

BOOK REVIEWS

Maritz Spaarwater, *A spook's progress: From making war to making peace*. Zebra Press 2012. ISBN: 978-1-77022-437-7. 283 pages.

Maritz Spaarwater, the author of *A spook's progress: From making war to making peace*, served as a senior officer (reached the rank of colonel) in the former South African Defence Force (SADF), first in the Special Forces and later in Military Intelligence. Of utmost importance is the fact that he served as Chief Director Operations in the former National Intelligence Service (NIS). In this capacity, he was among the first in the apartheid government to start official discussions on foreign soil with top leaders in the exiled leadership of the ANC. Later in his career, as a Chief Director in the former Department of Constitutional Development, he became involved in the CODESA negotiations in a support role and thus played a role in the events that resulted in a new South African constitutional dispensation in 1994.

Spaarwater takes the reader along on his journey of life. He dwells into his schooldays, the shaping of his personal views and his eventual education as lawyer. Those with a special interest in his experiences and endeavours as an intelligence functionary will find that this part of his career started when he joined the SADF, and specifically his appointment as a senior officer in Chief Staff Intelligence, commonly known as Military Intelligence. As a senior intelligence officer, he became aware of two interesting and contradictory tendencies from the late 1970s. On the one side there was a tendency among senior intelligence officers to be more outspoken in criticism of politicians in general and government in particular. This especially pertained to actions or inactions to alleviate the impoverishment of black people and how this affected security matters. On the other hand, there was an almost visceral contempt for the NIS, especially since the early 1980s when a very young Dr Niel Barnard was appointed Director-General of the (civilian) NIS. The disdain for the NIS arose from the fact that civilian intelligence officials had become more influential in top government circles as well as the contestation from the NIS that the communist threat (as it was perceived) lay within the country in the dehumanising destitution and hopelessness of the vast majority of South Africans.

In 1981, Spaarwater resigned from the military and joined the NIS as a divisional head in political research. He joined a progressively "intellectualised" NIS - driven by Barnard - who transformed the civilian intelligence agency into "a think-tank that tried as near as possible to establish the truth and fearlessly report it to their principle clients, the president and the cabinet" (p.87). This suited Spaarwater as a broadminded individual and educated person who obtained degrees in law, international relations and international law from the universities of Pretoria, Witwatersrand and Cambridge.

Spaarwater gives the reader insight into how the NIS rapidly gained credibility and the respect of the highest authorities, including PW Botha. He describes how he was involved in the creation of a properly structured chief directorate of research, something that was never highly valued in the intelligence services of the 1960s and 1970s. Of historical significance is the fact that research output from the NIS, usually supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs, gradually inspired a rethink in higher government circles about the South African security situation. Spaarwater has no doubt that this paved the way for the realisation that the only option South Africa had was to proceed to a negotiated political settlement.

Another interesting part of the book is Spaarwater's views on the role of the Afrikaner Broederbond (AB). More often than not, popular opinion holds that the AB pulled the strings from behind the scenes in apartheid South Africa and that events that profoundly influenced South Africa's pre-1994 history were all premised on AB influence and thinking. Spaarwater – himself never a member of the AB – acknowledges the political significance of the AB during those days, but also argues that this part of history is still un-interrogated and susceptible to misinterpretation. He contends that Barnard was a member of the AB and even suspects that Barnard as a member of the AB fronted a more reformist thinking in the NIS from 1986. At the same time, he asserts that other top members of the NIS, notably Mike Louw (who later assumed the post of Director-General) and Gert Rothman, were never members of the AB. In fact, Spaarwater states that Barnard never appointed top functionaries based on AB membership. Spaarwater also shares his personal relations with and impressions of Barnard, a formidable and enigmatic man who joined the NIS in 1980 at the young age of thirty-one after serving as a professor of Political Science at the University of the Free State.

Having made some remarks on the SADF's disdain for the NIS earlier in the book, Spaarwater returns to this matter and reveals that the SADF was always disinclined to keep the DFA or NIS informed of their operations. On at least two occasions, this led to the deaths of valued sources in neighbouring countries. To Spaarwater's astonishment, the relevant political principals never intervened to bring about an end to the distrust and strife between the two government departments fighting on the frontline for ostensibly common interests.

As a top intelligence functionary, Spaarwater also had the opportunity to take several clandestine foreign trips to visit eminent people, most notably the former Zambian leader and leader of the so-called Frontline States, Dr Kenneth Kaunda. Kaunda presented himself as a broker between the warring parties in Southern Africa. The South African government was a key figure in this and it was up to Spaarwater to act as representative of the NIS. Such was the trust between Spaarwater and Kaunda that the latter arranged for Spaarwater to secretly meet with Sam Nujoma, President of SWAPO, in Kaunda's office. As Spaarwater rightly

states, what influence this had on the eventual negotiated settlement between the pre-1994 South African government and its political enemies has not been fully examined and uncovered.

Threaded through other narratives are encounters with several other high profile figures, including journalist Max du Preez and the Reverend Allan Boesak. However, it was Spaarwater's involvement in the top NIS team who secretly met with ANC heavyweight exiles such as Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma in Switzerland in 1989 that captures the imagination of the reader. (This coincided with parallel discussions between a handful of government representatives, including Barnard from the NIS and former Pres. Nelson Mandela when the latter was still imprisoned.) The historical recordings of these groundbreaking events are not new to the informed reader, as this was well documented in other books, notably Allistar Spark's *Tomorrow is another country*. Still, Spaarwater's personal recollections and anecdotes of the events where "terrorists" and "Boers" discussed South Africa's future around "the fruit of the Scottish vine" (pp. 177-181) is of great interest. Not even former Pres. FW de Klerk, as newly elected head of state, was initially informed about these meetings and, in fact, had to be convinced by the NIS that such endeavours were the "implications" of an earlier Security Council meeting. According to Spaarwater, these events presented FW de Klerk with "a momentous opportunity... to size the day and heave us out of the hole we South Africans had been digging ourselves into for centuries" (p. 183).

Another important aspect of the book is Spaarwater's recollections of his role in the making of a new South African state. He, Spaarwater, had the task of bringing the exiled leadership of the ANC into the country and personally took (now Pres.) Jacob Zuma from the airport to a safe house. Interestingly, the police and the SADF were deliberately excluded from this clandestine task as elements in the security forces were not trusted by the NIS. In 1991, Spaarwater joined the Constitutional Development Service, which was the government's "prime mover of the negotiation process" (p. 198). This institution became the Department of Constitutional Development after Niel Barnard was transferred from the NIS to assume the post as its new Director-General in 1992. As Chief Director Negotiations Support, Spaarwater played a behind-the-scenes role in facilitating the transition to a new dispensation and he shares some interesting perspectives with the reader. His views on his political masters, including the former Minister of Constitutional Development, Roelf Meyer, several high-ranking ANC personalities, other politicians during the CODESA days, and his involvement in the government's top negotiating echelons, certainly make interesting reading. Many informed readers are certainly familiar with the context as much of that was documented by Jan Heunis in *The inner circle: Recollections from the Last Days of Apartheid*. Spaarwater's anecdotes, revelations and personal views on

the backroom political dynamics in government and at Codesa are nevertheless insightful, interesting and of historical significance.

The book is summarised by the publisher as “The experiences of an intelligence agent at a key time in South Africa’s history”, which is bar a few sections of the book that focusses on Spaarwater’s life beyond his career as an intelligence officer, an apt description. It is well written (Spaarwater being a sworn translator of the High Court) and highly recommended for those with a passion for or interest in contemporary South African politics, governance and history. After all, there are probably very few former intelligence functionaries of his profile that will follow his example by discretely and explicitly publishing their recollections. Moreover, very few had such an intimate involvement in, comprehensive overview and solid understanding of the government processes that resulted in official discussions with the ANC leadership and the constitutional negotiations that led to the 1994 democratic elections. This makes it a worthwhile reading experience.

Theo Neethling

Department of Political Studies and Governance

University of the Free State