



SADF soldiers' silences: institutional, consensual and strategic

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This article treats silence as a collective phenomenon. Silence can be proscribed and enforced, socially conditioned and sanctioned, or voluntarily embraced. All forms were evident in the case of soldiers who served in the South African Defence Force (SADF). First, they acquiesced to an institutional silence imposed upon them regarding their role in waging a war in Angola/Namibia, as well as suppressing the struggle against apartheid. Secondly, SADF veterans were complicit in a self-imposed and consensual silence about human rights abuses following the country's democratisation. This was partly enabled by a 'pact of forgetting' struck by the political elites and leaderships of the statutory and non-statutory forces. Finally, SADF veterans have employed silence as a strategy of control; they have invoked their experiential knowledge of the 'Border War' to assert their authority to tell the 'truth', thereby constructing a narrative of the conflict that remains largely unchallenged in the public domain. Consciously or unconsciously, SADF soldiers contributed to the public construction of silence following the violence of the apartheid wars.

For the purposes of this article, silence will be regarded as a group or collective endeavour. As such, silence can be proscribed and enforced, socially conditioned and sanctioned, or voluntarily embraced. Thus, silence can involve different degrees of agency, or none at all, by the group concerned. Silence occupies a liminal space between both active and passive remembering and forgetting.

This article's point of departure is Harvard historian Jay Winter's (2010) introductory essay in Efrat Ben-Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio & Jay Winter (eds.), *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (2010). Winter identifies three types of silences, namely: liturgical, political/strategic, and essentialist. While acknowledging that Winter's typology is a useful starting point for reflecting upon the reasons for collective silences in a century punctuated by war and conflict, the case studies compiled in the volume suggests that it does not account for all manifestations of silence during and after wars. It is also worth noting that there is some slippage between these forms of silence.

This article argues that soldiers of the South African Defence Force (SADF), who participated in the 'Border War', were subject and/or party to three types of silence.¹ First, they acquiesced to an institutional silence imposed upon them regarding their role in waging a war in Angola/Namibia, as well as suppressing the struggle against apartheid. Secondly, SADF veterans were complicit in a self-imposed and consensual silence about human rights abuses following the country's democratisation. This was partly enabled by a 'pact of forgetting' struck by the political elites and leaderships of the statutory and non-statutory forces.² Finally, SADF veterans have employed silence as a strategy of control; they have invoked their experiential knowledge of the 'Border War' to assert their authority to tell the 'truth', thereby constructing a narrative that remains largely unchallenged in the public domain.

The article investigates the nature of each of these silences, in turn. But this does not imply that there is no overlap between these types of silences.

1. SADF secrecy and institutional silence

During their national service, SADF soldiers were sworn to silence regarding the composition, movements or disposition of the country's armed forces. Such

1 The 'Border War' (or *Grensoorlog*) is the label most commonly applied to the deployment of South Africa's security forces in Namibia and Angola between 1966 and 1989. For an elaboration of the nomenclature, see Baines (2014: 1-4). For a military history of the conflict, see Scholtz 2013.

2 The statutory forces refer to the SADF and the armies of the former 'homelands', whereas non-statutory forces refer to the armed wings of the liberation movements.

practices are standard in armed forces. However, in the case of South Africa, these practices were compounded by extensive censorship and secrecy. Coupled with the Official Secrets Act (1956), the Defence Act (1957) effectively forbade unauthorised disclosures relating to the SADF.³ Section 118(4) of the (amended) Defence Act (1967) rendered it an offence for a person to disclose any secret or confidential information relating to the defence of the country that came to his/her knowledge by reason of his/her membership of the SADF or employment in the public service (Satchwell 1989: 46-8). The provisions of this legislation applied not only to civil servants and national servicemen, but also to the press. Thus, South African newspapers were permitted to publish little besides the most innocuous information about the SADF without official sanction. Accordingly, news of the SADF's invasion of Angola in 1975 was suppressed, even though it was widely reported in the rest of the world (Addison 1980).

In terms of the Defence Act, the deployment of non-voluntary South African troops beyond national borders required parliamentary sanction. Although those who participated in Operation Savannah were supposed to be volunteers, if instruction was given by the Minister of Defence to recruit volunteers from the ranks, it was ignored.⁴ During their brief, the troops might well have been told that they were not compelled to join the task force heading 'north'. But, even if they had, nobody wanted to be seen to be missing an opportunity for some 'real action'. According to testimonies, the peer pressure to be part of the 'adventure' was immense.⁵ The troops were made to sign a declaration that forbade them to disclose any details about the operation in which they were involved. While the government attempted to prevent local newspaper editors from publishing information that did not emanate from official sources, the story was broken by the international media. After the invasion was aborted, the authorities took measures to effect damage control. These included an amendment to the Defence Act in January 1976 to provide for the deployment of conscripts outside the borders of the Republic, if the State President deemed there to be a threat to the security of the country, which was applied retroactively to August 1975 (Seegers 1996: 212, Warwick 2012: 382, 396 note 198). However, neither the code

3 The Protection of Information Act (1982) repealed the Official Secrets Act (modelled on UK legislation).

4 Operation Savannah was the codename given to the SADF invasion of Angola.

5 For a related project, I interviewed four SADF members captured during Operation Savannah. They were: Robert Wilson in Bloemfontein, 14 November 2012; Graham Danney in Johannesburg, 5 December 2012; Andre Potgieter in Johannesburg, 3 November 2013, and Piet Groenewald, Riviersonderend, 1 February 2014. All were national servicemen. Wilson and Danney were mechanics and have no recollection of having been given a choice as to whether or not they wished to accompany the task force into Angola. The latter were mobilised later in a support capacity. For more details of this saga, see Baines (2014: 51-71).

of silence to which soldiers were subject, nor the news 'blackout' in South Africa managed to ensure the secrecy of Operation Savannah.

The National Party (NP) government and the SADF established a pattern of dealing with the public that did not inspire trust. The military authorities did not take the soldiers or their families into their confidence and disclosed information about military matters only on a need-to-know basis. Again, this was in keeping with the code of professional armies throughout the world. However, the SADF was 'economical' with the truth. For instance, it repeatedly failed to disclose accurate information about the number and nature of South Africa's (often self-inflicted) casualties. Stories released to, and published by the media were often contrived versions of what had actually caused the deaths of servicemen (Thompson 2006: 149). This was compounded by the SADF's reluctance to disclose the circumstances of soldiers' deaths to their next of kin (Steenkamp 1989: 29). Even the troops themselves were seldom informed about the strategic objectives of military operations in which they were involved. For instance, troops were not briefed beforehand when they were bound for Angola, and officers were instructed not to divulge the enemy's logistical and numerical superiority to their own troops at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale (Holt 2005: 122, 137). This might have made military sense, but it undermined morale.

The South African government repeatedly refused to divulge information about the extent of its military operations in Namibia and Angola, as well as its 'dirty tricks' and destabilisation of the frontline states.⁶ The disjuncture between official statements and public knowledge created a credibility gap that was evident not only to informed observers, but also to the SADF soldiers on the ground. The story of SADF troops in Angola listening with incredulity to broadcasts of statements by a government spokesperson, who denied their presence in that country, has become part of the lore of the 'Border War'.⁷ While some chose to believe the official li(n)e, others were understandably sceptical of SADF statements and press releases that spun a web of disinformation.

The apartheid state restricted access to information in the name of national security, while disinformation and propaganda was fed to a gullible public. The SADF had its own mouthpiece in the magazine *Paratus*, but the government also used slush funds to establish front organisations that published newspapers

6 Destabilisation included clandestine operations by SADF units and state security agents such as the Civil Co-operation Bureau against the liberation movements operating from the frontline states. There is a fairly extensive literature on the topic. See, for instance, Brittain 1988, Hanlon 1986, Johnson and Martin 1986.

7 Versions of this story have featured in numerous memoirs, as well as novels. See, for instance, Behr (1995: 82-3).

such as *The Citizen* and periodicals like *To the Point* in order to propagate its agenda. The mainstream media – the Afrikaans and English press, as well as the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which monopolized radio and television broadcasts – lent their unqualified support to the SADF as the guarantor of security and stability in the country, but was uncertain or ambivalent as to the legitimacy of its operations in Angola/Namibia. In order to compensate, the SADF attempted to win over local media by inviting carefully vetted (photo-) journalists and military correspondents to visit SADF units in the operational area. These journalists were effectively ‘embedded’. The apartheid regime believed that unrestricted media coverage of war could undermine public support for the war effort, as had been the case in Vietnam.⁸ In fact, South African censorship fuelled rumour-mongering and undermined civilian morale and support for the fighting in Angola/Namibia (Baines 2008a: 10).

In certain cases, SADF military units or sections shared incriminating knowledge. Sometimes this may have resulted in a conspiracy of silence; connivance to keep the lid on a secret shared by participants in specific operations. Such charges have been levelled against the paratroopers who participated in Operation Reindeer, the attack on Cassinga on 4 May 1978. They reject with contempt the accusation that Cassinga was a ‘massacre’ and that they are ‘mass murderers’. Like the members of Reserve Police Battalion 101, who slaughtered Jews in Poland during World War Two, the SADF paratroopers collectively crafted a set of rationalising narratives to justify their conduct (Browning 1992). They were able to make recourse to arguments about the fine line between sanctioned violence in battle and war crimes. In the face of charges of excessive violence perpetrated against innocent civilians, they rehearsed a story that has remained intact for over thirty-five years. Thus, the paratroopers’ narrative represents a consensual in-group version of events, rather than a silence enforced by the erstwhile political and military elites of the apartheid regime.⁹ It is as much about loyalty to comrades in arms as it is about loyalty to the institution of the SADF.

The legal strictures that obliged SADF veterans to maintain their silence remained in place until after the advent of democracy. The New Defence Act 42 of 2002 repealed most of the provisions – including section 118 – of the Defence Act 44 of 1957.¹⁰ The initial caution exercised by former soldiers in telling and

8 On 30 January 1976, Prime Minister B J Vorster stated in Parliament: “... America lost the war in Vietnam because inter alia the press was too much involved with that war” (*Hansard* 30 January 1976, column 374).

9 There is some dissent regarding the details, but not the broad contours of the story. See Baines (2014: 89–104).

10 The schedule to Chapter 106 of the New Defence Act lists the battery of laws repealed. It would be

publishing stories about their experiences in the SADF during the transition years is understandable, given the uncertainty as to whether or not they were still bound by the declarations they had signed while in uniform. However, I would suggest that it was primarily veterans' loyalty to the SADF as an institution that explains their silence. Their loyalty to the SADF outlasted the demise of apartheid and the formation of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF).¹¹ This was not necessarily the case with the other branches of the security forces such as the South African Police (SAP) (Payne 2008: 194). This might suggest that many – perhaps the majority of – conscripts and permanent-force members served the SADF without regarding it as an institution tainted by politics.

2. Stigmatized knowledge and consensual silence

As noted earlier, the veil of silence constructed about security matters by the apartheid state survived the political transition. It was reinforced by what Gear (2002) has dubbed “the silence of stigmatized knowledge”. This was knowledge borne by SADF veterans (and ex-combatants from the non-statutory forces) who felt compelled to keep certain sensitive information to themselves for fear of alienating the public, their own families and their friends. The post-apartheid discourse of reconciliation made it difficult to talk frankly about acts of violence committed against the very enemy that was now part of the government. This suppression of knowledge was also due to a fear of being held accountable for human rights abuses by the new regime. Paradoxically, then, silence was caused partly by the unwillingness of SADF veterans to speak about war experiences they were unable to forget.

The stigmatization of knowledge is partly a consequence of a sense of guilt and/or shame about the violations of victims' rights in the past. Whereas guilt stems from a tendency of perpetrators to deny culpability for violence inflicted upon others, shame springs from the embarrassment or humiliation caused by the publicity of such an act. In both instances, silence serves as a form of protection and, consequently, obstructs atonement. Public figures made some high-profile confessions, but the majority of SADF veterans remained silent or shared their stories in private spaces.¹² Individuals carried silent knowledge, but it implicated many SADF veterans. I have argued elsewhere that a taboo or, at

tiresome to list these in this article. Suffice it to say, it repealed the entire Defence Act 44 of 1957, save for sections 104, 105, 106, 108, 109, 111 and 112. Readers may consult <http://www.dod.mil.za/documents/acts/New%20Defence%20Act%2042%20of%202002.pdf>.

11 The SANDF was created in 1994 by amalgamating members of the statutory and non-statutory forces from the apartheid era.

12 The author Mark Behr springs to mind. See Baines (2008b: 9).

least, a relative silence occasioned partly by “political correctness” was apparent during the transitional period (Baines 2008a).

The success of South Africa’s settlement depended as much on the high-profile negotiations between the NP and the ANC in the World Trade Centre, Kempton Park, as it did on secret meetings between former adversaries in back rooms away from the glare of publicity. Deals were struck behind the scenes so as to avert a military coup by the old guard and defuse the threat posed by the right wing. While this was not exactly a conspiracy among the brokers of the peace, a ‘pact of forgetting’ was effectively negotiated between political and military elites of both the old and the new orders.¹³ This was, in some respects, at odds with the memory work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that occurred in very public spaces.

A group of retired and serving SADF generals held meetings with TRC representatives to clarify whether any amnesty the TRC granted for violations of human rights in neighbouring states would still apply in international law. When it became evident that amnesty granted by the TRC was not valid in international law, and that crimes that came to light in TRC hearings might lead to prosecution in the courts of sovereign states, the generals refused to apply for amnesty and distanced themselves from the TRC (TRC 1998c: 185). This was unnecessary, as the leadership of the ANC’s armed wing, Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), also favoured a general amnesty. In fact, there never was any intention of staging a Nuremberg-style tribunal and hold perpetrators of human rights abuses accountable in terms of international law (Frankel 2000: 23-4). So, whether offences were committed in South Africa or its neighbouring states, the chances of being prosecuted for human rights violations were slim. This was because the TRC had no powers to prosecute offenders and could only refer cases in which full disclosure was not made or acts were not politically motivated to the courts. And because the TRC was part and parcel of the South African legal process, its ambit did not extend to contraventions of international law.

Members of the SADF were also discouraged by a coterie of generals from making individual applications to the TRC, and were encouraged to use the nodal point set up by the SANDF to process any applications to the TRC’s Amnesty

13 This term is borrowed from the literature on Spain where amnesty and amnesia characterised the transition from the repressive Franco regime to democratisation. The “pact of forgetting” was reversed by the 2007 Law of Historical Memory. See Vincent 2010 and Encarnacion 2014. Cf. Frankel 2000 and Cruywagen 2014 for insights into South Africa’s negotiated settlement brokered by elite pact making.

Committee.¹⁴ However, the fact that few applications were received¹⁵ led the compilers of the TRC Report to note: “the Commission gained the impression that the nodal point acted as a gate-keeper rather than facilitator for amnesty applications” (TRC 1998c: 186). Conscripts who acted independently of the gatekeepers and admitted culpability for human rights abuses were summarily dismissed as sympathy seekers or outright liars by the generals and their apologists.¹⁶ Their disclosures broke the SADF’s institutional code of silence, as well as the more pervasive consensual silence about war crimes.

Subsequently, a clique of retired generals formed a contact bureau to protect the interests of former SADF members and liaise with the TRC and government bodies. In October 1996, the bureau produced a document, *The military in a political arena: the South African Defence Force and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, stating its position with respect to the role of the SADF in the previous dispensation. Amongst other things, it insisted that the SADF acted at the behest of the government of the day to ensure the security and stability of the country and thus did not have a political agenda (Hamann 2001: 130). The ex-generals were convinced that the TRC was biased against the SADF and predisposed to finding it guilty of misconduct. They declined to take responsibility for their acts of commission and omission. Not surprisingly, the submission was subjected to considerable criticism, including rebuttals by certain TRC commissioners.

Under the circumstances, SADF veterans felt ill at ease about appearing on a public platform to confirm that they had perpetrated illegal deeds in defence of

14 Notwithstanding the co-operative posturing of the former SADF members of the nodal point, its establishment, in fact, served to undermine the workings of the TRC. The Act that governed the TRC’s work specified that amnesty applicants could only qualify for amnesty if they met four specific conditions, namely that they applied in their individual capacity for acts they themselves committed; their actions were political rather than criminal in nature; they made a full disclosure of all the facts, and they acted under orders rather than in their individual capacity. Screening of individuals’ amnesty applications meant that the spirit of this undertaking was being called into question.

15 According to the TRC Report, there were 31 SADF applicants for gross human rights violations committed in South Africa, but each of these was already on their records or in the public domain. There were five applications for violations committed outside of South Africa, despite uncorroborated reports of large numbers of violations (TRC 1998c: 183). Elsewhere, the Report records one human rights violations submission and 13 amnesty applications for offences committed by SADF soldiers in Namibia (TRC 1998a: 76).

16 Only two conscripts applied for amnesty. Sean Mark Callaghan applied for and was refused amnesty for acts of omission regarding his role while attached to a Koevoet unit during 1983. Kevin Hall was granted amnesty for his role in killings as part of a unit on patrol during the mid-1970s. The latter admitted to having executed captured SWAPO combatants (TRC 1998a: 105-6). Their testimony was carefully scrutinised and rebutted by the Contact Bureau’s commentary on the TRC Report. This has been reproduced as Appendix A in Malan (2006: 463-5) and in Hamann (2001: 221-3).

apartheid. Thus, very few testified before the TRC, and even fewer confessed to committing acts of gratuitous violence or atrocities while performing their duties, and those that did so were mindful not to implicate others. Journalist Karen Whitty (2005) explained ex-conscripts' reluctance to testify in the following terms: "Bound by a sense of honour to their fellow troops, and the patriarchy still espoused by white South Africa, few men have come forward and spoken about their experiences, however barbaric and mundane, in South Africa's border wars".

The few who did testify probably did so out of a sense of guilt stemming from searching their own consciences rather than for fear of the legal ramifications. There was little compunction for SADF veterans to confess to human rights abuses when an unwritten agreement by former enemies cemented a consensual silence pertaining to atrocities committed by both sides. The TRC may not have offered a blanket amnesty to perpetrators, but it did little to counter the culture of impunity.

Former SADF chief, General Constand Viljoen, appeared before the TRC to apply for amnesty for involvement in a pre-election plot to establish a *volkstaat* by means of force. It became apparent that Viljoen favoured a general amnesty for the commanders and 'foot soldiers' of both the security forces and the liberation movements. In a subsequent submission to a TRC Special Hearing, he declared that both sides committed "indefensible actions". He implored the former adversaries to recognize that they had "dirty hands" (Cruywagen 2014: 73). This, in turn, implied that they should share responsibility for human rights violations and not play the 'blame game'. He appealed that the TRC should not rake over the coals of the past, as this would intensify divisions rather than promote reconciliation and national unity. In the face of cross-questioning, Viljoen denied any knowledge of a 'third force', but was not pressed further on matters relating to the conduct of the SADF (SABC 1997). However, he did defend "the righteousness" of the SADF's conduct in a paper titled *The honourable actions of our soldiers* (Viljoen *s a*).

Viljoen's biographer does not explore his ambivalence towards the TRC.¹⁷ While his Freedom Front did not recognise the TRC's bona fides, he acknowledged its reality and testified before it. He was prepared to seek amnesty for right-wingers who participated in politically motivated violence, but would not deign to defend the conduct of the SADF before the TRC. According to the TRC Report, Viljoen declined an invitation to attend the TRC's special hearing on conscripts, insisting that his presence would only give legitimacy to a "one-sided programme which did not analyse the past honestly" (TRC 1998b: 222). The Report disputes

17 There are only two references to the TRC (Cruywagen 2014: 73, 212) and the author collapses the amnesty application and special hearings.

the claim made in the SANDF submission to the TRC that “no serving or retired members of the SADF or SANDF (with the exception of General Viljoen) were invited to attend or provide information for the hearing”, or that the TRC “only heard one side of the subject” (TRC 1998b: 222). The TRC Report held that this statement was factually incorrect, providing examples of correspondence with the SANDF’s nodal point for liaising with the body. It also pointed out that three participants in the special hearing were either current serving members of the SANDF or retired members of the SADF (TRC 1998b: 224, footnote 3).

Former chief of the SADF and later Minister of Defence, Magnus Malan, adopted a rather different approach. He took it upon himself to testify 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. This was tantamount to claiming omniscience or, at the very least, a superior understanding of the situation in southern Africa to that of rank-and-file soldiers. While Malan no doubt had a vantage point on account of his membership of the State Security Council, the inner circle in P W Botha’s NP government, his memoir suggests that his hindsight has many blind spots and it is no *mea culpa*. Indeed, it is entirely devoid of critical self-reflection and repeats the platitudes of the apartheid regime’s threat perceptions and ‘total onslaught’ ideology. It is a self-serving attempt to salvage his own reputation and exonerate the SADF for the human rights abuses committed by the army and other state agencies.¹⁸

The state subsequently brought charges against Malan for murder arising from Operation Marion, specifically for the attack by SADF-trained Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) assassins on ANC supporters in KwaMakutha in 1985. The former general insisted that the TRC was intent on finding evidence to incriminate him and his SADF colleagues for atrocities and war crimes. Malan (2006: 387) opined that “[t]here was no indication that the training they received on returning from Caprivi was of an offensive nature, or that it was aimed at unlawful operations”. He insisted that he had never authorised any member of the SADF to kill political opponents of the government, but conceded that innocent civilians had been caught in the crossfire (Welsh 2009: 410). He felt vindicated by the verdict of the KwaZulu-Natal Supreme Court that acquitted him and 19 other SADF generals of the charges. The one and only opportunity to hold senior politicians and security force officers accountable for crimes committed under apartheid was bungled or sabotaged (Barron 2013). And so, the trial proved to be a travesty of justice.

18 For an elaboration of this argument, see my review (Baines 2009). See also Barron 2011.

Following the court case, Malan was recalled by the TRC to testify on the KwaMakutha killings in December 1997. This reinforced his suspicion that the TRC had made up its (collective) mind about his guilt and was intent on arriving at such a conclusion, irrespective of the findings of the court. Malan attributes TRC bias to its councillors' preconceived view that the SADF – not the ANC – were the transgressors in the conflict and the chief perpetrators of human rights abuses (Malan 2006: 417). In fact, the TRC declared both the ANC and the SADF “perpetrator organizations” (Mamdani 2002: 35), or “institutional perpetrators” (Borer 2003: 1102).¹⁹ This does not imply that all members of these organisations were perpetrators, although the TRC was firm on holding the upper echelons accountable for the actions of foot soldiers. Its Report stated unequivocally that those at the top of the chain of command bore responsibility for gross human rights violations by subordinates (Borer 2003: 1120). It also noted that neither the statutory nor the non-statutory forces could claim a monopoly on having fought a ‘just war’.

The working of the TRC was premised upon the belief that a restorative rather than retributive model of transitional justice would best serve the goals of reconciliation and nation-building in South Africa. But the (conditional) amnesty offered by the TRC to perpetrators of human rights violations did mean that the pursuit of justice was compromised, and that the culture of impunity prevailed. Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to assess whether or not the TRC has proved efficacious. Still, it could be argued that the consensual silence that prevailed about the misconduct of armed formations created a climate conducive to reconciliation. Equally, it could be argued that the country's specific conditions necessitated a modicum of forgetting, in order to achieve a stable and legitimate democracy in the aftermath of acts of violence committed by the signatories to the peace settlement. There is a thin line between silence and forgetting.

3. Witness authority and strategic silence

The passage of 25 or so years since the end of the conflict in Angola/Namibia has witnessed a willingness of former combatants to re-engage with the erstwhile enemy about the country's painful past, and enabled some veterans to come to terms with the memories of – their sometimes traumatic – experiences. Consequently, a number of SADF veterans have written memoirs about their experiences in uniform, and about the ‘Border War, in particular. No sooner had I suggested that veterans had been silenced by a combination of political correctness and self-imposed restraints (Baines 2008a) than the floodgates

19 The Report lists the SADF as the fourth ‘perpetrator organisation’, trailing the IFP, SAP and ANC.

opened and the pent-up stories grew from a trickle to a stream. Like Sebald (2004), who reckoned that German writers failed to engage with the issues of suffering and trauma after World War II, I probably overstated my argument that ex-conscripts were caught up in a cycle of guilt and shame that made them reluctant to tell their stories. If such a taboo ever existed, it has been overturned. Indeed, the subject of the war has become commonplace in artistic, literary, dramatic and visual representations. The internet and other social media have provided SADF veterans with a means with which to parade their profiles and (re) construct their life histories for public consumption.

While institutional and consensual silences have been somewhat eroded since 1994, SADF veterans – especially retired generals – have asserted their prerogative to represent their military records on their own terms. If their earlier writings were characterised by a lack of remorse for the injustices of the past, their recent writings seem intent on vindicating the role of the SADF in the 'Border War'.

This trend is exemplified by a collection of writings compiled by former SADF chief General Jannie Geldenhuys published in Afrikaans as *Ons was daar* and translated into English as *We were there*. The title of this volume would seem to imply that participation is a prerequisite for providing an authoritative account of the 'Border War'. It amounts to an assertion of authority based on experience in the conflict, of knowledge derived from being on the battlefield. In his preface, Geldenhuys (2012: 16) calls the contributors to the volume "real-life participants" who "relate the real history of the war". They would appear to believe that they alone are qualified to write about their combat and other experiences of the 'Border War', because they "were there". This perspective privileges first-hand experience above other forms of knowledge. It amounts to claiming a unique and, at some level, unquestionable right to truth-telling about war.

The historian Joan Scott questioned the view that "truth" in first-hand accounts of war (or any other type of experience, for that matter) constructs itself outside discourse, without cultural mediation. She argues that individuality itself, as well as the means of narrating it and its experience, have always been produced through discourse. She further contends that "it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (Scott 1991: 777-9). And Jay Winter (2010: 8) has argued that "experience is much more fruitfully defined as a set of events whose character changes when there are changes [...] in the subject position of the person or group which had shared those events". In other words, lived experience, including combat, is culturally and socially constructed.

The privileging of experiential knowledge by war veterans at the expense of other forms of (historical) knowledge amounts to silencing commentators and

armchair critics. But Winter (2010: 8) notes that “[r]elegating the rest of us to silence must be seen as a strategy of control, of cutting off debate, of ad hominem assertions of a kind unworthy of serious reflection”. The soldier-authors who contributed to *We were there* employ exactly this strategy; they invoke their authority to stop others from speaking.

The soldier’s mantra is that only those with prior knowledge of war are capable of understanding what he has experienced or witnessed. US Army Captain Mike Barno offers a typical recent statement of this position in an entry in his blog:

I don't enjoy having conversations about Afghanistan with people who haven't been there. It is not that I don't want to share or help others understand the conflict or my experiences. My issue is that the stories I truly want people to understand are so visceral that words rarely do them justice. Especially when my words fall upon ears that don't already have some basic connection to this conflict: the ears of someone who has never served in the armed forces, who has no relatives who have been to Afghanistan, who couldn't find Afghanistan on a map.²⁰

Substitute Angola for Afghanistan and Barno’s statement might have been made by a SADF soldier. Like their counterparts from other recent wars, SADF veterans reckon that their experience affords them a privileged understanding of combat. Accordingly, they have asserted their right to tell their stories from their perspective as participants. The corollary is that the uninitiated and scholars conducting research in the rarefied atmosphere of the ivory tower are dismissed with the rhetorical question: “How can you understand? ... You were not there ...”.²¹

Harari’s (2008) study of military memoirs reveals that the ideal of first-hand experience, or what he calls “flesh-witnessing”, became a potent new source of authority during the post-Napoleonic era. Military experience, especially combat, was invested with privileged knowledge. Harari (2008) notes that two stock expressions repeat themselves in nineteenth-century memoirs: “it is impossible to describe it” and “you had to undergo the experience yourself in order to understand it”. These formulae posit a fundamental difference between flesh-witnessing and eye-witnessing. According to Harari (2008), the knowledge gained through eye-witnessing and scientific observation is factual, and can be quite easily transmitted to other people. By contrast, a flesh-witness can never

20 Barno is a dentist who completed a twelve-month deployment in eastern Afghanistan with the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 25th Infantry Division, based at Forward Operating Base Fenty in Jalalabad. Thus, he was not an active participant in operations, but treated casualties.

21 Such phrases are repeated ad nauseum on the Facebook page for Grensoorlog/Border War 1966-1989 group, <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=103819570796>>, and other social media forums.

really transmit his/her knowledge to other people; s/he cannot really describe what s/he witnesses, and the audience cannot really understand. Harari (2008: 7-8) adds that the differentiation between eye-witnessing and flesh-witnessing is doubly important in today's highly mediated world, when so many people eyewitness war via live television broadcasts, without ever flesh-witnessing it.

Harari (2008: 125) demonstrates that the common soldier gained a new elevated status, because he had as much "experiential authority" concerning the body in combat as did his commanders. Accounts by junior officers and enlisted men, rather than high-ranking officers, were among the chief vehicles that caused Western war culture's reorientation towards experiential knowledge. They reinterpreted war as a "sublime revelation" (Harari 2008: 193). Romanticism emphasised 'sublime' experiences as privileged sources for knowledge and authority, and war experience fitted perfectly with the Romantic notion of the sublime. Combat was depicted as a quasi-mystical experience of revelation. To be clear as to what Harari means by this, one should remember that revelation indicates only a method of gaining knowledge, and has no essential connection with religion (Harari 2008: 22). The experience of war was tantamount to a secular revelation that taught soldiers life's lessons. This is captured by the phrase 'baptism of fire' which references a religious ritual to describe initiation into combat.

Harari (2008) holds that the quintessential late modern western war story describes war as an experience of learning the truth about oneself and about the world. The hero of the story is most often an ignorant youth whom war turns into a wise veteran; thus, a typical rite of passage story or Bildungsroman. What is it about war that teaches wisdom? Most late modern veterans point to the extreme bodily conditions of war: hunger, cold, exhaustion, injury, the presence of death – the exhilarating adrenalin rush of combat and occasionally the thrill of killing. Pushed to its limits, the soldier's body is subjected to physical endurance and pain that tests the will to survive. Eschewing the rationalist authority of logical thinking, and the scientific authority of objective eye-witnessing, veterans lay claim to the visceral authority of 'flesh-witnessing'. They are neither thinkers nor mere eyewitnesses. Rather, they are men (and occasionally women) who have acquired knowledge with their flesh (Harari 2008: 7). Although Harari's explanation of the higher regard for the common soldier might well overstate the valorisation of the bodily experience, there is little doubt that the typical twentieth-century war memoirist is inclined to assert his testimony as direct knowledge of past events or as an authority to which historical narratives must in some sense be answerable (Lynn 2009: 708-10).

Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker reckon that it became very difficult for historians to contradict, let alone question, testimony from First World War combatants as a large volume of first-person accounts appeared in print after the conflict. They contend that “the soldiers set themselves up as historians of their own experience, reacting against and wanting to correct the distortions and misperceptions in the home front’s view of them”. They assert that: “... veterans, who obviously had the incontestable status of witness to the war experience, also gave themselves the status of historians with the exclusive right to talk about the experience” (Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker 2000: 38).

They contend that a campaign to challenge the authority of the historian commenced with the Great War and amounts to a kind of “tyranny of the witness”. They advocate that historians should free themselves from this tyranny and not surrender their autonomy. They argue that experience alone does not entitle soldiers to speak about war or, conversely, disqualify anyone without first-hand knowledge from doing so. Accordingly, we must reject the idea of a closed circle of understanding and truth.

In his discussion of Great War memoirs, Harman (2001: 11) notes that “narratives exist as discourse rather than lived experience, [and they] can never bring us to a full understanding of war ...”. As language is unequal to the task of describing warfare, there exists a gap between life and literature (Harman 2001: 12). War veteran and scholar Hynes (1998: 16), who champions the soldiers’ voice in *The soldiers’ tale*, reminds us that personal narratives are not history, and that comprehensive knowledge of an historical event – especially of one as complex as war – is beyond the subjective experience of any one person. Keegan (2001: 48) points out that the ordinary soldier’s battle is a microcosm of the war offering a limited or keyhole perspective on the overall situation. This is not to argue that his experience is any less valid than his commanding officer, but to suggest that the view from the foxhole is different from that of the operations room. It is also worth bearing in mind that each participant and/or witness makes their own truth claims; that truth is compromised by the very nature and limitations of language, and that language is an inadequate and arbitrary means of communicating the ineffable (Hynes 1998: 25). Indeed, no account of war, however faithful to factual events, can enable the reader to live the (physical) experience of war. At best, a text may achieve verisimilitude, the appearance of being real or true. Social constructivism challenges the view that narratives are capable of rendering ‘ultimate truth’. Narrative provides internal meaning, an emotional or experiential truth about war. For the memoirist, the experience of the past is different from that of the historian; it belongs to a different order or mode of experience (Oakeshott 1966).

Memoirs and history, then, are distinct discourses about the past. The former work towards bridging the gap between lived experience and its historical transcription. They complement historical accounts and bring valuable personal insights to bear on the experience of war. They add another dimension to the reader's understanding thereof. But they also suffer from an inherent weakness, namely a loss of overall perspective due to an intense focus on the singular lived experience. Memoirs that examine the minutiae of historical experience from the vantage point of the individual soldier often lose sight of the bigger picture or the overall context that frames and gives meaning to the soldier's conduct during war. SADF memoirs add important personal insights to, but are inadequately situated within a wider socio-political context of the 'Border War'.

War memoirs have all the trappings of historical narratives. They tend to emulate the rhetoric of historical argument in their explication and defence, but are categorically distinct. They appeal to affective values, whereas histories are bound by the rules of the discipline or certain epistemic values (O'Dwyer 2010: 150, 164). And yet, testimony seems to be accorded a special epistemic privilege in our common understanding of the past. But should this be the case? Why should a war veteran's testimony be taken at face value, whereas a witness in a court of law is subjected to rigorous cross-examination? Is personal memory not merely one source of knowledge of the past that is in need of corroboration by other sources? Should it be subject to the norms of historical inquiry? Held to the same evaluative standards as historical writing? First-hand testimony is undoubtedly valuable to reconstructing the past, but "no narrative form has exclusive claim to interpreting [this] war, or any war, in its myriad representations" (Smith 2001: 260).

Accordingly, we must subject what veterans write to historical scrutiny. For veterans represent, and are represented through, experience on the battlefield in historically specific circumstances which historians should attempt to understand and analyse. We must reject claims by the authors such as contributors to *We were there* to having the 'last word' and so silencing other voices. We are bound to create space for all those involved to tell their stories, to encourage a multiplicity of narratives and counter-narratives.

4. Conclusion

Collective silences occur when certain subjects are legally prohibited or regarded as taboo; guilt and/or shame make certain subjects personally overwhelming or politically embarrassing; social and political contracts between elites conspire to systematically erase and suppress memories of past human rights violations so that they do not trouble the present, and the voices of a privileged group deny the right of others to speak.

In my view, the silence of SADF soldiers can be attributed to the suppression of knowledge by the apartheid state and the loyalty of veterans to the SADF and former comrades; the fear of being held accountable for human rights abuses by the new regime – although this likelihood evaporated once conditional amnesty was agreed upon and the state failed to prosecute Malan, and a period of 15 years or so for those who were traumatised to begin to come to terms with their experiences. I reckon that the breaking of the silence can be partly ascribed to the ageing process of veterans whose own children have reached conscript age and might be asking questions about the experiences of the national service generation. Such veterans have no wish to go to the grave without having told their stories – even if it is only to family members in an informal fashion (rather than, say, writing a memoir). Silence is seldom, if ever, absolute and permanent.

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