

Wishing Us Away: Challenges facing ex-combatants in the 'new' South Africa

by

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Introduction

This report provides an exploration of some key issues affecting ex-combatants in South Africa. It is based on a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups with former members of various armed groupings that participated in South Africa's recent conflict.¹ The analysis is organised under six inter-related themes:

- Betrayal
- The SANDF Experience
- Community Expectations, Perceptions and the Stigmatisation of Ex-combatants
- Violence and Crime
- Trauma and Distress
- Revenge Violence, Former Enemies and Reconciliation

For the purposes of the report, 'ex-combatants' are defined as the fighters of South Africa's past violent conflicts who are not currently situated within the state agencies of safety and security, i.e. South African National Defence Force (SANDF), South African Police Services (SAPS). Little is known of the present situations of these ex-combatants. Indeed, many former fighters, who often carry with them decades of militarised experiences and the accompanying burdens of these have, as one respondent put it, 'just disappeared into South Africa ...' where they must attempt to build new lives for themselves.

Demobilised² ex-combatants who no longer hold positions in the formal security structures are conventionally considered a vulnerable population. This is because the termination of their combatant activities requires them to find alternative methods of income generation and support - a demand for which they are often ill equipped. Furthermore, they find themselves in a hostile environment characterised by high levels of unemployment. This vulnerability combined with their former combatant status has led to characterisations of this population as a security threat.

Not all ex-combatants are equally placed in relation to this context. As is evident in South Africa, many former fighters of the Liberation Movement presently occupy prominent positions in both government and the corporate world. These ex-combatants have certainly not 'disappeared' but, instead, play visible and fundamental roles in society. But this is by no means true for the majority of ex-combatants. This investigation attempts to contribute to an understanding of the situations of those ex-combatants who have 'disappeared' from the public eye and the discourses of dominant society.

The respondents

South Africa has a vast and heterogeneous ex-combatant population, originating from an array of armed formations and experiences.³ This report focuses primarily on some of those whose participation in (or preparation for) armed conflict took place under the auspices of the African National Congress's (ANC) Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), including some who operated within Self Defence Unit (SDU) structures, and the apartheid state's South African Defence Force (SADF).

Within both these general categories there are a host of other combatant category distinctions to be made. At a very broad level the SADF combatants can be divided into Permanent Force members and those who served on a part-time basis as members of the Citizen Force. MK soldiers can broadly be considered to fall into those who left South Africa to train in exile (and who might have been deployed in South Africa or not) and those who operated internally throughout their combatant days. Especially within MK though, categories of combatants cannot be rigidly defined. For example, many, while perceiving themselves to be fighting for liberation in the townships where they lived, had only very tenuous or remote links with the ANC and its formal armed structure (MK). Others 'linked' themselves to MK through minimal training, and/or the provision of certain ordinances. Others who went for training in exile did so for varying periods of time. Some spent the large part of their lives in exile, while many of the later recruits were in exile for as little as one or two years.

For the purposes of this report ex-combatants who participated in the ANC's armed struggle are uniformly referred to as 'MK/SDU'.⁴ The majority of these respondents operated primarily inside South Africa. Many of them however, had exile experiences when they left the country to receive training offered by the ANC in the early 1990s. Before this they had operated as SDUs or 'comrades' in the townships. Although some of the research participants spent long periods in exile - having left South Africa in the 1970s or 1980s - these are the minority. Three focus groups with these respondents were complemented by several in-depth interviews.

Former SDUs from the township of Thokoza on the East Rand (Gauteng) are categorised separately from other MK/SDU respondents for their very particular combat experiences.

They participated in some of the most intense violent conflict that took place within South Africa's boundaries. The violence that engulfed Thokoza in the early 1990s was akin to that of high-intensity warfare. Respondents in this category are also usually considerably younger than other ex-combatants. One focus group and five in-depth interviews were conducted with these respondents. Additional material was collected through a focus group with parents/caregivers, and another with girlfriends/ex-girlfriends of Thokoza SDUs.

This study also draws on a series of interviews with ex-combatants conducted on behalf of the CSVr during 1999 and 2000 in KwaZulu-Natal.⁵ These interviews were mainly with former members of the non-statutory forces, i.e. MK, the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA, the Pan African Congresses' armed-wing) and local SDUs. In addition, several interviews were conducted with former combatants aligned to the Inkatha Freedom Party, who had been trained by the South African Defence Force in Namibia's Caprivi Strip. Interviews were also held with members of the Inkatha-aligned Self Protection Units (SPUs).

South African Defence Force (SADF) respondents⁶ divide between those who were Permanent Force members, and those who were members of the Citizen Force. Alternatively, they can be categorised as ex-Special Forces and former conscripts. (This is the case for respondents, but importantly, not all Permanent Force members were in Special Forces). All respondents who held permanent positions did so within the SADF's Special Forces' Reconnaissance Commandos. In this report these respondents are referred to as 'Special Forces' operators or 'recces'. Also housed within Special Forces but on a part-time (or Citizen Force) basis, were members of the Parachute Battalions. These respondents are also referred to as 'Special Forces' operators or, alternatively, 'parabats'. Most of the ex-Special Forces respondents were deployed exclusively outside South Africa. Interviews were conducted with a total of seven ex-Special Forces operators.

The other main category of SADF respondents is that of former conscripts, specifically those who had done their military service during the 1980s. All but one of these respondents had been involved in combat in either the former South West Africa

(Namibia) or Angola. Some of these respondents had, in addition, been deployed in South Africa's townships. One focus group was conducted with former conscripts, and another with female relatives of conscripts who had had similar combat experiences. The female relative group included wives, ex-wives and mothers of former conscripts. Most 'wife' respondents are, in addition, sisters of former conscripts.

While the bulk of the conscript data was collected through these focus groups, this information is supplemented in places with the words of other conscripts, accessed through subscription to an English-medium internet chat-line of ex-SADF soldiers.

Although former soldiers with a range of SADF experiences subscribe to 'ArmyTalk',⁷ most were engaged with the military in a Citizen Force capacity. This additional method of data collection provides important supplementary material for an ex-combatant category that represents a significant proportion of South Africa's white, adult male population. Subscribers to this group appear to broadly represent a different section of this population from that represented by those who participated in the focus group (none of whom subscribe to the chat-line). Contributions from this source are indicated by "AT", for 'ArmyTalk'.

In addition to these key respondent categories several additional interviews were carried out with former APLA members and members of Inkatha Self Protection Units (SPUs). The small numbers in both cases preclude these interviews from constituting respondent categories. Rather, the interviews are used as supplementary material where appropriate.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted between July 1999 and May 2000. Apart from the specific interviews that took place in KwaZulu Natal (mentioned above) and some ArmyTalk chat-line contributions, the research was done in the province of Gauteng.

With the exception of one APLA interviewee, all ex-combatants who participated in the research process are men. The absence of the voices of ex-MK women particularly, constitutes a crucial gap in the research. In addition, numerous other ex-combatants whose current situations also remain unknown, do not feature. As such, the focus of this study is relatively narrow. However, while its findings are not representative of the diverse ex-combatant population, they are indicative of a range of issues and problems percolating

within the ranks of South Africa's former soldiers.

Notes:

¹ The following interviews and focus groups were conducted during the research phase of this report: three focus groups with former members of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and former members of Self Defence Units (SDUs) aligned to the African National Congress (ANC); one focus group with former Thokoza SDUs; one focus group with female partners of Thokoza SDUs and one with relatives of Thokoza SDUs; one focus group with former conscripts of the South African Defence Force (SADF) and one focus group with female relatives of former SADF conscripts. In addition, a total of 26 interviews were conducted with former members of MK, APLA, SDUs, Self Protection Units (SPUs), the SADF and other key informants. Further to these research participants, discussions held with additional relevantly-placed individuals contributed to information gathering and data analysis.

² 'Demobilisation' is used here in its broad sense. It refers to all of South Africa's ex-combatants who are no longer part of the state's armed structures, and not only to the former members of the Non-Statutory Forces (MK and APLA) who were affected by the formal demobilisation process.

³ For a breakdown of different ex-combatant groupings in South Africa, see Gear, S. *Now that the War is Over: Ex-Combatants, Transition and the Question of Violence. A Literature Review*. CSVr report.

⁴ This is not to say that the histories of many ex-combatants do not fall more clearly into either an 'MK' or an 'SDU' description. Rather, as far as most of our respondents are concerned, the categories are blurred.

⁵ See, *Report on Ex-Combatants in KwaZulu Natal*, unpublished report, CSVr, December 2000. This report was commissioned by the CSVr and based on the KwaZulu Natal interviews.

⁶ In instances the words of ex-SADF soldiers are cited merely as 'SADF'. This is in line with requests made by some respondents who fear the possible consequences of more precise identification.

⁷ ArmyTalk <http://moo.sun.ac.za/mailman/listinfo/armytalk/>

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Betrayal

"We are spanners to fasten bolts, after the bolts have been fastened, we are sidelined ..."

This section explores betrayal, the most recurrent theme emerging from the various voices of ex-combatants.

The vast majority of interviewees feel they have been badly let down by those who propelled them into action and inspired their lives as combatants. A common element is the sense that the ideological paradigms that framed the wars they fought in, and their identities as combatants, have been betrayed. For many, the disjuncture between what they fought for and their present realities is a bitter pill to swallow.

That is why I say that I am still in a struggle ... There is this thing emphasised in the Freedom Charter that there shall be houses, security and comfort here inside South Africa ... and they expect it from us - the comrades - that we should make comfort for ourselves ... But you find the resources for those securities are not available. That's why I say that I am still oppressed, even now, because I'm not employed. [MK/SDU]

I went to the parabat 'cos I wanted to be worthwhile. We were led to believe we were stopping communism ... I believed, 'Stop the communists outside before they blow up my house and family.' Then you realised it was a political game. Lives were lost. It leaves a bitter taste. We were led down the garden path ... We went in believing we were doing the right thing. What for? ... I hear guys who are bitter to[wards] the politicians like it was a sell out 'We fought, why did you give it away?' ... The ANC government were assisted in getting into power, it wasn't a military victory. Some feel worse off because of that. [Parabat]

Several former SADF members refer to the former ruling National Party with scorn:

I think throughout the white ex-military, the people hate the New National Party and the old National Party more than they hate the ANC government ... I personally believe that the time of white politics is over in South Africa. The people who are still in politics saying ... we're fighting political battles are only organising a job for themselves. That's what they're doing because they are getting a lot of money for being in parliament and of course they get money from the party, which they get from the normal people who are suffering more and more due to their effects. How can the new National Party, for example, now stand up and say, 'We want to train the power in the country?' They did have the power, they gave it away.
[Recce]

For ex-liberation movement combatants in particular, current socio-economic circumstances often underlie the sense of betrayal. This is exacerbated by disparities existing within the ranks of the former liberation movement.

You'll notice that our cadres are suffering more than everybody in the country. They should have been the first preference of this government - but the government of the ANC, it has thrown them away. [MK/SDU]

The disparities that exist now are not only between ourselves and our white counterparts but our comrades as well, that have become, overnight, bourgeoisie and they are driving flashy cars and sleeping in very expensive hotels; they fly over our heads. But I think after all is said and done, you look at the thing in a perspective that is consistent with what you did and you will tell yourself, 'Now when I joined the movement I didn't join to benefit myself ... It was the common concern for all South African citizens - that we need[ed] to liberate ourselves from the draconian racial barriers that existed at that time. And for now what you need to do is only to make the most of the worst situation ... the best way you know how.' But there are people who are in a more disadvantaged position than I am. I must recognise that. [MK/SDU]

Ex-combatants' viewpoints about their situation and how they arrived at this current juncture are not uniform. There is, for example, disagreement between some MK/SDU respondents about why they were fighting and what reasonable compensation might therefore be. This is illustrated in an extract from one of the MK/SDU focus groups.

R1: [I] was suffering but even today I still use my tolerance, my political understanding, according to my commitment that I joined [MK] voluntarily. The motive behind was to serve the interests of the large oppressed and defenceless citizens of our country. And you expect funds from the ANC, that after the liberation [we] would be paid? ... According to my knowledge, I do not expect of us that we're expecting some financial payment from the ANC.

R2: The first thing that we should understand as comrades is what we have been fighting for ... And we were not fighting to be free ... we were fighting to live nice. Because, the boers, if we were fighting for freedom, they were just going to give us the freedom we want[ed], then [we would] still not enjoy life ... I was fighting for a better life ... So we must understand what we have been politically fighting for. It seems like we do not know what we have been fighting for really, really.

The words of the second respondent reflect a common frustration amongst many former combatants regarding the outcome of the struggle. Although political freedom has been achieved, conditions for many have not changed. Indeed, pervasive socio-economic hardship presents an ongoing and fundamental challenge to those combatants who engaged in the armed struggle, 'fighting for a better life'. Political freedoms have provided no guarantees of improved economic circumstances or opportunities for most South Africans.

This sense of unfulfilled expectations and disillusion permeates the ranks of former combatants as they attempt to come to grips with their current situations. Those who are not beneficiaries of the new dispensation are, in the present, casualties of the ideologies, or fragments thereof, that mobilised them into action. The disjuncture between what they fought for and their current situations leave many feeling, in the words of one respondent, that they 'do not know where they are going'. Many SADF respondents feel they were used and cast aside, brainwashed to be pawns in a political game they neither understood nor had any control over. Compounding their anger, is a pervasive sense that what they fought for has been given away, handed to their enemies on a plate.

Several SADF respondents, however, feel that while many of their colleagues were appalled by the dramatic political developments in the early 1990s, some saw these

developments as inevitable.

A lot of people's approach is 'Hell, what a waste'. My personal approach is ... that the former government were fighting to buy time. Ultimately, even at that stage I think we realised that it was going to happen; it was a question of when. But there are a lot of guys ... [who] were assured that if they fought and volunteered to do this and that, we'd never ever have a communist country. And subsequently it materialises that we have a government where a lot of the members have that affiliation. [Parabat]

My opinion about being bullshitted from the top is, okay, we were. And they tried to rope you into the army as young as possible so that you weren't wise enough, you were still a puppy. But ... I tell you, it was the right time. Okay we lost okes [guys], we lost buddies but it was the right time. War is never nice. But it had to happen, there was a reason ... Would you rather have this place looking like Sarajevo - everything blown to bits? [Conscript group]

Views of this nature are more common amongst 'ArmyTalk' subscribers than they are amongst interviewees and focus-group participants.

I know that change had to happen sooner or later, and maybe because my family politics has always been anti-Nat [Nationalist Party], I didn't shed any tears when they left power. I honestly believe that we are better off now than then. ["AT"]

The sense of having been 'sold down the bloody river' is, however, present among all categories of SADF respondents. Participants in the conscript focus group emphasise their past experiences as a crucial facet of this, and point to the treatment they received when they were soldiers. They were 'cannon fodder', they say. In other words, they were treated as dispensable and were unnecessarily endangered. The secrecy around their deployment also meant that most South Africans had no idea what sort of situations many soldiers encountered. Those that did know, the people in charge, interviewees maintain, didn't care.

Let's actually get one thing straight. You know what we didn't need was the bullshit we put up with on the border. That we didn't need. I tell you what we did need. We needed support. We never got it. We got a whole lot of bullshit thrown in our faces. Because you know what? The people at the top couldn't give a shit! They probably ran like rabbits. [Conscript group].

While former operators of the SADF Special Forces emphasise the necessity of the secrecy that shrouded military operations, for many former conscripts this constituted a deception that negated their war experiences in the eyes of civilian society. The news blackout that surrounded the SADF's operations meant that other South Africans had little clue that there was even a war going on.

There were 10 000 of us sitting in Angola and we hear on our radios Pik Botha saying, 'I deny categorically there's any South African troops in Angola'. And it's on the radio and it's 10 000 of you [who] can listen to that. So what are you, dead already when you're there? How would you feel?
[Conscript group]

In addition, relatives of former conscripts tell how letters sent by the conscripts were censored, much of them being blacked out with ink by the time they reached their addressees.

The boys were just off to 'the border', a term in which the horrors and victories of war were contained or rendered invisible to the communities from which the conscripts were drawn.

You come home, 'How's it up on the border. Is it *lekker*?'. ... It was like nobody even seemed to know there was even a war going on. They make as if there is nothing going on there. It was just like, 'Where have you been man?' 'I've been up at the border' 'Oh, that's nice, so-and-so is also there'.
[Conscript group]

A former parabat echoes these concerns. He also highlights a related rift that he says existed between the Permanent Forces and the Citizen Forces.

There was no counselling or concern for national servicemen or Part Time Force members when they came back from the border. Apart from Col. X, we never had a Permanent Force guy at any of the funerals of our people. A lot of the full time officers used the Citizen Force army to further their careers. They weren't too worried about the troops under their command, whether they died or not. We held the Permanent Force in contempt. I think that if the war had got more intense, we would've started having cases of Permanent Force guys getting shot by their troops. [Parabat]

Although this anger about the past is powerful, most conscript focus group participants combine these views with an elevation of their service as 'the best years of my life', and calls for the reintroduction of conscription. Moreover, the targets of their present anger differ to those of other SADF respondents.

"Up shit creek, no paddles and nowhere to go ..."

Amongst conscript focus-group participants, a sense of betrayal is less apparent than that of more generalised anger. Their anger is directed at a broad range of targets: the former enemy, the present regime and all those whom it represents, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), their white fellow country people, and Africa in general, in which, as white men, they see themselves as under attack literally and figuratively.

I tell you what there is in this room now, its complete hatred for the jops. It's because we all know what they do, we all know what they are doing now. And the government is turning around and saying, 'Tough shit, you are the White in this country'... Because you know what? The white man in this country, and I am going to quote, unquote here, 'Has had it so good for so long' - which is the kak they are preaching to us! Time to tighten your belts because the white man in this country is worth shit. And you know it's not only from the army [that we feel this anger], it's from business and it's going further. We are sitting here, up shit creek, no paddles and there is nowhere to go. And that's why we are now sitting here saying - we fought for this country to make it a better place. What we have done is given it to the kaffir and he is taking it backwards. [Conscript group]

Perceptions of White 'exclusion' are exacerbated by negative assessments of the move to rectify past imbalances through processes of affirmative action.

It's apartheid reversed. Even worse. Do you want to get the best promotion you can ever get in your life? You must be a black woman. You must be lesbian, alright, and you must be disabled at the same time. Top of the shit pile. Cousin, white male, you are straight at the bottom. [Conscript group]

Frustrations are sometimes underpinned by a fundamentally racist 'logic':

Take all the men in the world: 50% of them are stuff-ups, [of] all the women in the world

50% are stuff-ups. Anybody who is not White, ... you have also got 50% good okes and 50% bad okes, but I cut them all out of my life because you don't know which ones to choose. Cut them all out of your life and you won't have kak. I mean we had no kak for the last 80 whatever years, and these okes get into your life - they have got problematic lives - Blacks [and] Coloureds, Indians are about your best. But Coloureds and Black okes [have] problematic lives hey. I keep them out of my life. [Conscript group]

Perceptions of racial prejudice (with Whites as the underdogs) are intensified by concerns that white people have not demonstrated the necessary solidarity.

These okes, you see, they know they have got us by the balls. They've intimidated us. The Nationalist Party is such a lame duck, then the army, and now every civilian in the street ... I've got a big chip on my shoulder with Whites, about not supporting each other. The spirit is dead. It's not because the war ended in Angola, it's because of the psychological war in our own country. Psychologically, everybody has been just like switched off. [Conscript group]

This reinforces the sense of exclusion:

The way things are going now, if we had to go to war and fight for this government - I would not fight for them. Because you know, it's not my country. I am going to fight for this black man to take my house, to rape my kids and to shoot my daughter, that is what I am going to be fighting for? While he just smiles? I am not going to. I will never fight! [Conscript group]

Unlike other respondents, most conscript focus-group participants do not direct their intense anger at the people who gave orders, either from within the military or political ranks. This is possibly because they considered themselves to be fighting for their country, stability and the safety of their families rather than the government responsible and the specific military strategy in which they participated. Indeed, this suggests the power and success of the former regime's strategy, with certain segments of the white male population, in cultivating a sense of 'the nation under siege'. As the relative of a former conscript explains,

My brother didn't go to the army to fight for the government anyway. He went to fight for us. A lot of them [would] go up and fight for their families

- they didn't want the bombs and the landmines to come into South Africa. That's why they went there, to stop it. If you had asked my brother if he was doing it for the government, he would have told you where the government could go. And he didn't do it for the SADF. [Wife/sister of conscript]

And their country as they see it, rather than the previous government, has let them down. They experience their situation as fundamentally disempowering and appear to be overwhelmed by a sense of their impotence. The dehumanisation of the enemy instilled through military service not only lives on in this group of respondents particularly, but seems to gain momentum in their experiences of the 'New' South Africa.

They never fought for the army, they all went up there to fight for their family. It was a whole family thing. 'I want to get this country clean so that I can go home and marry my sweetheart and live in peace and have children'. If they knew what was going to happen today they wouldn't have bothered ... I don't think the anger is aimed at anybody in particular, its just anger with the black colour. Those were the ones they were fighting against. [Wife/sister of conscript]

Their military service took place at a time when their civilian lives were relatively secure and for which they are now nostalgic. Their broader positive associations with their time in the military appear to mitigate their anger at the treatment within the military, or alternatively, their treatment in the military was worthwhile with the over-arching objectives in sight - the safety and security of their way of life.

The conscript focus group was conducted during a period in which farm invasions and attacks in Zimbabwe by alleged war veterans were being endorsed by President Mugabe. For some conscripts, the situation north of the border has heightened feelings of anger and disempowerment.

In Zimbabwe it's starting all over again. It brings back memories, especially when they show this farmer that was beaten to pieces. It's bringing back memories. But they also sit and then they think if it's happening in Zimbabwe it's going to come here ... and he turns round and he looks at me and says, 'Well that's it, if that comes here, we're all gone.' It actually frightens you to think that he thinks - because he knows what they are capable of - that he is rather going to kill us than let them have us. [Wife/sister of conscript].

Not all conscript respondents endorsed these views. For a small minority, blame for their current situation is laid squarely at the door of their military experience and the former government, which, they believe, destroyed their lives. One respondent who is homeless, unemployed and suffers from post-traumatic stress, had this to say:

Understand you are 17 years old, you have just come out of school, you don't know nothing. You know shit about politics or things like that. You know about biology or geography. Now you come out there and they tell you that you are fighting these okes, they are called 'communists'. 'Off you go. These are people that don't believe in God. You can kill them, it's alright.' They didn't tell you about the other people that's in-between over there. They never do. You only find that out when you get there ... My government let me down, hey. They lied to me so much and look where I am now ... And if your parents let you down before that, and then you go to the army and they let you down, and then the government after that lets you down. That's why I say, what kind of person do you come out to be? You come out to be like a negative person. [Conscript group]

Afterwards, when we came back here ... they just decided we are going to give South West Africa away to these SWAPOs and give them a party on top of it. And that was like putting a cherry on top of the cake, like saying 'Bugger all you ous [guys] who got killed there, wounded and whatever'. [Conscript group]

It is important to point out that although this study is based mainly on material gleaned through interviews and focus groups, the predominant views expressed in the conscript focus group generally differ from those of 'ArmyTalk' subscribers. Similar issues were sometimes raised but usually articulated in a different manner. Most notably, the profound anger and entrenched racism that emerged in the conscript group were frequently less vivid in contributions found on the chat line during the research.

These two groupings - the 'ArmyTalk' virtual community and the participants of the conscript focus group - could be considered to broadly represent opposite poles of the heterogeneous conscript population. In general, and when compared with focus-group participants, contributors from the chat line are more favourably placed in terms of employment and security. They tend to regard themselves as secure professionals, and as financially 'comfortable'. Several claim they come from progressive, anti-National Party,

middle-class backgrounds. Participants from the conscript focus group, on the other hand, live in more precarious socio-economic circumstances, and are likely to be among those vulnerable to affirmative action policies. They are generally less educated, unemployed, or in less secure employment.

"Thrown outside like morning mucus ..."

There are many facets to the sense of betrayal expressed by former combatants, the most powerful of which is feeling discarded, neglected and forgotten by those for whom they fought. Many feel they have been cast aside, now they are no longer of use. Former liberation movement and SADF members express similar views on a number of issues:

You'll notice that today our cadres are lying in the streets, loitering in the streets, no jobs, no nothing ... They find themselves being regarded as rotten rubbish which may be thrown into the dirty bin. We were surviving under a terrible situation during the apartheid regime, but now this is a new regime [and] our people are regarded as useless ... I can say: big fishes, they entertain themselves, small fishes are going to be food for big fishes. [MK/SDU]

In the old days you were a soldier, you had no political views, you were working for the government of the day, finished. But then some guys got involved in the CCB,⁸ which was a hell of a good organisation no matter what the TRC or anybody says, and they were just dumped like, if I can say it, shit. [Recce]

This thing that [the] ANC has done to us has destroyed us. For such a long time [we were] working for the ANC [but] the ANC has thrown outside like morning mucus. [MK/SDU]

There is nothing that we are getting. We are still suffering. We are still the same. [MK/SDU]

You see history is going to judge us one day, this whole thing, and when it does that, we will know that somehow we failed the very people who brought liberation to this country. [MK/SDU]

You must just remember what they are doing with us or what has been happening with us is not unique, it has been happening all over the world

with soldiers. Soldiers are only important to a government as long as they serve a purpose. [Recce]

For MK respondents, in particular, such feelings are intertwined with their current unemployed status, and their prior expectations that in a liberated South Africa, and in recognition of their sacrifices, they would be provided for.

What I can say here is that life is hell and catastrophic you see, after we were neglected by our leaders, or maybe by our organisation ... Let me put it this way: I'm not employed you see. [MK/SDU]

The same life that I was living before is the same life I'm still living today ... we are unemployed. [MK/SDU]

The situation is compounded in the view of some cadres by the calibre of existing leadership within the ANC, and the loss of senior leaders who, it is believed, would have given greater priority to the situation of the ex- combatants.

I think the organisation was supposed to rope us in from the release [from prison]. Like 'this is our cadre who has gone through a lot, we have to look out for him'. You know, I stay in the shabby shack? ... A lot of comrades refer to this situation as a direct result of Hani passing away, Chris Hani. We all believe he would have not let this perpetuate any further but unfortunately what happened, happened. [MK/SDU]

For many former members of the SADF's permanent force, as with MK members, the need to secure work after the war is a serious concern. Several former recces also link the sense of resentment towards their former superiors to current employment opportunities, or the lack thereof. There is, for example, considerably less anger, they say, amongst those that have secured alternative income-generating opportunities.

Ja, there might be resentment amongst certain elements. But I think that an organisation like EO [Executive Outcomes] - although it was a pure mercenary type of company - opened so many doors for so many guys who met government officials from other countries and businessmen or whatever and are now security personnel for mines in Angola and Tanzania and Uganda and wherever. They've got a new life, they've got new everything. [Recce]

While economic circumstances fundamentally inform feelings of anger, they do not adequately explain the sense of betrayal. Several SADF Special Forces respondents focus their anger at the apartheid politicians who made a 180-degree policy turn without warning or consultation. The enemy that the SADF soldiers had been trained to hate and kill was now invited to the negotiation table. Some began to question why they had been fighting in the first place, and others could not understand why everything was being given up. It is not only a job that some have lost, it is the ideological foundations on which they had built and understood their lives and what they were fighting for.

It's these inconsistencies between what was and what is now ... When [South Africa] changed it was an election that was won but it was dramatically changed over in the sense - okay, we did not have the violence effect, ... the war that we have in the rest of Africa - but religion changed overnight and all those type of things ... You must remember we haven't lost a military war. If the policy was different in the sense that if we had not been taught that we were actually fighting against the ANC as well, or against SWAPO; if we had said we are fighting against communism etc, etc, and the ANC had been just another party inside South Africa, things would have been so different with the change over. But by making the ANC the enemy, by making SWAPO the enemy, you grow up with them the enemy, and then you get this change over and the church tells you, 'You were wrong all these years', and I mean you suddenly realise: we're the indoctrinated ones; we're the brain-washed ones, not them. You realise that, well, we had the strongest military force in Africa and without firing one shot, everything is gone. And because of that, because some government official or president decided it's time for the ANC to take over, we lost our jobs. We lost our future. Everything that was stable for us is gone. All of a sudden that which we believed in is gone and once your belief is gone, everything goes. [Recce]

For this respondent, the church bears particular responsibility. Having provided theological backing to apartheid and its aggressive anti-communist policies, followers were then expected to accept that what had been preached for years was erroneous and morally unsustainable.

The church says after 48 years, 'We have been wrong, apartheid was wrong, it was a sin'. And I asked them, 'If one of you can just tell me who will go to heaven, those who died before 1994 or those who died after 1994?' They

say I mustn't think like that. I say 'Well, I do think like that because, you - the church - taught what was right and what was wrong, and now you change. Overnight, you change with the political system which tells me that you are running with politics and that you are actually portraying more a political view and not the religious side of it'. So I do have a problem very much with the church and I believe most of the ex-soldiers do ... Do you want to tell me that you don't have one church leader that received the inspiration that they were on the wrong track until the new government came? That proves to me that the church are a system inside South Africa, and perhaps in the world, to indoctrinate people ... I can't accept it. Those were the guys who've actually done me in the most, who've stolen the most from me and who let me down the most. [Recce]

Similarly, ex-MK members have been required to make fundamental ideological shifts. One respondent explains his treatment at the hands of his former comrades:

My imprisonment was for a just cause, you don't regret that, but to come out // ... You know, I was told by the leadership, 'Look, the kind of politics you were involved in and the politics we are involved in now are two different things. You ... might be very useful to the organisation but none the less you must understand now, that the politics we are involved [in is] finance and now there is going to be a lot of friction, so you better not go and involve yourself in local structures, you just have to involve yourself in a very minimal form.' And in those days they wanted me to go and volunteer in the Premier's office for the election we had, but I refused on the basis that they were only prepared to give me money for transport, whereas I had a family to look after. That is terrible, I must say. You know, to go sacrifice 13 years, I was prepared to make the supreme sacrifice and I was even sentenced to death. ... I was with the McBride, the Sharpeville 6 and all those other political figures - ... all these people in high posts in Government. And now I was expected to do volunteer work as if I don't have people to look after, and you ask yourself that the disparities that exist now is not only between ourselves and our White counterparts, but our comrades as well. They have become overnight, bourgeoisie. [MK/SDU]

Intensifying their feelings of betrayal, ex-MK members complain that they are currently exploited by the ANC. They suggest that the pattern of being used and then discarded continues in the present when ex-combatants are called upon to assist the organisation as and when it requires, but receive nothing in return, or during the intervening periods.

The ANC would come just like last year; they use us to campaign for them,

and we do that, you see. And at the end of the day, there's nothing, ... there's nothing [that] can come [to] your family ... Just to campaign is [a] big job ... [and] other people won't do [it] because they see everyday, they look at the T.V. - *ja* one government official has stolen a certain amount of a taxpayer's money. [MK/SDU]

So now those who we were together with in the struggle, those comrades who are in politics, in the mother body, they no longer want us. We are targets if they want to use us, I would just put it straight like that. They wanted to use us ... during campaigning, when the elections were near. Like the elections are coming in July [so] they start to come nearer to us. I already have a note here to come to the branch ... After they have won, I am nothing anymore, do you understand? So in other words ... we are spanners to fasten bolts, after the bolts have been fastened, we are sidelined. [MK/SDU]

This last respondent had the doors to his house damaged by the state security forces during political violence. The doors, which remain broken, have, for him, become a symbol of ANC neglect of its cadres, the lack of the change he expected would come with liberation, and the frustration at the reality that there is no one who can be held accountable to remedy his situation.

I haven't seen life changing until now. Since [I was] troubled by boers [who were] breaking [the] doors of my house, looking for AKs and hand grenades. Even now the doors are still broken. There is no one to fix them. We reported this to comrades who saw when I showed them, what the boers have done at [my] home. They broke all the things in the house and those things are not fixed, even now. So I do not see anything changing . I am nothing anymore. There are still cracks caused by boers ... When I went to the office, to tell the councillor, 'Hey man, look, this crack was caused [in] those times'. He said, 'There is nothing I can do, it was the boers.' I said, 'But it's you in charge, you were in the struggle, please try'. He said, 'Take out the money'. How will I get money? Should I look for a gun and rob, as if I can't think to destroy my government, do you get that thing? So now, because I am in my senses I will not do what he is getting me to do. I will end there. [MK/SDU]

The SADF's foreign soldiers

Several SADF respondents highlight the situations of one category of their former colleagues whom they consider to have been treated extremely badly and, as one respondent put it, 'sacrificed on the altar of expediency' ["AT"]. These are black foreign soldiers who were recruited or captured by the SADF in Angola, and 'turned' to be reconstituted as units in the SADF's Special Forces. Following the war they were brought to South Africa where they were promised homes and citizenship. Now, however, most are destitute with little support and limited opportunities. For Special Forces respondents, the plight of these particular soldiers is a source of outrage.

The guys that we really have to worry about [are] the black members of 32 Battalion and Special Forces who were captured by the military in Angola, and fought for the SADF ... [They're] Portuguese-speaking, Ovambo-speaking, Himba etc. They're now destitute ... We brought them back to South Africa like the bushmen who were dumped in Kimberley ... And now 10 years later, is anybody worrying about those guys? How do you think you're going to feel in a strange country? You are unwelcome in your own country; you are just as unwelcome in the country which is supposed to be looking after you ... These are people who have great reason to be angry. They can't go back to their own country, and they're treated very badly here. They're buggered. They can't even communicate with South Africans. Where do you find a job? I've got all these Portuguese-speaking Blacks who phone me on a daily basis, 'You are our father, please look after us'. But I can't even look after myself because the same system that I worked for has also done me in along the way. [Recce]

"It is them now who are in the fat ..."

A frequently articulated frustration amongst both main categories of ex-combatants, is the perceived hypocrisy and expedience of the organisations for whom they fought, as well as of the broader population. An important facet of this is the issue of who has secured employment in the 'new' institutions of the state. MK respondents resent that they have not been considered for job opportunities within government. Rather, they claim, it is either those who played no role in the struggle, or worse, those who were actively opposed to it, sometimes fighting for the enemy, who have benefited.

We have worked hard for the ANC ... But, now what is surprising is that the very ANC takes those amalumpere [sell-outs, informers, askaris] who were killing people in the location, and gives them jobs. So ... we meet them [and they are] driving cars of the movement [and] they look down at us [and] talk bad about us. [They say] that we worked for ANC, but today it has left us outside. [MK/SDU]

If we look at our mother body, we find sell-outs working there, those who were telling us that a white man cannot be painted [that the white man will always be more powerful]. Today it's them who work for the land that we fought for for such a long time ... It is painful to work, work, work - and at that time when the pot was hot, when the fire was red, it was us [on] the frontlines ... to bring back the land. Today we are left behind ... it is them now who are in the fat. [MK/SDU]

Several former cadres believe that by virtue of their particular role in the struggle, they should receive preferential treatment.

Because they fought for democracy, ex-combatants must get first preference, not the civilians. The government is starting with the civilians and we are just sitting ... We should be the first to know when they are doing something, and that we must be there before other people ... but we are not saying that they must only look out for us because we were fighting for the country. [MK/SDU]

One former conscript expresses similar feelings of resentment and envy towards fellow Whites who left South Africa during apartheid in order to avoid conscription. Not having had the opportunity to do the same, he considers his participation in South Africa's wars to

have effectively brought his life opportunities and goals to a sudden halt.

I also wanted to go to Oxford University or Cambridge ... you know what I mean? Those guys who came back from overseas, that ran away from the army, [would] come back and say, 'You're stupid, why did you go to the army because look what I'm doing?' Now he's driving a BMW and he's got his cell and whatever, and you're just sitting there with the same as what you left here [with]. And you look at these guys and you know you're a mess. [Conscript group, follow-up interview]

"Getting into Shell House, it's like when you want to get to heaven ..."

Contributing to their sense of having been discarded is the difficulty ex-combatants frequently experience when attempting to secure the assistance of their organisations. Both SADF and MK respondents, for example, raise specific problems with the SANDF [see section, The SANDF Experience, below]. MK respondents, in particular, emphasise that they are now distanced from the ANC. This marginalisation, they say, results from a lack of interest on the part of those in the structures, disempowering bureaucracies, and a politics of nepotism and patronage, which, some claim, has become the order of the day.

Like [the ANC] head office, Shell House, you go and report there [to] launch your grievances. When you get there you find new faces, people who do not know you. Some of them were not even in struggle. But now because there's nepotism operating in the office ... (somebody got her sister in, some their mother), when you get there they just look at you and say, 'No, I don't know you'. They will only speak to people they know ... So it seems that we are thrown away. [MK/SDU]

It's as if now we have said 'ANC for us all and everybody for himself'. Now you have to know 'who', who knows 'who', who is good buddy-buddies with 'who', so that [you] can move all the steps into there. Unfortunately some of us just don't believe in those things, where you have to go through 'who' and 'who'. [MK/SDU]

It's difficult to get into Shell House, it's like when you want to get to heaven, really ... The security promise to arrest you, they ask all these things ... [if] you do not have a label that you have been sent by a well known person in the movement, those at the top. Really, it's difficult. It's just like if you knock [at] heaven, and they say, 'It's not your time ... Go back', such things. I had forms with me, they tore them [up] in front of me.

You get comrades there who tell you, 'Hey we will call Mr. So-and-So'; I don't know whether he deals with security ... In Shell House you only go as far as the entrance door ... and when you come back [to your area] you will get red tape at the branch which you have to jump before your things can become recommendable. [MK/SDU]

These feelings go hand in hand with a sense amongst ex-combatants of being 'stuck' in the bygone era of the war. The following respondent suggests that this situation actually suits the leadership: ex-combatants can still be utilised for the organisation's political gain while those in leadership positions have long since acquired new priorities and no longer represent their interests.

We like the organisation, even today, but the time to eat politics is over. *Ja*, [at] that time the Thabo Mbekis were sacrificing, everybody was sacrificing, but today they do not eat politics, as maybe we are supposed to believe that we have to eat politics ... The time to eat politics has past comrades ... If I do not come through somebody, at Shell House my story will not be taken. That thing is killing the organisation ... Everybody has sacrificed.

[The] comrades in 1990, when they arrived [from exile] were leather [but] today they are fatty boom-boom: you see, they do not eat politics as maybe our leadership at branch level expect us to feed on politics. No comrades, it is time that now things be delivered. [MK/SDU]

"Forgotten' is an understatement, we have been wished away ..." Similarly, many ex-SADF soldiers who were thoroughly schooled in the ideologies of the old South Africa have a sense of being left behind from the rest of society, being relics of something now forgotten as a result of the politics they too were fed. On the SADF side of the coin though, these ways of thinking no longer suit anyone.

Frustration at the collective amnesia of broader society and those in power is strongly expressed by both main respondent groupings. There is a sense that everybody except the former soldiers is settling into the 'New' South Africa, ensuring that they get what they can out of it and conveniently forgetting the less palatable parts of their recent history that might make this more difficult. At the time the soldiers were encouraged by their communities to believe they were 'doing the right thing'. Suddenly though, it seems they did wrong. As one ex-SADF soldier put it:

If there are people I loathe above all, they are those who like remora fish on a shark owe their lives to the largesse of their host. They are quite happy to go along for the ride, but as soon as the shark gets caught, they gap it and latch on to the nearest one, leaving the erstwhile host to his fate ... The South Africans have joined the club of those who deny the fact that they supported a political system rightly or wrongly, that gave them an advantage over others, and they now decry the 'Racist Apartheid System', conveniently denying their past until reminded, and then they respond by tearing their clothes and heaping ashes upon themselves. I do not feel any guilt for any of the actions I took part in. What I did, I did in good faith, true to the ideals I was schooled in, and what I believed in at the time. It is not my fault; it is not anybody's, apart from the politicians, who do what they do for the citizens of whatever country. So don't berate yourselves, at the end of the day we are, and will always be, pawns, until somebody wakes up and decides 'Hell no!! This is Bullshit!' and decides to do something about it - and then gets seduced by power. ["AT"]

Similarly, an MK ex-combatant points to those black South Africans who doubted that political change would ever be realised, but who have nevertheless reaped the benefits of transition. He feels it is imperative for them to at least acknowledge those who sacrificed their own futures to fight for liberation.

These people who were pessimistic you know, 'What do they think? Do they think they can liberate this South Africa with petrol bombs and stones?' They were an elite group ... So we were just these naive South Africans who were so persistent, who told themselves, 'I'd rather die than just be a number that existed in South Africa, be part of statistics'. And after this is done, now they are fortunate: they have qualifications and certificates. They just springboard, they're being roped in through affirmative action and all other kinds of measures that are seeking to equate the scale ... We welcome that, it's just that even today, they have not thanked the very illiterate people; they are not inclined just to say, 'Let's bend backwards and swallow our pride' and say, 'But you see folks, when you did what you did we said you wouldn't do it, but you did it, and thanks to you, we have this now.' 'Forgotten' is an understatement; we have been wished away. It would be so different if it was like, 'No one will ever forget what you did'. [If] every time you go and sit in that flashy car, in that very comfortable office you [would] say thanks to someone, 'With my qualifications and everything, I would have been a doormat of someone, but today I can compete with whoever'. [MK/SDU]

The experiences of SADF and MK respondents overlap in a number of ways. Both made great sacrifices and both now ultimately feel betrayed. The following SADF interviewee draws specific attention to the commonality of the situation for soldiers on both sides:

It was a major disruption, those camps, I can't emphasise that enough ... By the same token, you must look at our opponents: they learnt some terrific skills but they didn't have the opportunities that I had, so I can't really bemoan my lot. But it's funny that those perhaps that weren't prepared to get involved were prepared to capitalise, on both sides. So isn't the moral of the story, sit back, be meek and mild don't fight for your rights, don't go to war.
[Parabat]

Ex-Thokoza SDUs and betrayal

In contrast to other respondent categories, betrayal did not emerge as a central theme in discussions with former members of Thokoza SDUs. A sense of incompleteness following the war, or a need for recompense for their roles in the war, is sometimes expressed.

The war is war and at the end of it we got nothing. The war just ended.
[Thokoza SDU]

But unlike for other respondents, responsibility for this deficiency is not located with an organisation or structure. This is likely because most Thokoza SDU respondents did not consider themselves to be fighting for an organisation or an ideal. Rather, most became directly involved in the conflict in response to the violence that was taking place around them, and the fundamental need for community protection.

[I fought] because my brothers and sisters were dying. [Thokoza SDU]

We were not fighting for the ANC, we were fighting to get our houses back.
[Thokoza SDU]

More than anything else, they perceive themselves to have been fighting for their communities, and in the present, do feel a certain amount of appreciation from community members.⁹ They also contemplated the end of the violence with fewer immediate expectations than many other ex-combatants. More often, it seems, feelings of resentment or betrayal have been generated in relation to initiatives aimed at ex-SDUs (or started by

SDUs themselves), which have taken place since the cessation of hostilities. In this context, numerous post-conflict expectations have been raised and dashed. The Kathorus Police Reservists Programme¹⁰ is one prominent example. Another respondent is perplexed at the apparent inefficacy of the Youth Commission.¹¹

Despite the fact that Thokoza SDU respondents do not generally articulate a sense of betrayal, the concerns of one respondent connect closely with the frustrations expressed by MK/SDU respondents. During the conflict this individual occupied a leadership position in one of the SDUs. He has since moved out of the community and has a job. Now, he is concerned that those who remain unemployed amongst his former colleagues feel betrayed by people who have 'made it'. A division between his former colleagues and himself has emerged.

Myself and other people are being perceived as people who led before and at this stage, I'm somewhere else, working. Now, if there is a problem [in the township] I wouldn't go [there] with that confidence that I used to go with before ... Other people who [were] leaders also ... cannot like go with that confidence to those people. I may phrase it as a betrayal to those people. I managed to get some employment for myself and I've left them behind ... I know it's actually haunting them that they're not working, and [for me] to come to them wearing shoes and whatever, they will see a big difference between myself and them ... It's something inside me that I must understand: one day if somebody says, 'I'm asking for R5.00', I must make sure that I don't say, 'I don't have [it]' because that could be a provocation in itself. That person [will think], 'Everyday this person goes to work, we were together on the battlefield, I'm only asking for R5.00'. [MK/ SDU]

Notes:

⁸ The Civil Co-operation Bureau (CCB) was a special unit of the SADF.

⁹ See section, Community Expectations, Perceptions and the Stigmatisation of Ex-combatants.

¹⁰ See also section, Violence and Crime, 'Processes to integrate armed forces -

compounding problems of militarisation?'

¹¹ See also comments regarding the Thokoza Monument in section, Revenge Violence, Former Enemies and Reconciliation.

Next section: [The SANDF Experience](#)

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As the wave of mayhem died down, residents formed cleaning crews and security watch teams to deal with the aftermath of what South African President Cyril Ramaphosa described as one of the worst instances of violence since the apartheid regime ended in the early 1990s. "How dare we allow this mall to be looted? That's why we're here," Nhla Nhlaous, local community leader, told RT in Johannesburg, describing the need for volunteers to patrol the streets. "We'd rather have our lives ended. We can't live on our knees." Others rushed to stock up with groceries and fuel, fearing that the looters might return. "We are not safe in South Africa. We don't know where to run," Tshepo Mabilo, an owner of a non-profit organization, said. It's very much devastating.

Wishing us Away: Challenges Facing Ex-Combatants in the New South Africa, Violence and Transition Series, Vol. 8. Track two vol. 12 nos. 1 and 2, SEPTEMBER 2003 5. Foreword. With the ending of minority rule and civil war in South Africa, government embarked on the ambitious project of integrating the apartheid defence force, the former homeland armies, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress. We hope that the research and this double edition of Track Two contribute to the efforts of government, veterans' associations, and others to enhance the social and economic conditions of former combatants, many of whom continue to experience great hardship.

The New Africa - Capitalist or Socialist? Marxism the Science of Change - Toussaint. Uganda - A Survey. This report provides an exploration of some key issues affecting ex-combatants in South Africa. It is based on a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups with former members of various armed groupings that participated in South Africa's recent conflict. The analysis is organised under six inter-related themes: 1. Betrayal. Not all ex-combatants are equally placed in relation to this context. As is evident in South Africa, many former fighters of the Liberation Movement presently occupy prominent positions in both government and the corporate world. These ex-combatants have certainly not 'disappeared' but, instead, play visible and fundamental roles in society. In my view ex-combatants from both sides have earnestly begun to explore their place in post-apartheid South Africa by revisiting the memories of their military experiences. They are breaking rank and telling their stories. And this paper seeks to understand why this is so. They would remain marginalized in the 'new' South Africa. Their sense of betrayal was exacerbated by the outcome of the war and negotiated settlement that, undoubtedly, devalued the experiences of SADF national servicemen. The silence imposed by the state was compounded by the veterans' own wish to forget. Official invisibility intensified individual amnesia. Under such circumstances, veterans tended to repress their traumatic memories so as not to admit recollections too painful to recall. in the 'new' South Africa. by Sasha Gear. *Violence and Transition Series, Vol. 8, 2002.* Not all ex-combatants are equally placed in relation to this context. As is evident in South Africa, many former fighters of the Liberation Movement presently occupy prominent positions in both government and the corporate world. These ex-combatants have certainly not 'disappeared' but, instead, play visible and fundamental roles in society. But this is by no means true for the majority of ex-combatants.