real Shagonovich only arrived in Angola after the offensive against Mavinga and Jamba had been beaten back by the SADF and its allies on the Lomba River. This Shagonovich was not a "chemical warfare expert" (as Malan holds), because prior to being stationed in Angola, he was the Deputy Commander of the Soviet Airborne Troops.[33] The error by the SADF in identifying the Soviet commander and his skills, was presumably due to flawed intelligence. This is somewhat ironic when it is remembered that Malan enjoined his men to "know your enemy". The same inadequate intelligence was apparent when the SADF generals directing operations in Angola in 1987/1988 admitted that they regarded Fidel Castro as an unknown quantity after he effectively took charge of the Cuban forces from his war room and they were unable to predict his moves on the battlefield.

In spite of the setbacks in southern Angola, Malan and his generals took some comfort from making exaggerated connections between the course of events in southern Africa and those that played out on the global stage. Malan even goes so far as to claim that the losses inflicted on the Soviet Union in Angola following on the heels of Afghanistan caused the superpower to overreach itself. Accordingly, the SADF made a significant contribution to ending the Cold War (p 435). This claim follows the line of reasoning that holds that the Reagan administration made the cost of competing with the US' military and nuclear programmes prohibitively expensive. It assumes that the Soviet Union's support for the MPLA and Cuban adventurism – as opposed to internationalism – was a significant drain on its resources. This argument has not convinced Russian scholars who can claim some "inside" knowledge of the workings of the Soviet state and its military aims and capacity, nor has it been entertained by US "Sovietologists" who have analysed the causes of the end of the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union and Communist bloc took *all* commentators by surprise. It would be according SADF generals far too much prescience to suggest that they were able to predict the demise of communism and thus decided to change tack from waging war against SWAPO and later the ANC (and their respective allies) to facilitating the transfer of political

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31 F Bridgland, *The War for Africa: Twelve Months that Transformed a Continent* (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1990)

32 See, for instance: W Steenkamp, *South Africa's Border War 1966-1989* (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1989), pp 148-150; F Bridgland, *The War for Africa: Twelve Months that Transformed a Continent* (Ashanti, Gibraltar, 1990), p 62; S Ellis and T Sechaba, *Comrades against Apartheid: the ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (James Currey, London, 1992), p 183

33 V Shubin, "Historiography of the liberation struggle: conflicting views " Paper presented at the Workshop on Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, September 2008

power. The timing of this breakthrough was clearly coincidental and fortuitous, rather than predictable, and all parties seized the moment. This serves to underscore the irony inherent in Malan's claim that the SADF made possible the peaceful transition to democracy (p 426).

It is apparent from his writings that Malan's retirement has not been easy for him. Especially trying have been the legal trials and quasi-legal proceedings of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC). He voluntarily testified before the TRC in May and October 1997 on behalf of the SADF, because he reckoned that his testimony would frame that of subordinates who might follow him and place such evidence in the "correct" context. He was also involved in making written submissions to the body. He insists that the TRC was intent on finding evidence to incriminate him and his SADF colleagues for atrocities and war crimes. He subsequently faced murder charges that stemmed from Operation Marion, specifically for the attack by SADF-trained IFP assassins on ANC supporters in KwaMakutha in 1985. Malan protested his ignorance and felt vindicated by the verdict of the KwaZulu-Natal Supreme Court that acquitted him and 19 other SADF generals of the charges. His subsequent "retrial" before the TRC on the same matter in December 1997 seemed to confirm his suspicion that the TRC had made up its (collective) mind about his guilt and was intent on asserting that, irrespective of the findings of the court. Malan attributes TRC bias to its councillors' preconceived view that the SADF – and not the ANC – were the transgressors in the conflict and the chief perpetrators of human rights abuses (p 417).

The number of TRC amnesty applications might, at first sight, suggest otherwise, as they were primarily from the ranks of the liberation armies or non-statutory forces. "Of the 256 members of the apartheid era security forces that applied for amnesty ... only 31 had served in the SADF. In contrast, there were close to 1 000 applications for amnesty from members of the various armed structures aligned to the ANC".[34] Malan offers the following reasons for so few SADF amnesty applications to the TRC:

- it had no jurisdiction to grant indemnity for alleged human rights abuses committed outside of the country which was primarily the SADF's field of operation;
- it took no cognisance of the fact that SADF members were appraised of the fact that carrying out legitimate orders was not a violation of human rights and that SADF chiefs accepted responsibility for these actions;
- it was biased and hostile towards SADF members; and
- it was not prepared to accept that SADF discipline was exemplary and that members committed only a handful of "irregularities" (p 424).

These reasons require some elaboration and qualification. There was actually a highly successful campaign led by General Dirk Marais, former Deputy Chief of the Army, and endorsed by Malan, to dissuade those who had served in the SADF from approaching the TRC for amnesty. A clique of retired officers formed a Contact Bureau that effectively served as a gatekeeper of SADF submissions to the TRC. This

34 D Foster, P Haupt and M de Beer, *The Theatre of Violence: Narratives of Protagonists in the South African Conflict* (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Cape Town, 2005), pp 15-16

ensured that full disclosures were not made and that admissions of culpability were not readily forthcoming. Conscripts who made such admissions were summarily dismissed as sympathy seekers or outright liars by the SADF generals and their apologists.[35] Malan implies that the ANC/SACP alliance's attempts to discredit the SADF created a political climate that instilled guilt in former soldiers on account of the role that they played in securing a legitimate state and protecting its citizens, but it is debatable how much guilt or remorse was felt by such soldiers – both in the ranks and amongst the officer class. If the unwillingness to testify or apply for amnesty is anything to go by, there has been little compunction to come forward and confess war crimes or human rights abuses, and amongst those who have, it is arguable that any sense of guilt was derived from searching their own consciences, rather than capitulating to the pressure of political correctness.

So is Malan's memoir an exercise in self deceit, or does the author sincerely believe his version of events? There can be little doubt that Malan is unable to bring himself to accept the cause or system he defended as anything but legitimate. It is quite understandable that he should cling to a belief in what he fought for, otherwise his lifelong purpose is negated, his *raison d'être* is no more. After all, Malan has a vested interest in preserving a version of the past that holds that apartheid was not a crime against humanity and that the SADF served to protect all of South Africa's citizens. This obviously flies in the face of the ANC's own triumphalist master narrative of the justness of the liberation struggle. In other words, Malan is still fighting a rearguard action against what he views as the winner's take on the past. He holds that: "The war may have ended but the political struggle continues" (p 431). He invokes – with a hint of irony – the slogan of the liberation movements in the former Portuguese colonies: "*a luta continua!*" For Malan the struggle continues to preserve his self-image intact. For the rest of the South African public, it continues in the sense of their having to engage with the politics of identity and memory.

This contestation over the meaning of the past is evident not only in the discourses of political commentators, scholars, and media analysts, but in the language and actions of ordinary citizens. For instance, it was apparent that the controversy occasioned by AfriForum's challenge to the decision of the Freedom Park Trust to omit the names of SADF soldiers from the wall of names raised issues concerned with who gets to define the nation in the making.[36] And if SADF veterans are persuaded by Malan's version of events, then unreconstructed views might receive a fillip amongst sectors of the white community. In fact, some of Malan's arguments are already being appropriated and disseminated via the media. The *Grensoorlog* series being screened by Kyknet provides something of an outlet for certain former SADF officers and soldiers to put their case. Privately-made and distributed films such as *Soldiers' Friend* celebrate the achievements of certain units in the Border War – especially the special forces and parabats – and propagate racism, and the disembodied voices of the SADF veterans that find expression in blogs on numerous websites frequently articulate some very conservative viewpoints. I am not suggesting

35 For instance the testimony of conscript Kevin Hall was carefully scrutinised and rebutted by the Contact Bureau's commentary on the TRC Report This has been reproduced as Appendix A of Malan's text, pp 463-465, and in Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, pp 221-223

36 G Baines, "Site of Struggle: The Freedom Park Fracas and the Divisive legacy of South Africa's Border War/Liberation Struggle" Paper presented at the Workshop on Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, September 2008

for a moment that such voices should be silenced or that they have no place in the marketplace of ideas, but I am concerned that opinions represented in Malan's book will resonate with those who wish to condone the apartheid regime and the illegal actions of its security forces, for Malan's views exemplify those of a significant segment of white South African society. It is precisely for this reason that they should not be summarily dismissed, but be subjected to close scrutiny and countered by the exposition of contrary perspectives – as I have attempted with this review.

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