

LESSONS FROM THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN WARS: A COUNTERINSURGENCY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

With the war in Afganistan still going strong, there is a considerable interest in the military profession for insight into counterinsurgency war. This article argues that the five Southern African counterinsurgency wars – the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), the Portuguese colonial wars (1960-1974), the Rhodesian War (1965-1980), the Border War in Namibia (1968-1989) and the South African war against the ANC/SACP are valid illustrations of some of the rules being analysed in military literature nowadays. Mainly three lessons come out very strongly. One is the fact that counterinsurgency warfare is not about destroying an enemy army on the battlefield, but a struggle for the hearts and minds of the local population. The other is the role played by space – the smaller the geographical area to which the counterinsurgent can confine the insurgent, the better the chances for success. Last but not least, no counterinsurgency war can be truly won militarily. Politics will always be the deciding factor.

1. INTRODUCTION

The dramatic events of 9/11, when three hijacked American passenger aircraft with Muslim terrorists behind the controls crashed into the American Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon outside Washington DC with great loss of life, brought about a big renaissance in military and academic circles' interest in the phenomenon of terrorism. The subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the successful conventional American-British invasions were followed by protracted guerrilla wars, complemented the focus on terror with attention for insurgency and counter-insurgency war.

Especially in America it meant a renewal of the interest in counterinsurgency conflicts. This country developed considerable experience in the Vietnam War in this kind of conflict, but deliberately allowed it to go to pieces after the war. The lesson the American military – wrongly, as it turned out – drew from this war, was that it was not a guerrilla or insurgency war, but a conventional conflict.² The result was that they concentrated on mobile conventional operations, an approach which

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2 Cf. Harry G Summers Jr, *On strategy. The Vietnam war in context* (Pennsylvania, 1982); John A Nagl, *Learning to eat soup with a knife* (Chicago, 2006); Andrew F Krepinevich, *The army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, 1988).

was, in itself, followed with great success in the Gulf War of 1991 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003.³

It also meant that the Americans – like the British in the Anglo-Boer War in 1900 – were intellectually and in terms of military doctrine caught completely off-guard when the conventional struggle turned into a guerrilla war. It needed the considerable energy of one of the greatest intellectuals in the US Defence Force, Lieutenant General (later General) Dr David Petraeus as Commandant of the American Army's Combined Arms Centre at Fort Leavenworth to turn it around. Under his direction a new field manual on counterinsurgency was written, which became the foundation of a new approach in Iraq as well as Afghanistan.⁴

Of course, Southern Africa has had its share of guerrilla and insurgency wars. The Anglo-Boer War was one of the most prominent ones, as was the later Border War in Namibia, but the ANC's struggle against the National Party government in South Africa, the Rhodesian Bush War and the wars in the Portuguese African territories are valid examples as well. The question is therefore: Do these wars add anything of value to our knowledge and insight into the phenomenon of counterinsurgency warfare which could be of interest to those involved in Iraq and Afghanistan or for the modern SANDF? This article is meant to seek an answer.

In the analyses that follow, a working knowledge of the Southern African wars is assumed.

2. THE ANGLO-BOER WAR

According to the widely accepted three-stage Maoist scheme of guerrilla/insurgent war, these conflicts start in a low key, with few clashes and much political mobilisation. They then progress to full-scale mobile war, when the counterinsurgent is, at last, overrun.⁵ The Anglo-Boer War, like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, was different. It started as a conventional, positional war, during which the Boer republics surprised everyone but themselves by dealing some heavy blows to the British. But the Boers surrendered the initiative by staying on the defensive, and after a few months the superior British numbers and firepower made the difference. This, plus turning the Boers' flanks instead of the bull-like frontal charges of the

3 Thomas E Ricks, *The gamble General Petraeus and the untold story of the American surge in Iraq, 2006-2008* (London, 2009), p. 81.

4 Cf. Leopold Scholtz and Thean Potgieter, "Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan" in Deane-Peter Baker and Evert Jordaan (eds), *South Africa and contemporary counterinsurgency. Roots, practices, prospects* (Cape Town, 2010), ch. 11. Cf. also US Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, FM3-24 at <www.fas.org/lirp/doddir/army/fm3-24 fd.pdf.>

5 Mao Zedong, "On protracted war", in *Selected military writings* (Beijing, 1973), pp. 210-211; Mao Zedong, "Problems of strategy in China's revolutionary war" in *Selected military writings*, pp. 113-115.

first weeks, brought about the defeat of the Boer commandoes. By August 1900 the largest part of the republics were occupied.⁶

However, the Boer leaders refused to submit and took to guerrilla warfare. They had no idea of the theory of insurgency warfare; they just followed their natural talent and common sense. Within a few months, the Boers were resurgent while the British were in deep trouble.

Twice – in September 1900 and June 1901 – the republics decided to widen the geographical scope of the war by invading the Cape Colony and Natal. Luckily for the British both attempts were done in a haphazard and piecemeal fashion, without proper coordination between the Transvaal and Free State forces. General Christiaan de Wet made two attempts to cross the border during November–December 1900 and February 1901, and was only driven back by bad luck and a desperate defence. Small commandoes did penetrate deep into the Colony, but this first invasion was too limited to galvanise the Cape Afrikaners into open revolt. The invading units were also small enough for the British to experience them as a wake-up call, and they took several vigorous steps to stifle a revolt before it could begin.

In September 1901 General Jan Smuts finally succeeded in crossing the border with a sizeable commando, but after an unparalleled epic journey through the Cape Midlands and the Eastern Cape he finally settled in the sparsely populated Northwest Cape. This was strategically less important than, for instance, the Western Cape, and when the peace negotiations started in May 1902, he had to inform his compatriots that they should not look to the Cape for their salvation.

The Cape invasions (plus an abortive attempt by General Louis Botha to cross into Natal) were important for two reasons. Firstly, they were meant to regain the initiative – a key element in all warfare. Only very rarely will a side win a war while not having the initiative. This failed, and the initiative remained with the British. Secondly, it had to do with the elements of *space* and *force*.

Normally, the bigger the area in which the insurgents operate, the more difficult things become for the counterinsurgents. The insurgents do not have to physically occupy the space where the war is taking place. They can roam around and choose where and when to attack – an outpost here, an isolated convoy there. As long as they make it clear that they are alive and well and that they can strike at will, they will make an impression on the local population. It is also called *armed propaganda*. The counterinsurgents, on the other hand, do not know where the guerrillas are going to appear; they have to be everywhere – not merely for an adequate defence against an invisible enemy, but also to impress the locals that they remain in charge.

6 Unless otherwise stated, this section is based on Leopold Scholtz, *Why the Boers lost the war* (Basingstoke, 2005); and Leopold Scholtz, *Generaal Christiaan de Wet as veldheer* (Pretoria, 2003).

A successful invasion in the Cape Colony would have meant that the operational area would almost have doubled, and that the Boer forces would have grown considerably due to the recruitment of thousands of Cape Afrikaners. It is even conceivable that it could have persuaded the British to call it an end to the war and recognise the two republics' independence. As we know, it did not happen. The British succeeded in confining the greater part of the war action to the Transvaal and Free State, thereby denying the Boers more space.

Nevertheless, during the last months of 1900 and the first months of 1901 the Boers gave the British a difficult time. In classical guerrilla fashion, they attacked the cumbersome British columns and convoys at will, and then melted away into the vast *veldt*, with the British survivors helplessly swearing in frustration. The fact is that the Boer horse commandoes – essentially mounted infantry – were infinitely more mobile than their adversaries. As Thomas Pakenham explained in words that would echo down to the Border War of the 1980s: “There was one iron law of strategy imprinted on the mind of the Boers like a law of the wild: the answer to superior numbers is superior mobility.”⁷

But the element of space was even more important than that. Lord Kitchener, the British commanding general after the departure of Lord Roberts, was a military technocrat with a good grasp of operational art and military strategy. From his correspondence with St. John Brodrick, War Secretary in London, it is clear that he seriously grappled with the problem of space, although at first he did not know how to solve it. In February 1901 he perceptively wrote to Brodrick: “It is a most difficult problem, an enemy that always escapes, a country so vast that there is always room to escape, supplies as they want almost everywhere.”⁸

With his considerable energy and organisational skills, Kitchener, in time, devised a series of answers to overcome the problem of space. This answer had five interlocking pillars:

- Firstly, the countryside was completely devastated by the British burning all farmsteads, farmlands and food supplies, while most of the cattle were either killed or cruelly immobilised to die of hunger and thirst. Several towns were practically raised to the ground and totally depopulated. This would make it extremely difficult for the commandoes to survive.
- Secondly, members of the local population – mostly women, children, old people and even black farmhands – were massively detained and transported to concentration camps. The purpose was to deny the Boers food, shelter and intelligence. Instead of trying to win the hearts and minds of the local

7 Cf. quotation of Thomas Pakenham in Roland de Vries, *Mobiele oorlogvoering. 'n Perspektief vir Suider-Afrika* (Menlo Park, 1987), p. 6.

8 Scholtz, *Why the Boers lost the war*, p. 104.

population, white and black, *they were simply removed*. This was mirrored in the harsh Soviet depopulation of the rural areas in Afghanistan during the 1980s, except that the Afghans were forced into the cities, instead of concentration camps.⁹

- In the third place huge “drives”, consisting of several columns, were sent out to drive the commandoes before them and wear them out.
- These drives were complemented by block house lines. At the beginning, these were erected only along the railway lines to prevent the Boers from interfering with train traffic, but after a few months they were also built criss-cross through the *veldt*. Kitchener explained to Brodrick that this aimed “to divide the country up into paddocks by lines of blockhouses and so restrict the area in which [the] Boers could operate”.¹⁰
- The above pillars were backed by a fifth, namely improved mobility. Kitchener got rid of his cavalry and infantry and replaced them with mounted infantry to emulate the Boer way of war. The British never really equalled the Boers in terms of mobility, but they made a good effort to do so.

In the end, the fact that the Boers remained tactically vastly superior to the British was not enough. The combination of the above measures broke the back of the commandoes. The minutes of their deliberations preceding their surrender show that the loss of space made their operations infinitely more difficult. Also, their concern about the massive deaths of their womenfolk and children in the camps brought about the fear that the entire Boer people would be exterminated by the British.¹¹ They were finally forced to surrender on 31 May 1902.

But while Kitchener might have been a competent manager and technocrat, that is all that he was. He had no notion that Clausewitz’s dictum about war being politics waged by different means also implied the opposite – *that politics could be war waged by different means*. That is exactly what happened. The date of 31 May 1902 became a black day in Afrikaner history, so powerful that the very name of Horatio Herbert Kitchener was enough to instill anger in Afrikaners for decades to come. Yes, he forced a surrender, but in order to do it he treated the Afrikaners extremely cruelly. Large swathes of the republics were converted into utter wasteland. More than 26 000 women and children died in the concentration

9 Scholtz and Potgieter, p. 171.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

11 General Jan Smuts’ dramatic speech during the Vereeniging peace deliberations captures this *angst* brilliantly. Cf. JD Kestell and DE van Velden (eds), *De Vredesonderhandelingen tussen de regeeringen der twee Zuid-Afrikaanse Republieken en de vertegenwoordigers der Britsche regeering welke uitliepen op den Vrede, op 31 Mei 1902 te Vereeniging gesloten* (Pretoria, 1909), pp. 194-195.

camps. About 10% of the white population of the republics did not live to see the day of surrender.¹² The price paid by them was extremely horrendous. There can be no doubt that, had the International Criminal Court of Justice existed in 1902, Kitchener and many of his officers would have been indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Afrikaners were reduced to extreme poverty. Their language was denied in public life; their very identity trampled on and despised. The state and economy became English.

Dan O'Meara is correct in saying:

“[T]he structure of South African capitalism offered few opportunities to those whose home language was Afrikaans. The economy was dominated by ‘imperialist’ interests. Its language was English, and Afrikaans-speakers were powerfully discriminated against. Promotion and advancement required both proficiency in a foreign language – that of a conqueror – and virtual total acceptance of the structure of values dominant in the economy.”¹³

This meant that although the Afrikaners were formally subjugated by Kitchener, they, like the Irish and the Indians, became a perennial unstable factor in the British Empire. Britain could never depend on the unquestioning loyalty of the Union of South Africa in the way it could on Australia, New Zealand or Canada. The Afrikaners remained an unruly people, for ever on the lookout for ways and means to throw off the British yoke.

All of this helped to radicalise Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s and played a powerful role in inducing fear for their continued existence as a separate people. And this was to a large extent responsible for the introduction of the *apartheid* policy as (in the words of Hermann Giliomee) a “radical survival plan”.¹⁴

Therefore, when the National Party, representing the Afrikaners, finally won the general election of 26 May 1948, the comment by an anonymous Afrikaner became the title of a book by an English-speaking journalist: *At last we have our country back*.¹⁵ Accepting the Clausewitzian intermeshing of war and politics, 26 May 1948 meant the nullification of 31 May 1902. It meant that Kitchener had, after all, lost the war. (Of course, 26 May 1948 was in turn overtaken by 27 April 1994, when a black government came to power. Such is the ever-turning wheel of history.)

What does this tell us about counterinsurgency warfare? It tells us that the point of gravity of a counterinsurgency war does not lie in the destruction or subjugation of the insurgents' forces. Kitchener did not even think to look further than that. If you want to win a counterinsurgency war, you need to win over the local

12 Fransjohan Pretorius, “Die Anglo-Boereoorlog: ’n oorsig” in Fransjohan Pretorius (ed.), *Verskroeiende Aarde* (Cape Town, 2001), p. 21.

13 Dan O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme. Class, capital and ideology in the development of Afrikaner Nationalism 1934-1948* (Ravan, 1983), p. 55.

14 Cf. Hermann Giliomee: *The Afrikaners. Biography of a people* (Cape Town, 2003), p. 447. Cf. also Leopold and Ingrid Scholtz, “Die Britse imperialisme, die Anglo-Boereoorlog en die ontstaan van apartheid”, *Journal for Contemporary History* 27(2), May 2002.

15 GH Calpin, *At last we have our country back* (Cape Town, n.d.).

population, not only in order to deny the insurgents shelter, food and intelligence, but to construct a stable peace *after* the war. And for that to happen, you have to offer an *idea* which is more attractive than that offered by the insurgents. But this calls for subtleness and sophistication. And, efficient though Kitchener was as an operational commander, these attributes he could not pride himself on. Of course, given the fact that the British were the aggressors, his chances to win the hearts and minds of the Afrikaners was at best, small. But he could perhaps have prevented the high temperatures of the fires fuelling the aggressiveness of Afrikaner nationalism a few decades later.

3. THE PORTUGUESE EXPERIENCE

Several elements in the wars in the African Portuguese colonies – Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau – are relevant as well.

It is clear that the Portuguese never got a proper grip on the insurgencies in their colonies. On the operational level, Al J Venter reported about the large search-and-destroy operations in Mozambique which reminds one of lord Kitchener's drives in South Africa:

“During bush operations everything in their path would be destroyed, livestock would be slaughtered, crops and villages burnt, the local people rounded up for questioning and anyone acting in a suspicious manner would be arrested and taken back to base. ... By nightfall the unit would be back at base, congratulating themselves on a job well done. Naturally, any one of the local people who had experienced one of these Portuguese ‘search and destroy’ missions was by then firmly a supporter of Frelimo ...”

Thus there was always enough time and space for the insurgents to escape these amateurish operations, which could be seen and heard kilometres away.

In Angola this was exacerbated by the haphazard way in which the Portuguese enforced the policy of *aldeamentos* (fortified villages) in order to separate the population from the insurgents. General Alan Fraser, Chief of Staff: Operations of the South African Defence Force (SADF) and one of the leading theorists about counterinsurgency warfare, criticised the Portuguese harshly for this. He even threatened to withdraw SADF support if these coercive measures continued. It simply induced “fear and hatred for the Portuguese”, he reported. Later on the situation improved somewhat. In his study about the war Brigadier General Willem van der Waals quotes British political scientist Tom Gallagher's general conclusion about the Portuguese conduct of the conflict: “Military policy remained haphazard and uncoordinated. Strategy was usually defensive and ‘ad hoc’, owing more to the judgement of individual officers ... than to corporate military planning.”¹⁶

16 WS van der Waals, *Portugal's war in Angola 1961-1974* (Rivonia, 1993), pp. 200 and 234.

In his study about the Portuguese colonial African wars John P Cann is rather more positive about the purely military aspects of their approach, but he, too, acknowledges:

“In the final analysis, while Portugal fought an imaginative campaign to retain its colonies in an anticolonial era, no amount of military verve could overcome the political problem of Portugal’s legitimacy in Africa. Because of this circumstance, Portugal lost the war and ultimately its colonies despite its enormous sacrifices. This development reinforces the point that wars are largely resolved politically.”¹⁷

In the end, the political will to carry on with what amounted to an unbearable burden on a poor country collapsed. The authoritarian Marcello Caetano’s regime was toppled by a military coup in April 1974, and the new government promptly moved to grant independence to the colonies.

4. RHODESIA

In contrast, the Rhodesians were consummate tacticians and superbly effective on the operational level. Their war started in 1965, when the white Ian Smith government unilaterally declared its independence from Britain. During the first years, the resulting black revolt was waged on a rather low level, but it slowly accelerated from the early seventies, and escalated to a climax during the years 1976-1980. At first, the governing Rhodesian Front (RF) refused to countenance any political compromise, but by 1978 they were forced to co-opt Bishop Abel Muzorewa as premier, while still retaining the strings of power. This, also, did not succeed, and a combination of military and external political pressure brought about the Lancaster House Agreement, according to which power was handed back to the colonial power, Britain. The British then organised elections, which was handsomely won by the main insurgent leader, Robert Mugabe and his ZANU.

Inside the country, the Rhodesians perfected the so-called fireforce tactic, which rested on rapid air mobility. Observation posts scattered throughout the so-called tribal trust lands would pick up insurgent activity and communicate it to bases, where helicopters with soldiers or Dakota aircraft with paratroopers would be dispatched to the scene, after which the insurgents would be hunted down and killed or captured, and the survivors would melt away or flee. Several participants in these operations have written iconic books about their experiences.¹⁸

These operations were complemented by several devastatingly effective invasions of the insurgents’ rear areas in Mozambique and to a lesser extent also in

17 John P Cann, *Counterinsurgency in Africa. The Portuguese way of war 1961-1974* (St. Petersburg, 1997), p. 194.

18 Cf. Chris Cocks, *Fireforce. One man’s war in the Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Alberton, 1988); JRT Wood: *Counter-strike from the sky. The Rhodesian all-arms fireforce in the War in the Bush 1974-1980* (Johannesburg, 2009).

Zambia. Thousands upon thousands of guerrillas were killed, and their infiltration operations into Rhodesia were severely disrupted.¹⁹

But while firefights and body counts may not be entirely irrelevant, in a counterinsurgency campaign they count for much less than in a conventional war. Because of the spectacular body counts of cross-border operations, the Rhodesian military started to concentrate on these in the late seventies. But they were not strong enough to pursue large-scale invasions of Mozambique and Zambia as well as to continue with the mundane task of combating the insurgents inside the country. This gave the guerrillas the chance to esconce themselves firmly in the tribal trust lands and cultivate – sometimes, although not always, by force – the loyalty of the local population, the point of gravity of any insurgency war.²⁰

At the same time, as Jakkie Cilliers reports, the white Rhodesian government “lacked any grasp of the dynamics of the revolutionary threat” facing them. He illustrates his conclusion with a statement by the Minister of Information, PK van der Byl, the man in charge of “psychological operations” to persuade the blacks that they were better off with a white government: “I wanted to step up the use of the bayonet – that’s the most effective propaganda – the bayonet.”²¹ Also, the Rhodesian policy of protected villages was a failure.²²

In the end, as Jakkie Cilliers explains, the Rhodesian government “lacked any sound political basis from which to argue a viable alternative”. Therefore, they “were unable to convince the local population that the existing order was just, fair and worth defending”. Also, the “excessive use of aggressive and unlawful practices rather led to loss of government legitimacy, thus easing the acceptance of an alternative value-system and authority”.²³

During the fighting, the Rhodesian Security Forces undoubtedly won the vast majority of their firefights with the insurgents. But in the end that mattered little. Insurgency wars are conducted according to different rules, as Paul Moorcraft and Peter McClaughlin remark:

“No matter how brilliant its military techniques, a conservative counter-revolutionary war must be based upon a clear political strategy. ... No distinct political strategy emerged in Salisbury. Political transformation to black rule was the only viable, if initially unacceptable, option for the white rulers. Instead the RF [Rhodesian Front] created a mountain of

19 Paul Moorcraft and Peter McClaughlin, *The Rhodesian war. A military history* (Barnsley, 2008), ch. 9; Dudley Cowderoy and Roy C Nesbit: *War in the air. Rhodesian Air Force 1935-1980* (Alberton, 1987), chapters 8 and 9; Jakkie Cilliers, *Counter-insurgency in Rhodesia* (London, 1985), ch. 7.

20 Cilliers, pp. 196-200.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 245.

propaganda which the whites, but not the blacks, swallowed. The whites made the cardinal error in being gulled by their own propaganda.”²⁴

And therefore, in the end, “despite the welter of recriminations and details of the derring-do of the Rhodesians, the political, social, economic and military structures of white power were collapsing”.²⁵

5. THE SOUTH AFRICAN WARS

During the apartheid years, South Africa fought in three different wars – against the ANC in South Africa itself, against SWAPO in Namibia and Southern Angola, and against the Angolan MPLA government inside Angola. The last-named war will not be discussed here, as this was a conventional mobile war (1975-1976 and 1987-1988), but the first two are very relevant for our purposes.

5.1 The ANC’s armed struggle

The ANC’s armed struggle was launched at the end of 1961, after the South African government had banned the organisation the previous year. Those leadership elements who had not been arrested, made their way into exile. The armed struggle by Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK, or “Spear of the Nation”) was introduced by adopting a comprehensive plan for insurrection, known as Operation Mayibuye. A prominent role was played by the later President Nelson Mandela, who had made a thorough study of the military writings of Prussian military theoretician Carl von Clausewitz, Cuban revolutionaries Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong, Israeli freedom fighter and later Prime Minister Menachem Begin, as well as of Boer War writings. He was also impressed with what he witnessed during a clandestine visit to the leaders of the Algerian rebellion against the French colonial government.²⁶

Operation Mayibuye was outlined in a document²⁷ which was captured at Rivonia in 1963. In it, Che Guevara’s influence is visible. The South African insurrection, it was stated, “must be sparked off by organised and well prepared guerrilla operations during the course of which the masses of the people will be drawn in and armed” – the same message carried in Guevara’s book on guerrilla warfare.²⁸ The writers of the document envisaged an invasion of four groups of 30 guerrillas which would then attack “pre-selected targets with a view to taking the

24 Moorcroft and McClaughlin, p. 198.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

26 Nelson Mandela, *Long walk to freedom* (London, 1994), pp. 325-326, 328 and 336.

27 “Operation Mayibuye: Document found by the Police at Rivonia, 11 July 1963”, at <[www.anc.org.za/78?t=Umkhonto we Sizwe](http://www.anc.org.za/78?t=Umkhonto%20we%20Sizwe)>

28 Che Guevara, *Guerrilla warfare* (London, 1969), p. 13.

enemy by surprise”. On arrival this force should be greeted by “at least 7 000” guerrillas to start the insurrection. In the initial phase, the rural areas would become “the main theatre of guerrilla operations”. There “the overwhelming majority of the people will protect and safeguard the guerrillas”, which would to some measure neutralise the disadvantage of “the absence of friendly borders”. Tellingly, the authors stated:

“In any event we must not underestimate the fact that there is terrain in many parts of South Africa, which although not classically impregnable is suitable for guerrilla type operations. Boer guerrillas with the support of their people operated in the plains of the Transvaal. Although conditions have changed there is still a lesson to be learnt from this.”²⁹

This clearly showed the military naivité of the ANC leaders. Much had changed since the Anglo-Boer War. Guerrilla operations were then possible because of the lack of infrastructure. There were no roads in the modern sense of the word and only few railway lines. Just 12 years later, when some Afrikaners rebelled in 1914, the combination of a much improved railway network and the availability of motor vehicles afforded the government forces the necessary mobility to prevent a repetition of the Anglo-Boer War. The rebellion was crushed.

This made a guerrilla war from the sixties onwards totally impossible, as the infrastructure was by then really well developed. The Mayibuye plans were thus doomed to failure right from the beginning. No wonder that the armed struggle collapsed when the ringleaders were arrested at Rivonia in July 1963. Several attempts by insurgents to infiltrate the country by sea and through Rhodesia – the so-called Wankie Campaign – also failed dismally.³⁰ Only after the Soweto riots of 1976, when an exodus of angry young blacks across the borders were taken in by MK and the ANC, did things change, and from 1977 onwards, incidents of sabotage started increasing in the country.

In October 1978, a decisive moment was reached when a few ANC and South African Communist Party (SACP) leaders, headed by Oliver Tambo, visited Vietnam to learn from the Vietnamese experience.³¹ In the discussions which followed the visit, the leaders noted that “the Vietnam experience reveals certain shortcomings on our part”. They debated whether their bid for power would be “the result of a general all-round *nation-wide insurrection* which a period of armed struggle will have helped to stimulate” – the approach hitherto followed – “or are we embarked on a *protracted people’s war* in which partial and general uprisings

29 “Operation Mayibuye: Document found by the Police at Rivonia, 11 July 1963”, at <[www.anc.org.za/78?t=Umkhonto we Sizwe](http://www.anc.org.za/78?t=Umkhonto%20we%20Sizwe)>

30 Cf. Nicky van Driel, “The Wankie campaign. The ANC’s first military operation: July-September 1967”, at <www.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/thesis/vandriel-thesis/menu-index.htm>

31 Luli Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo. Beyond the Engeli mountains* (Claremont, 2004), pp. 522-530; Anthea Jeffery, *People’s war. New light on the struggle for South Africa* (Johannesburg, 2009), pp. 25-39.

will play a vital role?” They decided on the latter. Such a “people’s war” “can only take root and develop if it grows out of, and is based on, political revolutionary bases amongst the people”.

They therefore decided in the short term “to concentrate on armed propaganda actions”, defined as “armed action whose immediate purpose is to support and stimulate political activity rather than to hit at the enemy”.³² In the long run this crystallised in what the ANC called the “four pillars of the revolution”:

- The building of underground ANC structures;
- mass action on which the most broadly-based united front would be built;
- the international isolation of the apartheid regime; and
- the armed struggle.³³

The ANC had clearly realised that the classical guerrilla approach of Mayibuye was impractical. As Thabo Mbeki explained to an American newspaper:

“We can’t fight a bush war in South Africa. Look at the map. It is all developed. There are roads, radios and landing strips everywhere. This is not Angola or Mozambique. We do not have forests. The (military) machine would smash us if we tried to send in an army from outlying areas. Also, 87% of the Whites are in towns and cities. Our masses have to serve as our bush. The Black community is our bush.”³⁴

The practical offshoot of this was a concerted campaign to make the country ungovernable. “We must ... destroy the organs of government of the apartheid regime,” an ANC publication commented. “We have to undermine and weaken its control over us.”³⁵

In practice, after a while this degenerated into an ordinary terrorist campaign. At first, MK concentrated on “armed propaganda” – that is, spectacular deeds of sabotage such as a mortar bombardment of the military town of Voortrekkerhoogte, limpet mine attacks on the Sasol fuel plant, etc. Then the SADF hit back with attacks on ANC safe houses in Maputo, Gaborone, Maseru, etc, which induced MK in turn to become more militant. At the funeral of Joe Gqabi, an ANC leader killed by South African Special Forces in Zimbabwe in 1981, Oliver Tambo threatened South African whites: “[I]t was Matola [where ANC members were killed a few weeks previously] yesterday; it is Ashdown in Salisbury [where Gqabi was killed] today, but tomorrow it will be Pretoria.”³⁶ His protégé, Thabo Mbeki, was even

32 Report of the Politico-Military Strategy Commission to the ANC Executive Committee, August 1978, <www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=79>

33 Cf. Oliver Tambo’s New Year’s message, 8 January 1984, at <www.anc.org.za/2632>

34 Hilton Hamann, *Days of the generals. The untold story of South Africa’s apartheid-era military generals* (Cape Town, 2001), p. 123.

35 “Power to the people!”, *Mayibuye*, 1/1984, p. 7.

36 “Speech by Oliver Tambo at the funeral of Joe Gqabi”, Harare, 9 August 1981, at <www.anc.org.za/4387>

more direct, saying that very few whites were dying in the struggle. “They must begin to die as we are dying. That’s the nature of war. So suffering there will be on our side, but let there be suffering also on the other side.”³⁷

The Church Street bomb of July 1983 crossed a border in that for the first time a military target was attacked without regard to civilian casualties. After that, bombs were exploded at restaurants, discos, shopping malls, mass sports events, while mines were planted on rural roads, black policemen and their families were executed, etc.³⁸

The following table illustrates the change of focus from hard to soft targets:³⁹

PERIOD	% HARD TARGETS	% SOFT TARGETS
1983	80	20
1984	63	37
1985	33	63
1986	17	83
1987	?	?
1988	31	69
1989	17	83

Indeed, at the ANC’s National Consultative Conference which took place at Kabwe, Zambia, in 1985, it was formally decided to escalate the use of violence and to “shift the struggle from the black ghettos into the white areas”. “We can no longer allow our armed activities to be determined solely by the risk of civilian casualties. The time has come when those who stand in solid support of the race tyranny and who are its direct or indirect instruments, must themselves begin to feel the agony of our counter-blows”, according to the official minutes of the conference.⁴⁰ At a press conference Tambo referred to the Allies’ decision to bomb German cities, and said that the “distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ targets is going to disappear ... I think the distinction between hard and soft targets is being erased by the development of the conflict.”⁴¹

However, the government fought back vigorously. On the basis of the writings of French General André Beaufre, and a US counterinsurgency expert,

37 “Perspectives of our struggle, part 2”, interview by Radio Freedom with Thabo Mbeki, Dawn 7/81, p. 14.

38 Own research, to be presented at a later stage.

39 Maj.Gen. B Mortimer, “S.A. Defence Force involvement in the internal security situation in the Republic of South Africa”, submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, at <www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/submit/sadf.htm>

40 “Second National Consultative Conference: Report, main decisions and recommendations”, at <www.anc.org.za/137>

41 “Press Conference in Lusaka, 25 June 1985”, at <www.anc.org.za/4467>

John J McCuen,⁴² a sophisticated strategy was developed. A “total onslaught” was being waged, it was felt, against four power bases. These were political/diplomatic, economic, socio/psychological and security bases.⁴³ The answer was a “total strategy”, which was defined as “the comprehensive plan to utilize all the means available to a state according to an integrated pattern in order to achieve the national aims within the framework of the specific policies. A total strategy is, therefore, not confined to a particular sphere, but is applicable at all levels and to all functions of the state structure.”⁴⁴

This was the principle of *unity of purpose* in action. All government departments, that of Defence included, were cogs in a unified machine and with an overriding strategy, driven by the central government.

The SA government hit back through a combination of harsh repressive measures – a state of emergency, the banning of organisations and “subversive” political activities, the arrest and clandestine murder of anti-apartheid leaders – and political reform and socio-economic upliftment. The SADF was used not only to patrol the black townships, but to rapidly cut through red tape in order to build roads, clinics, water pipes, electric pylons, etc, so that grievances could be removed. The Chief of the SADF, General Constand Viljoen, briefed the Cabinet in 1981 – so he told Hilton Hamann – that “we could carry on for a very long period but eventually they would have to make some political moves to solve the problem”. The politicians were told that “they had to find a formula where all the people living in the country would feel involved and part of the country ...”⁴⁵

At the top the entire counter-revolutionary strategy was coordinated by the State Security Council, and at grassroots level by the Joint Management System, which integrated the efforts of all the government departments in line with the overall total strategy. These bodies did sterling work, but it was not enough. Some politicians seriously underestimated the blacks’ grievances. For instance, the Minister of Defence, General Magnus Malan, thought the revolution was “basically about getting a roof over your head, having food to eat, having education for your children, having a job to do and medical services”.⁴⁶ For the rest, it was presumably all about Communist agitation and subversion. But it was not the case. To most blacks, it was, in addition to the things mentioned by Malan, about freedom and human dignity – really powerful motives.

42 André Beaufre, *Introduction to strategy* (New York, 1965); John J McCuen, *The art of counter-revolutionary warfare. The strategy of counter-insurgency* (London, 1966).

43 Magnus Malan, “Die aanslag teen Suid-Afrika”, *Strategic review for Southern Africa*, October 1981, pp. 8-11.

44 *White paper on defence and armament procurement*, 1976, p. 5, para. 6.

45 Hamann, pp. 55-56.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Nevertheless, the government's countermeasures ensured that although several townships became no-go areas for the police and army, especially at night,⁴⁷ the ANC's people's war strategy failed. In an analysis of the state of the armed struggle MK leader Ronnie Kasrils wrote in February 1988:

"[W]e were not able to take full advantage of the favourable conditions that materialised [with the upsurge of violence]. We were unable to deploy sufficient forces at home; our cadres still found big problems in basing themselves amongst our people; our underground failed to grow sufficiently ... the incredible mass resistance and strikes were consequently not sufficiently reinforced by armed struggle."⁴⁸

On the geopolitical front, Mozambique and Swaziland were intimidated into signing non-aggression pacts with Pretoria, effectively removing those countries as springboards for MK infiltration into South Africa. In Lesotho, a regime change was forced through a blockade, and MK had to leave that country as well. Botswana and Zimbabwe were still used as conduit for infiltration, but their governments did their best to prevent it. And in 1988 Angola kicked MK out as well as part of the Namibian peace agreement. This left Tanzania as its nearest base, and the ANC in pretty much the same dismal geopolitical situation as in the sixties.

All of this made the ANC's insurgency war in South Africa entirely different from the other wars analysed in this article. In itself, MK never threatened the government, not even remotely. Its war was a resounding military failure. But in the end, the success of an insurgency war is measured less on the basis of military matters than on politics. The ANC's military failure did not matter all that much. The fact is, as Chester Crocker accurately commented, that whereas the government "was winning the purely physical test of strength ... Botha could rule, but he could no longer govern."⁴⁹ Crocker furnished the reason elsewhere in his book: Botha "never figured out how to link this power base to a coherent reform strategy."⁵⁰

The fact is that the government understood the theory of counterinsurgency warfare very well, but could not bring itself before 1990 to do what that theory demanded, namely the abolition of apartheid. Only two years after Ronnie Kasrils's confession about the ANC's military impotence, the government had to unban the ANC and SACP and enter into negotiations, which ended with the ANC in power in April 1994. The ANC had succeeded in capturing the hearts and minds of the people.

47 In the late eighties, SA President PW Botha conceded that 14% of the black townships were beyond government control. Cf. Holger Jensen, "The media war" in Al Venter (ed.), *Challenge. Southern Africa within the African revolutionary context* (Gibraltar, 1989), p. 300.

48 Ronnie Kasrils, "The revolutionary army", *Sechaba*, 12 September 1988, p. 4.

49 Chester Crocker, *High noon in Southern Africa. Making peace in a rough neighborhood* (Johannesburg, 1992), p. 381.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 308.

5.2 The Border War in Namibia

Although the SADF had made a thorough study of the Portuguese and Rhodesian wars, circumstances in Namibia differed considerably. The war in Namibia started late in 1966, when the first and only base the rebel movement, SWAPO, ever had inside the territory was stormed by a combined military and police force. As in Rhodesia, the conflict in Namibia was a low-level war for several years, but this changed when Angola became accessible to SWAPO insurgents after the collapse of Portuguese power in 1974-1975. This meant, in the words of General Jannie Geldenhuys (later Chief of the SADF), that SWAPO got an important “prerequisite for a successful insurgency, namely a safe border across which he could fall back”.⁵¹ An optimistic Sam Nujoma, SWAPO’s leader, told the Soviets in Moscow he planned “to broaden the area of armed operations, first to the Atlantic coast and then to the centre of the country”.⁵²

This again illustrates the importance of the factor of *space*, which we encountered in the other wars as well. *Space*, together with *initiative*, became the two key concepts around which this war was fought.

In the aftermath of the SADF’s abortive and ill-fated intervention in the Angolan civil war – tactically and operationally – the South Africans fared very well indeed, but it was a strategic disaster – SWAPO insurgents swarmed all over the north of Namibia, and soon bombs were exploding in Windhoek, Swakopmund and other places. The SADF floundered in unwieldy, large-scale operations, without hurting SWAPO.⁵³

The SA Army leadership realised that SWAPO had to be prevented from stretching the area in which they operated to inside Namibia. According to Geldenhuys, the main purpose of the SADF’s strategy, therefore, “was to clean Kaokoland, Kavango and the Caprivi ... If we could attain this goal, we could reduce the wide-spread insurgent-infested territory until only Ovambo remained. We could then concentrate our efforts there ...”⁵⁴ South African military pressure resulted in Zambia kicking SWAPO out, with the result that the insurgents could no longer infiltrate into the Caprivi strip. “This was the beginning of the fulfilment of our plan”, Geldenhuys commented.⁵⁵

SWAPO was further curtailed by the fact that it was perceived to be an Ovambo organisation, with the result that it struggled to make an impact on the hearts and minds of the non-Ovambo population. In the end this was not decisive, because

51 Jannie Geldenhuys, *Dié wat gewen het. Feite en fabels van die Bosoorlog* (Pretoria, 2007), p. 35.

52 Vladimir Shubin, *The “hot” Cold War* (London, 2008), p. 213.

53 Jan Breytenbach, *The Buffalo soldiers. The story of South Africa’s 32-Battalion 1975-1993* (Alberton, 2002), p. 149; Willem Steenkamp, *South Africa’s Border War 1976-1989* (Gibraltar, 1990), p. 63; Magnus Malan, *My lewe saam met die SA Weermag* (Pretoria, 2006), p. 194.

54 Geldenhuys, p. 68.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

the Ovambos made up about 60% of the population, but it did mean that SWAPO could never really make inroads into the Caprivi, the Okavango and Kaokoland. Also, by reacting vigorously, the SADF prevented SWAPO from infiltrating the so-called white farmlands south of Ovamboland. And that meant that, in practice, the insurgency was limited to the relatively small area of Ovamboland itself. This made it much easier to counter the insurgency.

The other concept was *initiative*. According to his memoirs, Geldenhuys and his staff “developed an approach which I have not encountered elsewhere this pertinently. Who has the initiative, you or your opponent? The basic truth in an insurgency war is that the insurgent often potentially, and often in reality, has the initiative.” In a conflict situation, Geldenhuys reasoned, “it seldom happens that someone who has the initiative, loses”. One of the ways to get the initiative is “by not waiting, but be the first to engage the insurgent in battle – to take the battle to the insurgent. ... If you have the initiative, you determine what you want to achieve and you plan how to do it.”⁵⁶

The practical result of this was a series of mobile cross-border operations, in which SWAPO was hit very hard. The first was a parachute assault on Cassinga, a SWAPO base 250 km inside Angola, together with an overland attack on another base at Chetequera, nearer to the border, on 4 May 1978 (Operation Reindeer). During the next few years, there were repeated operations across the borders. At first, with Reindeer, Rekstok in 1979, and Sceptic in 1980, the South Africans only destroyed SWAPO bases and then pulled out again. But SWAPO simply filled up the void and continued as before. Therefore, with Operations Protea and Daisy in 1981, the SADF stayed. It occupied the southern part of the Angolan province of Kunene in order to make SWAPO’s infiltration as difficult as possible. And at the end of 1983, another invasion, Operation Askari, saw the SADF dominating almost the entire province as far north as Cuvelai and Cassinga.⁵⁷

Operationally, these operations were extremely effective. Not only were thousands of guerrillas killed, but SWAPO infiltrations were thoroughly disrupted – though never entirely prevented – before they could take place. Also, SWAPO was pushed ever further northward, so that insurgents had to walk hundreds of kilometres through SADF-dominated areas to reach the border. Many were intercepted before they reached it. The conclusion of the SA Air Force commander during Operation Askari, Brigadier Dick Lord, was that PLAN (the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia – SWAPO’s army) “never succeeded in regaining the offensive capability

56 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

57 Cf. Leopold Scholtz, “The Namibian Border War: an appraisal of the South African strategy”, *Scientia Militaria* 34/1, 2006, pp. 36-38; Leopold Scholtz, “Strategies en operasionele beoordeling van die SAW se oorgrens-operasies in Angola, 1975-1988”, *Journal for Contemporary History* 33/3, February 2009, pp. 68-74.

it had prior to Askari. Askari became the watershed in the course of the Angola/SWA war. SWAPO PLAN was reduced in military strength and from then onwards no longer posed a major threat.”⁵⁸

Askari had unexpected political-military consequences. The Angolan government experienced a lapse in political will, and started negotiations with South Africa against the will of their Soviet and Cuban allies. This resulted in the Lusaka Accord of February 1984, according to which the Angolans promised to rein SWAPO in, while the SADF pulled out of Angola. However, SWAPO was not a party to the agreement and continued its infiltration, while the Soviets and Cubans rapidly persuaded the Angolans to look the other way. The Soviets also started a major rearmament programme to transform the Angolan military into a formidable combat force, with ominous implications for South Africa – but that is a different story.⁵⁹

South of the border, the counterinsurgency war continued. From time to time, the SADF still launched limited cross-border operations, but not on the same scale as before 1984. Nevertheless, the number of insurgents diminished, and, on average, an insurgent was detected by the security forces only six days after crossing the border. The SADF combated the insurgents by flooding the relatively limited area of Ovamboland with aggressive patrolling. They took over the Rhodesian fireforce concept and adapted it to Namibian circumstances (here it got the Afrikaans name of *reaksiemag*, or Romeo Mike). When a patrol encountered a SWAPO gang, they would call in a Romeo Mike unit, which would either be paratroopers flown in on Puma helicopters, or ground troops in Casspir armoured personnel carriers. The results were invariably the same – the insurgents would either be killed or captured, or they would flee northwards across the border.⁶⁰

The kill ratio was astounding. During the entire war, an average of 15,8 SWAPO insurgents were killed for every member of the security forces.⁶¹ But, as we saw in the case of Rhodesia, this had only a limited relevance in the broader scheme of things.

The SADF realised this too, and developed a sophisticated hearts and minds programme to win the loyalty of the local population. Roads were built, villages were given access to fresh water, schools and clinics were erected and manned by SADF conscripts with the necessary skills, etc. But while this had considerable success in the non-Ovambo territories of the Caprivi, the Okavango and Kaokoland, it made little impression on the Ovambos.⁶² Besides, on grassroots level, some

58 RS Lord: “Operation Askari: a sub-commander’s retrospective view of the operation”, *Militaria* 22/4, 1992, p. 9.

59 Scholtz, “The Namibian Border War...”, pp. 42-43.

60 *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36; Abel Esterhuysen, “The South African Defence Force and counterinsurgency, 1966-1990” in Baker and Jordaan (eds), pp. 111-113.

61 Scholtz, “The Namibian Border War...”, p. 44.

62 Geldenhuys, p. 68; Breytenbach, p. 196.

SADF troops, reflecting the racist culture back home, did treat locals disrespectfully or even cruelly. Especially the Police's Counterinsurgency (COIN) unit, Koevoet, became notorious in this regard.⁶³

The bottom line is that especially the locals in Ovamboland did not respond to the SADF's attempts to win their favour in a cold, rational way. SWAPO, dominated as it was by Ovambos, was seen as "us" and the SADF as "them". As Major General Chris van Zyl put it: "The moment you have an emotional cause like freedom, no school, no clinic, no tarred roads, no electricity, no shiny car can compete with that."⁶⁴

And, therefore, when the UN-supervised elections at last took place in 1990, SWAPO won 57% of the vote, almost exactly the percentage Ovambos (about 60%) in the country.

The South Africans, in contrast to the Portuguese and Rhodesians, did have a comprehensive political strategy. That was to accede to Namibian independence, but not with the "red flag" flying in Windhoek – that is, not with a Communist-dominated SWAPO in power. This meant that the SADF was, in effect, fighting for time – time to bring about a situation in which SWAPO would lose an election.⁶⁵ Because of the preponderance of Ovambos, this turned out to be a forlorn hope.

The South Africans' cause was helped by the fact that SWAPO was a rather defective rebel movement which treated its own members in a dictatorial and arbitrary, even cruel, fashion. In 1976 and again in 1984 large-scale purges were instituted against members as well as soldiers who were deemed to be a threat to the leadership, but who actually only wanted greater internal democracy in SWAPO. Truly horrendous stories of incarcerations, beatings, torture and rape were recorded.⁶⁶

Towards the end, this affected SWAPO's military capacity negatively. The Canadian researchers, Colin Leys and John S Saul, come to the conclusion that "after 1976 all questioning of policy decisions was delegitimised, so that not even leaders as senior as Hage Geingob (later to become Namibia's first Prime Minister) or Lucas Pohamba could get a discussion in the Central Committee of what the security organisation was doing". In the end, they say, "one [anonymous] senior

63 Cf. Hamann, pp. 64-65.

64 Lieneke de Visser, *Winning the hearts and minds. Legitimacy in the Namibian Border War* (unpublished MA thesis, University of Utrecht, August 2010), p. 37.

65 Leopold Scholtz, "The South African strategic and operational objectives in Angola, 1987-1988", *Scientia Militaria* 38/1, 2010, pp. 73-74.

66 Andreas Shipanga, *In search of freedom* (Gibraltar, 1989), ch. 23-31; Lauren Dobell, *Swapo's struggle for Namibia, 1960-1991 War by other means* (Basel, 1998), pp. 47-51; S Groth, *Namibia – the wall of silence* (Cape Town, 1996), pp. 55-66; John S Saul and Colin Leys, "SWAPO. The politics of exile" in Leys & Saul, *Namibia's liberation struggle* (London, 1995), pp. 48-53; Colin Leys & John S Saul: "Liberation without democracy? The Swapo crisis of 1976", *Journal of Southern African Studies* (Paris, 1988) 20/1, March 1994, pp. 123-147. For a Swapo view of the crisis, see P Katjavivi, *A history of resistance in Namibia* (Paris, 1988), pp. 105-108.

cabinet minister acknowledged to us, ‘there was fear everywhere’. The Central Committee could not act. We were saved by [the implementation of Security Council Resolution] 435.’⁶⁷

In general, South Africa fought a very sophisticated counterinsurgency war. SADF officers had made a thorough study of COIN theory, and their strategy reflected that. They played all the right notes. But in the end, they could not win over the majority Ovambo tribe, the internal problems in SWAPO notwithstanding. To the Ovambos, the SADF remained “them” and SWAPO “us” and that made all the difference.

6. CONCLUSION

What lessons would be relevant for an intelligent and ambitious young officer, expecting to be sent off some time to serve in some dangerous place, when studying the Southern African counterinsurgency wars or, for that matter, for anyone interested in recent history?

One must, of course, be careful when identifying lessons from five such disparate wars. Some important characteristics differed. But some important ones were also common to all, and we will have to concentrate on them.

On the operational level, the factor of space was throughout of cardinal importance. The British succeeded in artificially reducing the Boers’ operating space in 1901-1902, thereby making their operations much more difficult. Neither the Portuguese nor the Rhodesians had any success in this regard. In their war against the South African government, the ANC stayed confined to the townships and never became able to threaten the establishment throughout the country. And in Namibia, the SADF was able to reduce SWAPO essentially to the relatively limited area of Ovamboland.

As the military observer Peter Godwin, who fought with the Rhodesians, explained:

“It’s important to stay away from the body count mentality. COIN conflicts are not won by such thinking. They are won by holding territory, and denying the enemy free range in ‘liberated’ areas. At present, it’s my understanding that there are large areas of Afghanistan where the Taliban has relatively free range – that’s what happened too, by the end of the Rhodesian conflict – where much of the countryside was in guerrilla hands (though the Security Forces could enter at will –they didn’t have continuity of presence. ‘Who owns the night?’ is the simple question you ask to determine this).”⁶⁸

But it goes beyond operational lessons. Probably the most important lesson is, therefore, once again, that war – as Clausewitz taught us – is essentially a political act, though the grammar may differ. In counterinsurgency war this is even more so.

67 Leys and Saul, “Liberation without democracy?”, p. 145.

68 John Noonan, “An interview with Peter Godwin”, *Small Wars Journal*, 2009, p. 4.

In conventional war, the political aspect mainly revolves around the high political objective formulated by governments. In a counterinsurgency war, even a patrol of an infantry section with a corporal in charge can be heavily pregnant with political meaning.

Conventional warfare is often about the application of maximum violence, concentrated at a specific place and time. The immediate purpose is to crush or neutralise the enemy's armed forces. Counterinsurgency is mostly about minimum violence. It is about infantry soldiers on patrol smiling and waving to the locals, behaving courteously to their old people and womenfolk, respecting their customs, dishing out medical aid when required. It is about building schools, clinics, giving people access to fresh water and electricity. It is about creating a climate of security and stability in which people can afford to show loyalty to the government. It is about the hearts and minds of the population. And in the end, it is about furnishing the people with a better idea in which to believe than the one which the insurgents propagate, and creating a sense that the government is not "them", but "us".

In the Anglo-Boer, Portuguese and Rhodesian wars, the counterinsurgents did not have the faintest insight in these matters. To them, the enemy had to be subdued by brute force – the bayonet being the best form of propaganda, as Rhodesian minister PK van der Byl said. (In the same vein, some Americans in Vietnam made light of the hearts-and-minds approach by saying if you've got 'em by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow –with the same negative results.) In all three cases, the local population was seen as a hindrance which had to be removed.

Especially in the Anglo-Boer War, the subjugation of the Boer commandoes succeeded militarily. But in a sense, the war did not end on 31 May 1902, but rather on 31 May 1961, when a unified South Africa became a republic outside the Commonwealth and with the Boer descendants in charge. In the Portuguese colonies, a similar lack was combined with indifferent military prowess. The Rhodesians, in contrast, were brilliant when fighting the insurgents, but they, too, had no coordinated political strategy, no sense of how to utilise the state's full capacity to win the war, no idea how important it was to win over the ordinary villagers in the tribal trust lands, no awareness that blacks would not indefinitely let themselves be dominated by colonists whom they regarded as invaders – as "them".

The South Africans, on the other hand, made a thorough study of counterinsurgency theory. They read Beaufre and McCuen and observed the mistakes of the Portuguese and Rhodesians. They knew about the principle of unity of purpose – it was embedded in their total strategy. They understood the difference between conventional and counterinsurgency war. One only has to read General Jannie Geldenhuys' memoirs to see fundamental gems like this: Conventional warfare, he wrote, boils down to "movement and the delivery of firepower. By concentrating

overwhelming firepower at the right time and place, one can bring about so much destruction that you win decisive battles which lead to final decisions.” Such a war is best suited to centralised command and control. On the other hand, an insurgency war is “much more social science-oriented. It is about people and not machines.” It is made up of a multitude of small “wars” which is best suited to decentralised command and control. “One cannot force such a war to a quick decision by military action, as your enemy does not present you with a target on which firepower can be concentrated decisively at a certain place.”⁶⁹

In the end all of this helped. The South Africans did not lose the war in the sense that the Portuguese and Rhodesians did. They delayed the inevitable until the international political situation – the collapse of the Soviet bloc and Communism – made a hand-over of power possible, when the hand-over in their own minds was no longer tantamount to suicide and subjugation to a Communist dictatorship.

Of course, it cannot be said that they won either. After all, South Africa has been ruled by the ANC since 1994 and Namibia by SWAPO since 1990. But it was, in a sense, a draw. In contrast to the Portuguese colonies, where the rebel movements transformed the territories into Marxist-Leninist one-party dictatorships, or Rhodesia, where Robert Mugabe became a dictator in all but name, neither the ANC nor SWAPO reached their objective of establishing socialist one-party regimes.⁷⁰

In themselves, the South Africans would never have been able to win the two wars. Had the conflicts dragged on, they would most probably have succeeded to hold out another decade or even two. But in the end they would have lost, had the USSR and the Communist bloc not imploded and pulled the rug from underneath the ANC’s and SWAPO’s feet. What the South Africans did succeed in doing, was to win time and wait, like Charles Dickens’s Mr Micawber, for something to come along.

What implications do all of this have for anybody fighting a present counter-insurgency war? Very simply, this: Forget about winning militarily. You may crush the enemy every time you run into him. You may wipe the floor with his fighters. But such military victories can only be meaningful if they fulfil two conditions:

- Firstly, they must contribute to a lasting improvement in the stability and safety of the local population. You cannot chase the insurgents out of a certain territory and then go to fight the enemy elsewhere while allowing the insurgents to come back and punish those who were too friendly to the counterinsurgent forces. The locals must feel that you are in control of the vicinity and that they can trust you.

69 Geldenhuys, p. 65.

70 Cf. Leopold and Ingrid Scholtz, “Die oorsprong en ontwikkeling van die SA Kommunistiese Party se tweefase-revolusie”, *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 30/3 and 30/4, September and December 2004; Research on SWAPO’s ideology still to be presented.

- Secondly, you cannot simply kill insurgents. Remember that they most likely are sons, fathers or brothers to local people. Killing ten insurgents may be fine. But if that results in 15 new recruits for the insurgents or 20 new sympathisers, you have lost ground.

We have seen how the British, Portuguese, Rhodesians and some elements in the South African security forces could not care less about winning the hearts and minds of people. They simply wanted to kill the enemy. And that was exactly the wrong attitude, as was more than adequately proved by the British and Malaya in the fifties. That was where Sir Gerald Templer, the British High Commissioner in the territory, came up with the innovative idea that the point of gravity in counterinsurgencies was winning the “hearts and minds” of the local population. Malaya, of course, was the shining example of this approach working.⁷¹

Lastly, one has to offer the local population a powerful idea, a vision that captures their hearts. That idea has to be more attractive than the one offered by the insurgents. Neither the British nor the Portuguese or the Rhodesians ever realised that. The South Africans did in theory, but never succeeded in translating it into practice.

Of course, Afghanistan and Iraq – or, for that matter, the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Somalia – is not Angola, Namibia and South Africa. But there are enough underlying similarities for the Southern African wars to be relevant to present counterinsurgency wars.

71 Cf. Nagl, chapters 4-5 and 8-9.