



REFLECTIONS ON THE CONDUCT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE (SAP) AND VIOLENT POLITICAL CONFLICT, CA. 1984-1989

Abstract

During the 1980s, political violence had the best of the South African landscape. While the minority regime struggled to find a political solution, it simultaneously employed its vast security complex to suppress the upheavals. The South African Police, naturally, represented the apartheid-state's immediate mechanism. The carnage was unprecedented in scope and severity. As such the South African Police, bolstered by draconian security legislation, utilized unprecedented means in quashing opposition. The article aims to address certain aspects of the police's conduct during this time. It should, however, be taken into account that an in-depth analysis of police conduct during the 1980s cannot be undertaken in a single article.

Keywords: Apartheid South Africa; political violence; South African Police; Louis le Grange; Magnus Malan; States of Emergency; torture; kitskonstabels; Third Force; 1980s.

Seutelwoorde: Apartheid Suid-Afrika; politieke geweld; Suid-Afrikaanse Polisie; Louis le Grange; Magnus Malan; noodtoestande; marteling; kitskonstabels; Derde Mag; 1980's.

1. INTRODUCTION

"As far as we are concerned it is war, plain and simple", said Louis le Grange, Minister of Law and Order, in 1984.¹ Although these fire and brimstone statements should not receive too much undue attention as most of them were made in moments of aggravation or political metaphor, the fact is that this statement, and many similar statements, were made; and these sort of statements typified the South African government's actual view and handling of the internal upheavals for many commentators during the 1980s.² The political violence that had beset South Africa

1 H Murray, "Louis le Grange", *Leadership SA* 3(3), 1984, pp. 28-31.

2 A Prior, "Political culture and violence: A case study of the African National Congress in South Africa", *Die Suid-Afrikaanse*

during this decade, flowed forth from the overriding master strategies of both the regime and the African National Congress (ANC) – the Total Strategy and People’s Power, respectively. Socio-economic and political aspects thereof cemented the seedlings of chaos. In September 1984 the violence finally erupted in the Transvaal over tariffs and spread across the country – and, indeed, the decade.³ The article will reflect on the police during this turbulent time and, hopefully, spur or contribute to interdisciplinary research in this regard.

The actions of the Government’s security forces, specifically during successive States of Emergency that had beset the country during the mid- to late 1980s, were an important example of the above, and specifically of the conduct of the South African Police (SAP). Internally, the SAP was the Nationalists’ most important pillar of strength – in essence, the police was the white minority Government’s first line of defense against those who threatened the system that kept it in power. It was also the police force that had to physically implement their policies and indeed, without the police to physically enforce it, States of Emergency, or any other such measures, would not have been worth the paper they were written on.⁴

When one mentions the police, most people will automatically conjure up the familiar image of the blue uniformed bobby-on-the-beat. It is important to note that the police during this period was an extensive organisation. Founded in 1913, by 1987 there were 951 police stations and border posts and some 60 950 police personnel, racially broken up into 32 754 whites and 28 196 non-whites. The SAP was made up of 24 sections. These included the Uniform Branch, the SA Narcotics Branch, the Stock Theft Units, the Financial Section, the Security Branch, the Special Units Branch, the Police Reserve (ex-policemen) and the Reserve Police Force (civilian volunteers).⁵ Although all sections were involved and affected by the violent political turmoil of the period, those most intensely involved with political violence were the Security Branch and the Special Units.

By the 1970s, which saw Soweto explode into chaos, police heads realised the need for a specialised capability for the control of unrest and rioting. During the 1970s the police were not effectively prepared to handle uprisings such as those it had faced in 1976.⁶ The police officers who were drawn to help suppress the uprisings were ordinary rank and file constables who, without the necessary special training, were prone to fall back on brute force. By the 1980s, as mass political upheavals flared up, unrest policing was separated from ordinary police

Tydskrif vir Staatsleer 11(2), December 1984, p. 189.

3 See H Sommer, “From apartheid to democracy: Patterns of violent and nonviolent direct action in South Africa, 1984-1994”, *Africa Today* 43(1), January-March 1996, pp.53-76.

4 *Ibid.*

5 D van Pletzen (ed.), *The official yearbook of the Republic of South Africa 1988/89* (Pretoria: Bureau for Information, 1988), p. 260.

6 S de Villiers (ed.), *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Cape Town: Juta & Co. Ltd., 2003), p. 175.

training. As riot and unrest control became an increasingly central aspect of police duty, growing amounts of funding were allocated to the riot police segment of the police. According to the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) during the era in question, police riot control, “was in line with the state’s highly militarised and coordinated approach” to the ANC’s so-called “people’s war”.⁷ Throughout the decade, pressure increasingly swelled up against the minority regime. So too, the state would increasingly pressure the police to fortify it against internal attack. Successive States of Emergency would place tremendous weight on the police in this regard. Excessive police behaviour was not necessarily the political answer to the country’s woes, but the police had to create a cordon of sorts, while the politicians tinkered with solutions.

2. PROSTITUTING THE POLICE?

Contrary to popular belief, not all police headmen clamoured for a State of Emergency. Police Commissioner, Gen. Johann Coetzee, opposed the institution of the first 1985 State of Emergency, favouring the more traditional tried and tested policing methods of infiltration, detention and arrest in dealing with unrest.⁸ But he was outweighed by other police powerbrokers, such as Security Branch Head, Maj. Gen. Johan van der Merwe. On the Government’s side, in terms of the unrest, one of the most powerful policemen was Maj. Gen. Bert Wandrag, who was in charge of the police’s counter-insurgency scheme and strategised in terms of the Total Onslaught. Shortly before the 1985 State of Emergency came into effect, he argued in favour of “firm action” by the police which, practically speaking, would somewhat curtail the concept of “minimum force”.⁹

Practical and longstanding dilemmas surrounding the difficulties of riot control cited by the police themselves and by outside analysts included:

- severe lack of manpower;
- the layout of the townships, with houses and shacks stacked cheek-by-jowl, necessitating penetration on foot and in single file only;
- a hot climate, making the wearing of riot gear and visors very uncomfortable. South Africa’s warm climate also makes the use of water cannons much less effective;
- South African riots were more violent and more dangerous compared to those in Europe;

7 *Ibid.*

8 G Cawthra, *Brutal force: The apartheid war machine* (London: International Defence Aid Fund, 1986), p. 30.

9 *Ibid.*

- the fear experienced by young 18 year old policemen – operating in units of 20 or 30 – confronting huge crowds of up to and more than 50 000 people easily led to violent overreaction;¹⁰
- aggression and agitation from the side of the protestors or rioters;
- the racially prejudiced attitudes of the police which entailed a very real right-wing element within police circles;
- the abovementioned State of Emergency indemnity clause protecting policemen from any court proceedings brought against them;
- alleged magisterial judicial bias in favour of police officers;
- alleged reluctance of attorney-generals at prosecuting police officers; and
- an alleged conspiracy-of-silence among the brotherhood of policemen concerning the misconduct of their colleagues.¹¹

At the end of 1985, an article appeared in the police force's official periodical, *Servamus*, which was clearly intended to give an objective, and also positive, account of police activities in townships during the States of Emergency. Entitled "Inside South Africa's burning townships (with the SA Police)", TH Troups, a foreign journalist, went on patrol with some riot policemen. After emphasising how South Africa's internal upheavals were triggered by socio-economic calamities and then exploited by radicals who intimidate "ordinary residents" to take part, he moved on to explain the police's bad press. Accordingly, the police role as protectors in township violence was, "widely ignored".¹²

Subtly working on how non-political the police were, he referred to policemen who had sacrificed their lives in order to save black people, basically from themselves. He quoted an unnamed resident who said, "The police appeared as knights in shining armour, to stop Black destroying Black". Moving on, he explained how black people endured the vast security presence for the greater good; he stated that, although black people did not enjoy, "living in a police atmosphere", they also, "don't like having their homes and shops burned". Troups then went on to write how disciplined and conscientious the riot police were, noting that they started off with verbal warnings which, according to him, were futile as the crowd did not listen.¹³

Since "minimum force" was the watchword, the police will use firepower, "as a last resort". He ended his article by listing all the special talents a riot

10 A Jeffery, *Riot policing in perspective* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1991), pp. 3-5.

11 *Ibid.*

12 TH Troups, "Riot – inside South Africa's burning townships (with the South Africa Police)", *Servamus*, November 1985, pp. 10-11.

13 *Ibid.*

policeman must have and, “[f]ortunately for most township residents there are men who have mastered these skills [...]”.¹⁴ The article was clearly intended to boost police morale.

During the turbulent 1980s, the police’s image was very bad amongst blacks. This perception was in no small way due to the laws the police enforced. Because the people regarded the laws made by the politicians in Pretoria to be harsh, unfair and prejudiced, it stands to reason that the people would regard the government’s law enforcers in the same way. In other words, as far as the majority of the people were concerned, the police force, in effect, became the agents of apartheid.¹⁵

The Government vehemently denied that its security forces were used to further political goals, but during the mid-1980s, the lines between political security and the law and order were certainly blurred. “The South African Police [...] are not being used by this Government to further their political aims as such”, Minister Louis le Grange explained, “We are there to protect the security of South Africa and to maintain law and order.”¹⁶ Years after the PW Botha era and its accompanying rhetoric had ended, during the TRC hearings of the 1990s, former SAP General, Johan van der Merwe, cleared up the issue when he said, “The politicians prostituted the police”.¹⁷

Because the police were the state’s primary enforcers of apartheid laws and the first line of defence against internal dissent, they became the primary symbol of apartheid’s oppression. As the most recognised face of apartheid domination and severity, the police also received the brunt of violent outrage which was directed at apartheid. The ANC had specifically earmarked the police for attack.¹⁸ Furthermore, the police’s work was greatly frustrated in the mid- to late 1980s when black people could easily get killed if they were seen as being too friendly with the police. If blacks were regarded as being collaborators, they were harassed and killed by necklacing. During 1985 the anti-police feelings amongst radicals were burning. Policemen in townships were indeed in grave danger.¹⁹

3. THE MILIEU

When assessing the role of the police, it is important to look at the sphere the police worked in and, more importantly, the mode of thought the government had

14 *Ibid.*

15 Prior, p. 195.

16 Institute for Contemporary History (INCH), University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. Louis le Grange Private Collection (LGPC), PV 778: pleg. 262.

17 A Krog, *Country of my skull* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 4.

18 *Die Volksblad*, 30 April 1985.

19 *Die Volksblad*, 27 October 1985.

helped to foment within the police milieu as to what was expected of them during these tough times.

In a 1986 speech delivered to young policemen who had completed their training, PW Botha said that, apart from their normal policing duties, they were also expected to defeat an evil campaign of terror ["bose veldtog van terreur"]. And that they, the police, were South Africa's first line of defence against the powers of Communist enslavement ["voorstel linie teen die magte van die Kommunistiese slawerny"].²⁰

To ensure that they unequivocally grasped the serious implication of this, Botha assured them that the state had a good understanding of the international terrorist onslaught and that leftist radicalism ["links-radikale konkelry"] was at the root of this global plot. He emphasized that this fatherland struggle was severe because South Africa could not expect any help or understanding from the rest of the world, since they all bought into the "great lie".²¹

This, according to Botha, was an international "propaganda game" which caused many, "normally rational and logical people [to] lose perspective". As for the idea that negotiations would solve everything, Botha said that was simply a, "false impression [of a] mythical heaven on earth" and part of the "great lie". Botha said that when people spoke of negotiations they actually meant, "a final transfer of power to the South African Communist Party and its front, the ANC". He repeated that South Africa could not even state its case as, "the world is not allowed to believe it". Making the police officers even more attentive to the sinister political climate they were about to work in, the State President implored the policemen that this, "sly interference for the benefit of radicals" should be, "exposed to public contempt".²²

This speech, on the one hand, underlined the great responsibility that went along with wearing the police uniform, but, as can clearly be noted, there was a broader political undercurrent. Botha's speech – and indeed many other similar messages to the police from various authority figures – conveyed the impression that only the police could protect South Africa from a lurking Armageddon. It could be argued that these and many similar sentiments served to strengthen an over-zealousness, an "anything-goes" mentality on the side of many policemen.²³ On the other hand, the anti-establishment groups attacked the government with stringent war cries that furthered the idea that a full-out civil war was imminent.

20 INCH. PW Botha Private Collection (PWBPC), PV 203: 4/2/144.

21 *Ibid.* For more information on the Botha government's relations with the international community, see J-A Stemmet, *Apartheid under siege, 1984-1988: Actions and reactions*, Section 3 (PhD, University of the Free State, 2002).

22 *Ibid.*

23 The ANC also made use of this type of propaganda. During the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the issue of what was propaganda and what were broad directives was intensely debated by both the ANC and former government officials.

For example, in 1986 Allan Boesak told a rally that the people should keep on fighting until Botha has to flee the country in the middle of the night.²⁴

With the above in mind, it is again necessary to point out the great powers and privileges Pretoria had bestowed on the police – a police force which was encouraged to believe that the barbarians were at the gate and that only they could rescue the country. By the mid-1980s, by means of its extensive laws and regulations, the Botha Government covered every possible aspect of protest politics and popular dissent. Wielding such explicit and, at the same time, vague laws as the 1982 Internal Security Act and State of Emergency Regulations, the Government had intensified its political grip and expanded its draconian control to new frontiers. Through its intertwined judicial web, the Government prescribed who could do and say what, when, where, for how long and in which way.²⁵ The Government thus inspired a sense of desperate-times-call-for-desperate-measures, and then went a long way in legally condoning those desperate measures. In doing so, the Government freed the police force's hand to a great extent and encouraged them to push the limits. After all, as the police's Minister of Law and Order had said, this was a war.

When the Government told their undermanned, overworked police force – after showing them through the extraordinary legislation – that these were desperate times where the end definitely justified the means, brute excesses could have been expected. Of course, this hampered the government's position when trying to reign in the police. Because, after enforcing the idea that South Africa's physical survival depended on the police's efforts, the Botha administration could not simply step back and tell the police that they had taken their words too literally.

The fact that the police were tremendously undermanned and had to cope with immense pressure from the Government to deliver; as well as physical pressure from within the violent townships and all round criticism from both inside and outside South Africa; should not be belittled. That this fomented a climate for the police's inordinate severity should not be underestimated. "During my term in office in Cape Town, extreme pressure was placed by the Joint Security Management System on the Security Branch, in particular to stem the tide of murder and violence", Maj. Gen. Griebenauf of the police explained, "And obviously I gave members under my command instructions to do everything in their power to apprehend people who were guilty of these things to extract as much information as possible from the detainees [...] I was [...] very much aware of the fact that members' success could be ascribed to the use of unconventional questioning or interrogation methods."²⁶

24 *Die Volksblad*, 22 February 1986.

25 JD Brewer, *Black and blue: Policing in South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 300.

26 De Villiers (ed.), Vol. 2, p. 218.

Being arrested by the police was a traumatic and shameful prospect for most white South Africans and, as such, possibly an effective deterrent – much less so for black South Africans. During the apartheid years hundreds of thousands of South Africans were arrested under the large range of apartheid laws and regulations. At the risk of generalizing, it could be argued that, for so-called non-white South Africans, arrest became a relatively normal part of life in apartheid South Africa and, during the 1980s, being arrested for your political defiance was something of a status symbol and identified one as having been part of the struggle.²⁷ Arrest, therefore, lost much of its inherent use as deterrent. Nonetheless, during the States of Emergency one aspect of being held by the police that posed a chilling prospect was being detained without trial. This was so because there was a very real chance that, once detained, one might disappear. A fair amount of the police brutality that took place during the 1980s took place within the seclusion of police interrogation cells.

“I know people so easily refer to detention without trial as if we detain people and forget about them. But I’m talking about people who are being detained for questioning”, said Louis le Grange in 1985. “The purpose of the detention is to get information from these people” and, “We try to make it as comfortable as possible [...] I want to assure you that we are certainly trying to detain these people under the most humane circumstances”. About the much debated and criticised fact that the detainees are kept in solitary confinement, the Minister explained that was simply, “the best secure accommodation available”.²⁸

The poet and painter, Breyten Breytenbach, published a book entitled *True confessions of an albino terrorist*. Breytenbach, who was jailed on charges of terrorism from 1975 to 1982, wrote that the police and other security forces made extensive use of torture and that the police adhered to absolutely, “no ethics, no moral or religious code” in their, “absolute power to do with and to detainees what they want to”. The SAP, not surprisingly, said that his accusations, “derived from [...] fantasy” and were, “far-fetched, malicious, and unsubstantiated”. Furthermore, the police said that they were, “totally opposed to any illegal, cruel, or inhuman treatment of prisoners”.²⁹

One of the most infamous cases of the 1980s police brutality took place in 1983. On 6 July 1983, Paris Malatji was interrogated while in police detention. His interrogation came to an abrupt end when Sgt. Jan Harm van As shot Malatji through the head.³⁰ During 1984, Abel Ngwenya died a few hours after being detained by police. A private pathologist said violence was the cause of death. The police, as they would do many more times, cited epilepsy as having been

27 See the chapters on the African National Congress (ANC) in Stemmet.

28 INCH. LGPC, PV 778: pleg. 262.

29 C Cooper *et al.*, *Race Relations Survey 1984* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1985), pp. 768-769.

30 *Ibid.*

responsible.³¹ Louis le Grange said that no one died in police custody during 1985, irrespective of facts to the contrary. On 6 May 1985 a shop-steward of the Chemical Workers' Industrial Trade Unions, Andries Lazarus Raditsela, died in a Soweto hospital. Two days before, Raditsela, then still in good health, had been detained by police. Later that same day he was admitted to hospital. A post mortem found that he had died of subdural haemorrhaging. His death caused an outcry and his funeral was attended by 25 000 mourners.³² In 1986, the new Minister of Law and Order, Adriaan Vlok, said that 83 people had died while in police custody.³³

In 1988, the Human Rights Commission reported that 13 people had gone missing while being detained by the police.³⁴ During 1988, information came to light about Ngwako Ramalepe who had died in 1985 while in police custody. His family's lawyer alleged that the police had tortured him and then dumped his body by the roadside. Dr. David Loubser, a pathologist found that Ramalepe's stomach had blood in it; meaning that he had swallowed his own blood and had died after his veins ruptured and thus bled to death. His veins had ruptured after police had beaten him more than 40 times with a sjambok.³⁵

4. ...VERY UNPLEASANT...DETENTION

In 1987, according to the police, Benedict Mashoke had hanged himself while in custody. His mother said that he had told her, while in custody, that the security police was torturing him. She also said that, when she went to identify her son's body, his face was extremely swollen and his right eye was protruding from its socket, but that there were strangely no marks around his neck. The pathologist concurred. During 1988, the death, while in police custody, of Simon Murale, former Vice-Chairman of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS), also received attention. Murale died after he was transferred from the Modderbee Prison to the Boksburg/Benoni Hospital.³⁶

"This study provides very strong evidence that torture is commonly practiced in South Africa", stated the conclusion of a 1985 report by the University of Cape Town's Institute for Criminology.³⁷

31 *Ibid.*

32 C Cooper *et al.*, *Race Relations Survey 1985* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations 1986), pp. 454-455.

33 C Cooper *et al.*, *Race Relations Survey 1986* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations 1987), p. 769.

34 C Cooper *et al.*, *Race Relations Survey 1988/89* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations 1989), p. 555.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 568-569.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Cooper *et al.*, *Race Relations Survey 1985*, p. 453.

“You don’t have to make physical contact with someone to assault them; you can make it unpleasant for someone on lots of different levels [Jy hoef nie noodwendig iemand direk aan te raak om hom aan te rand nie; jy kan op baie verskillende maniere dit vir ’n mens uiters onplesierig maak]”, said Louis le Grange in 1985 and then added, “None of those methods are permitted [Geen van daardie metodes word toegelaat nie]”.³⁸ Many commentators have argued that detention without trial and the subsequent solitary confinement that accompanied it was in itself a form of torture. But, in more practical or physical terms, the police devised a whole range of torture methods. There was an extensive menu of methods, varying from the more traditional, like beatings, to intricate psychological torture.³⁹ The most “popular” methods of torture included:

- beatings and assaults with fists, hosepipes or whips and a further array of implements;
- electric shocks administered to various sensitive places on the body;
- choking and/or strangulation;
- suffocation with a wet bag or hood made of cloth;
- breaking or crushing of toes or fingers or other parts of the body;
- burning;
- defilement of sexual organs;
- animals such as snakes, dogs and even spiders were also used to torture people; and
- the use of drugs.⁴⁰

During the second half of 1985, the SAP arrested almost 900 schoolchildren who were taking part in a school boycott, some of them as young as seven. “We are cracking down”, warned Gen. Johann Coetzee, “We will not allow 5000 stupid students to disregard law and order”.⁴¹ During 1985 to 1989 some 48 000 detainees were under the age of 25. Torture methods used on children by the police range from food and sleep deprivation to beating and kicking, being kept naked during interrogation, electric shocks and cigarette burns.⁴² The police, during the period in question, explained over and over that their men were up

38 H Gillomee, “Onderhoud met Louis le Grange”, *Die Suid-Afrikaan* 3, Autumn 1985, p. 16.

39 Cawthra, p. 116; M Coleman (ed.), *A crime against humanity: Analysing the repression of the apartheid state* (Belville: Mayibuye Books, 1989), pp. 54-55.

40 *Ibid.*

41 P Younghusband *et al.*, “The friends of Mr. Botha”, *Newsweek* 106(10), 2 September 1985, p. 40.

42 De Villiers (ed.), Vol. 2, pp. 261-262.

against large mobs, which sometimes, unfortunately, contained children.⁴³ They also asked the responsible organisations to refrain from using children in their ranks. The police added that they would not allow stone throwers and arsonists to go free and unpunished just because they were under age⁴⁴

In 1985, Dr Wendy Orr, a district surgeon, stated that her daily work had brought her into contact with many detainees and that overwhelming physical evidence existed that many of these people were deliberately being tortured and assaulted. Some of the more macabre complaints she received from the stream of new detainees included that they were forced to eat their own hair and drink petrol. She said that what distressed her most was that many of the detainees in her care were taken away for the sole purpose of being tortured. Dr Orr also said that it had become clear to her that, because of their special powers under the States of Emergency, many security officers, “were unrestrained in the abuses they inflict upon the detainees”.⁴⁵ The police firmly denied her allegations and stated that her findings were based on hearsay. Brig. Ernest Schnetler also stated that the people had to remember that the country was in a state of violent unrest and that the police were under immense pressure. Furthermore, the Brigadier noted that the police themselves were under constant violent attack.⁴⁶

In some cases where detainees died under interrogation, the police got rid of the body. In many cases where detainees died, instead of going to this type of trouble, the police simply lied about the cause of death.⁴⁷

These official stories varied greatly – more common excuses being that the detainee died of natural causes; that the detainee voluntarily committed suicide and, finally, that the detainee fatally slipped on a bar of soap while showering. Many of these cover stories were so flimsy and became so commonplace that they were eventually ridiculed.⁴⁸ Police brutality continuously solicited extreme criticism. In 1985 Louis le Grange pointed out that people should not condemn the entire police service for the misconduct of a few individuals. He also said that the police had to do with brutal killers and, “naughty children” and that the police, in some cases, had to act severely in order to protect innocent lives.⁴⁹ Did Pretoria condone this behaviour? In his testimony before the TRC, Leon Wessels, a high ranking Nationalist, said that, “everybody in this country knew people were tortured”.⁵⁰

43 The ANC explicitly called on the youth to participate in the struggle and to fight the security forces.

44 Cooper *et al.*, *Race Relations Survey 1985*, pp. 442-443.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 450.

46 *Die Volksblad*, 6 February 1986.

47 De Villiers (ed.), Vol. 2, p. 213.

48 See the reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Volumes 1-4.

49 *Die Volksblad*, 1 May 1985.

50 De Villiers (ed.), Vol. 2, p. 219.

5. HEATING UP THE HOTSPOTS: THE TOWNSHIPS

The police's image among black South Africans was fomented openly in townships. The police methods and mechanisms used in townships were thorough. Apart from experimenting with different devices like a so-called sneeze machine and types of tear-gas cannons, traditional riot equipment included rifles fitted with teargas discharges, shotguns and the Stopper 37mm gun, which could shoot teargas canisters or rubber bullets.⁵¹ There was always the sjambok (a type of leathery whip) which became an international symbol of apartheid brutality. Questioned about its use, Le Grange said it was mild, "it's just a sting".⁵²

In a highly confidential 1985 document compiled for the Minister of Law and Order by Commissioner PJ de Wit, the methods used at that time by the police were summarised. Apart from the ordinary methods, members of the Security Units, posing as reporters, photographed troublemakers ["belhamels"]. These ringleaders ["voor-bokke"] were dealt with later.⁵³

One of the tactics mentioned in the report was the use of so-called dummy vehicles ["fopvoertuie"]. According to the Commissioner these vehicles were used to demoralise those who perpetuated radicalism.⁵⁴ In a 1985 case that would become known as the so-called Trojan Horse incident, one of these fake vehicles did a lot more than demoralise.⁵⁵

The immediate effect of the Trojan Horse maneuver did not subdue the community, as the police had hoped it would; instead it outraged them to the point of hysteria.⁵⁶ An inquest followed the international outcry. It reprimanded the police, stating that it could not, "hide behind a State of Emergency". Nonetheless, the Cape's Attorney General declined to prosecute anyone involved.⁵⁷ These types of incidents became commonplace during the decade.

51 Cawthra, p. 254.

52 INCH. LGPC, PV 778: pleg. 262.

53 INCH. LGPC, PV 778: pleg. 18.

54 *Ibid.*

55 Details of this incident remain sketchy to this day. This summary must not be understood as, nor does it pretend to be, an in-depth account. In October of 1985, in the coloured Cape township of Athlone, as part of a Special Task Force operation of the railway police, a railways truck cruised slowly up and down the streets. When someone finally flung stones at it, policemen, who had all along hidden in the back of the truck under wooden crates, jumped up and starting shooting. The 12 policemen and one soldier were armed with pump-action shotguns from which they fired 39 rounds. They killed one adult and three youths. The youngest of the three was only 11 years old. Unbeknownst to the security men, an American television crew was filming not far from there and captured the whole sequence on tape. Within hours the killing was broadcast around the globe and shocked the world. See RH du Preez, *Separate but unequal. The coloured people of South Africa: A political history* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1994).

56 P Younghusband, "South Africa on the boil", *Newsweek* (106)18, 28 October 1985, p. 27.

57 Cooper *et al.*, *Race Relations Survey 1988/89*, p. 566.

It must be stressed that the policemen in the townships were under intense pressure. A *Newsweek* article of 1985 argued that South Africa's internal violence would, "tax the skill and discipline" of any police force, but as the situation steadily degenerated, the SAP had become, "undermanned, overtired and quick on the trigger".⁵⁸

6. INSTANT COPS

The police decided on a way to boost the numbers of policemen. "An effective physical counter to the tyranny of the 'comrades' should be established from the ranks of the blacks themselves", read a police paper by Maj. Gen. FMA Steenkamp. As the Black Local Authorities (BLAs) started to fall apart during the mid-1980s, the Government decided to follow the Malaysian counterrevolutionary model. They created special constables and municipal police forces to protect moderate black councils and to expand the security forces' presence in the black townships.⁵⁹ In order to inflate their numbers, the SAP unveiled *kitskonstabels* (literally meaning "instant constables"). Most were jobless, semi-literate and many had criminal backgrounds.

During the States of Emergency they were deemed to be part of the Force and, therefore, had the same extraordinary powers and privileges pertaining to formal policemen, and they were similarly armed. *Kitskonstabels* were known for being thuggish and cruel.⁶⁰ These were bolstered by the infamous Municipal Law Enforcement Officers (MLEO). Their deployment formed part of the police's strategy for black areas to be policed by black policemen. The basic criteria were that a volunteer should be fit and have a standard 6 (grade 8) school qualification. They were trained for about three months, uniformed and armed. Overnight, this turned into a bloodied disaster.⁶¹

"The special constables were the biggest nonsense introduced by the state", policemen told the TRC, "They shot people unnecessarily. They were drunk on duty and rude most of the time. The problem was that they had not received enough training [...] they were wild. The problem was that they were uneducated, but given guns and a high position."⁶² Gen. Magnus Malan, Minister of Defence, viewed these special constables with contempt as being untrained

58 R Wilkinson and RB Cullen, "Hair trigger justice", *Newsweek* 106(12), 16 September 1985, p. 15.

59 De Villiers (ed.), Vol. 2, p. 182.

60 J Cock and L Nathan (eds), *War and society: The militarisation of South Africa* (Cape Town: David Phillips, 1989), p. 77. See also, A Jeffery, *The Natal story: 16 Years of conflict* (Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1997).

61 Brewer, p. 302.

62 De Villiers (ed.), Vol. 2, p. 184.

and unmanaged.⁶³ “It is not about having feet on the ground”, explained Gen. Malan, “it is about having competencies on the ground [...] Police were seen as power – that’s what he wanted”.⁶⁴ One township resident described these special policemen as, “the dogs of the South African Police doing all their hunting and watching”.⁶⁵ Township dwellers were sickened and revolted. *Kitskonstabels* were ostracized, hunted and slaughtered – the *kitskonstabels* reacted in kind. This further complicated the work of the formal policemen. The police now had to police the townships, as well as, technically, their fellow-policemen.⁶⁶

Although an outcry surrounded the brutality of certain elements of the police, a phantom-like specter was brewing. This camouflaged corps became known as the so-called “Third Force”.⁶⁷

7. “LIKE HELL!”: THE THIRD FORCE

Since the beginning of the 1980s and, specifically, by the mid-1980s when the violence and mass liberation movement really gained momentum, certain individual anti-apartheid activists started to simply disappear. Corpses were discovered, while others simply vanished. Rumours started to surface that a sinister entity was responsible. Had Pretoria begun to systematically and physically liquidate opponents? Or was it natural mass-paranoia?

In 1989, only one day before 32 year-old Butana Almond Nofomela was to have been hanged for a non-political crime, he revealed the small tip of a chilling iceberg. He claimed to have been part of an official state-sponsored hit-squad, cloaked by the police’s Security Branch.⁶⁸

In 1980 the State Security Council approved a program called “Institutions and Functions of Special Forces”. This bureaucratic sounding outline was, in fact, the top-secret creation of a defense capacity to wage ultra-sensitive operations against state enemies, employing operations and techniques that fell outside the conventional scope of the security forces. In other words, the Government wanted to create a structured capability to execute covert operations against its enemies. “Covert operations are associated with a psycho-political condition of frustration among decision-makers”, wrote academic Annette Seegers. “These methods may

63 J-A Stemmet Private Collection (JASPC). Interview with Gen. Magnus Malan, 12 August 2000.

64 *Ibid.*

65 M Swilling (ed.), *Views on the South African state* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1990), p. 90.

66 De Villiers (ed.), Vol. 2, p. 184.

67 It is of the utmost importance to note that, as far as the scope of this article is concerned, it would be an insurmountable task to give a full and complete in-depth historic account of the Third Force, the various forms it took, the scores of operations, or to speculate who exactly in Pretoria was aware of it.

68 Coleman (ed.), pp. 121-123.

co-exist with the rule of law but, in some cases, the rule of law withers to a point where covert operations are the rule and the law is the exception.”⁶⁹ Structures were to be established to secretly recruit, secretly manage and secretly fund special clandestine units. At first the initiative was confined to the army’s elite Delta 40 unit. Initially, their targets were exclusively outside the Republic. As the internal situation deteriorated, it eventually operated locally too.⁷⁰

During 1986, Adriaan Vlok, who was then the Deputy Minister of Law and Order, convened a special committee to discuss the country’s internal security situation. An interim report was compiled which proposed that a third force was needed – a special security structure which would come from, but exist outside the police force and army. This special force was to have been, “specifically organised, equipped and trained to plan, co-ordinate and execute counter-revolutionary actions” in an attempt to counter internal unrest.⁷¹

In 2000, Gen. Magnus Malan spoke about the inception of the third force and how livid he was when it was suggested to him by Vlok. “I said, ‘Like hell!’” The General said that the police was obviously going to usurp his men and that, “you guys don’t know how to work with them”.⁷² Apparently Malan’s concerns were pooh-poohed quickly after Vlok’s committee handed in their report. The Civil Cooperation Bureau was formally created from members of the police and diverse security institutions.⁷³

“In some cases it was necessary to eliminate activists by killing them”, said Maj. Gen. “Sakkie” Crawford, “This was the only way in which effective action could be taken against activists in a war situation”.⁷⁴ Technically, the term “death squad” is not completely fitting, because these groups’ activities not only included killings, but also threatening and intimidating individuals, destabilising political organisations’ facilities and the spreading of disinformation to cause trouble, confusion, fear and paranoia in the ranks of the opposition – by whatever means.⁷⁵

The relevant security operatives justified their targeted killings of guerrillas, as well as non-combatant anti-apartheid activists, by arguing that it was something that had to be done in reaction to the ANC’s stepping up of its “people’s war”. As well as, and probably in no way less important, was the intense pressure put on them by the Government to crush, by any means possible,

69 C Schutte, I Liebenberg and T Minnaar (eds), *The hidden hand: Covert operations in South Africa* (Pretoria: HSRC Publishers, 1998), p. 80.

70 C Alden, *Apartheid’s last stand: The rise and fall of the South African security state* (Johannesburg: Macmillan Press, 1996), p. 95.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

72 JASPC. Interview with Gen. Magnus Malan, 12 August 2000.

73 Alden, p. 176.

74 De Villiers (ed.), Vol. 2, p. 221.

75 Schutte *et al.*, p. 158.

internal dissent and to protect the *status quo*. In many cases, security personnel whose loyalty to Pretoria was questioned became targets themselves.⁷⁶

The number of politically motivated assassinations by these special task forces increased after 1985 and coincided with the shift to counter-revolutionary strategies. The securocrats no longer regarded the most important threats to state security as being of an external nature, but rather as a growing interior hazard. State Security Council documents of the period reflect a certain anxiety among securocrats at the security forces' inability to permanently and quickly quell internal unrest.⁷⁷

8. CONCLUSION

Recently, contributions to South Africa's historiography have witnessed a boom in academic works and a plethora of popular literature dealing with the so-called Border War, also known as the Bush War. The role of the SAP during the country's violent political saga of the 1980s is completely overshadowed by the dramatics, and at times romanticized trauma, of the Border War. The police of the 1980s are easily dismissed as the hero-less henchmen of the apartheid state; the physical embodiment of the system at its darkest.

Apart from embroidering on police brutality, vital and relevant other fields of study are in great shortage. Statistically, South Africa is bewilderingly dangerous. South Africa is globally (in)correctly regarded as a gangster's paradise with its incredulous corruption and types of violent crime of which the brutality borders on the phantasmagoric. In 2016 there were 2 126 552 crimes reported to the police. This included 623 233 cases of murder, attempted murder, sexual offenses, assault and robbery.⁷⁸

Further deterioration in this regard may very well lure or force the police into the realm of extraordinary means of conduct by a frantic political *status quo*. A society where the, a la Richard Nixon, silent majority craves law and order, but no longer trusts the enforcers (nor their political bosses) thereof, lays bare the seedlings of a society heading towards implosion. As the 1980s showed, merely bolstering the number and powers of the police are not enough to solve crises of which the crux is embedded in much deeper sociopolitical processes. The interaction between the political sphere, the realm of the police and its combined impact on society during times of turmoil, as found in South Africa during the 1980s, demands sober and thorough research.

76 De Villiers (ed.), Vol. 2, p. 273.

77 *Ibid.*

78 "South African crime stats 2016: Everything you need to know", *Business Tech*, 2 September 2016, <Businessstech.co.za>, accessed 8 February 2017.