

TROOPS, TOWNSHIPS AND TRIBULATIONS: DEPLOYMENT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEFENCE FORCE (SADF) IN THE TOWNSHIP UNREST OF THE 1980s

J-A Stemmet*

1. INTRODUCTION

As South Africa's violent political crisis of the 1980s intensified, the SADF entered the internal fray - at the behest of the South African Police (SAP). The military supplied auxiliary support to the police in their drive to squash township unrest. The deployment of the army was a controversial move. Both within and outside South Africa anti-apartheid activists condemned military involvement, arguing that it proved the brutality of the regime and, propagandistically, that Pretoria, apparently compelled to deploy the military, was losing control over the violent conflict. The military was apprehensive about involving itself in the local turmoil. Starting with Operation Palmiet of 1984, this article examines the development of the military's internal role, as well as the police's justification for calling on the SADF and, on the other hand, the army's qualms about entering the internal arena alongside the police. Finally the article will reflect on the army's approaches and conduct during its local foray.

2. PALMIET, POLICEMEN AND PRECEDENTS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MILITARY PRESENCE

"Bloody Monday" was how 3 September 1984 would eventually be known in South Africa. A one-day stay-away was organised in the Vaal Triangle to protest against an announced service cost increase by the black Lekoa community council. The protests, initially revolving around the Sharpeville and Sebokeng townships near Vereeniging, exploded into violence. In the days that followed 31 people died and 300 were injured.¹ By 23:30 on the day of the stay-away, Sharpeville lay in

* Department of History, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. Email: stemmetj.hum@mail.uovs.ac.za

¹ A Du Toit and N Manganyi (eds), **Political violence and the struggle in South Africa** (Cape Town, 1990), p.1; JD Brewer, **Black and blue: policing in SA** (New York, 1994), p. 298.

ruins and nine people had been killed. Boulders and rocks blocked entrances to the township and burning vehicles were strewn about. Of the dead, most were killed in clashes with the police but some died as a result of black anger vented on community councillors, some of whom were literally hacked into pieces. Looting and arson were the order of the day as shops, homes and businesses were destroyed.

The following day the death toll rose as more corpses were found. Four strangled bodies were found behind a garage; another was discovered having been stabbed to death and the burnt body of another victim was discovered in a liquor store. As the townships started to burn, the death toll, by the end of the 4th, rose to 26. On 5 September 1984, an office building was set on fire in addition to a private house and a hostel housing migrant workers. The home of a murdered councillor was destroyed and others were pelted with petrol bombs.²

The unrest then took a new route and spread to the East Rand townships, with stone throwing starting at Thembisa. Initial targets included a primary school, a beer hall, a bus and a delivery van. Vosloorus experienced incidents not unlike these. The violence was terrifying and the cost was running into millions of rands.³ Clearly the situation was critical and it seemed that the police were not successful. As in Grahamstown earlier in the month when sporadic violent incidents occurred, it was time to call in the army.

At 02:00 on 23 October Operation Palmiet commenced. To execute this "seal and search" operation, a mixed batch of no less than 7 000 soldiers and policemen moved through Vereeniging to Sebokeng, Sharpeville and Boipatong. The thousands of soldiers formed a cordon around the townships - in the streets of Sebokeng there was an armed soldier every 10 meters.⁴ This left the police free to conduct an intense door-to-door search of every one of the 19 500 houses and shacks.

Inside Sebokeng on the afternoon of the same day, police and army commanders briefed selected politicians and security personnel on the success of Palmiet. They told the group that the operation was an "unqualified success" and that the army had already left the township's streets; furthermore, that the operation had been conducted with the strictest discipline; citing as proof the fact that not a single shot had been fired nor any stones been thrown.

² G Leach, **South Africa - no easy path to peace** (Boston, 1986), p. 137.

³ **Ibid.**

⁴ J Cock and L Nathan (eds), **War and society: The militarisation of South Africa** (Cape Town, 1989), p. 68.

The Minister of Law and Order, Louis le Grange, said that Operation Palmiet was necessary to "effectively rid the areas of criminal and revolutionary elements". The operation was a success as far as discipline was concerned but if the security chiefs hoped to crack open a terrorist cell they must have been very disappointed. Between 350 and 400 arrests were made, but on non-terrorist charges only. The charges varied from contravention of pass and influx laws to the illegal possession of dagga, small firearms, stolen goods and pornography.⁵

On 15 November 1984, the army again backed the police. This time the army was brought in to help the Orange/Vaal Development Board in another crackdown on Sebokeng. Hundreds of policemen and soldiers, with the special board police tagging alongside, entered the huge Sebokeng Hostel which housed 10 000 migrant workers. Unlike Palmiet, 2 300 arrests were made. During the next two months the army moved in on Daveyton, Atteridgeville, Tembisa, Fingo Village, Evaton and Vosloorus.⁶

Irrespective of how disciplined the operation was and of whether a single shot was fired or not, the internal use of the army sparked widespread criticism. "We needed 7 000 soldiers and police, apparently to restore law and order," said Beyers Naudé in 1984, "tomorrow, if we continue to act in that way without looking at the root cause, we will need 20 000...But at the end we are still going to lose."⁷

The political editor of the **Rand Daily Mail**, Patrick Laurence, wrote: "The use of so many soldiers so openly served to indicate the severity of the crisis generated by township rebellion. The advantages of deploying troops appear to have been outweighed by the disadvantages...If the aim was to eradicate the spirit of rebellion, to eliminate the influence of 'radicals' and restore the confidence of the 'large majority of peace-loving people' in the government, it was not fulfilled."⁸

A group of lawyers specialising in human rights warned that Operation Palmiet could cause blacks to regard the army as an "instrument of white political oppression" and could even "encourage resistance to military call-up amongst whites who do not wish to participate [in] the enforcement of discriminatory laws".⁹

⁵ P Frankel and N Pines (eds), **State, resistance and change in South Africa** (Johannesburg, 1989), p. 117; C Cooper et al., **Race Relations Survey 1984**, p. 752; S Baynham, "Protest, the police and public order", **Reality**, Vol. 17, No. 3, May 1985, p. 4.

⁶ Frankel and Pines, p. 117.

⁷ B Naudé and A Paton, "Beyers Naudé in conversation with Alan Paton", **Leadership SA**, Vol. 3, No. 4, fourth quarter, 1984, p. 83.

⁸ P Laurence, "The collapse of indirect rule", **Indicator SA**, Vol. 2, No. 4, January 1985, pp. 13-4.

⁹ **Ibid.**

Certain police spokesmen said that the mere presence of uniformed and armed soldiers had a marked effect and it was "often all that was necessary to disperse an angry crowd", which of course had dire consequences for the army's ambitious "hearts-and-minds" campaign.¹⁰ "Palmiet kan nie anders as om die beeld van die politieke neutraliteit te ondermyn nie," wrote Simon Baynham, "dit ondermyn ook die weermag se harde werk in sy burgerlike aksieprogram om die goedgesindheid van swartmense te win ... Direkte of indirekte militêre betrokkenheid by binne-landse oproerbekeer kan die groeiende persepsie van 'n militarisering van die Suid-Afrikaanse staat alleen maar versterk."¹¹

The increasingly powerful UDF successfully brokered backing from a potent alliance of trade unions to support a call for a two-day stay-away in November. Black South Africa was outraged by the deployment of the army inside townships and through this protest stay-away, demanded the withdrawal of all police and army personnel from the townships. The result was the largest stay-away yet seen in South Africa.¹² Ironically the stay-away that protested against army and police presence in the townships was met by exactly that, as policemen and soldiers were deployed in the townships to patrol locations in affected areas and manage roadblocks. The Government also decided to ban all further information relating to the army's supportive role in township operations. Following the blanket secrecy that was draped over the army's internal position, the **Cape Times** placed townships "in the same category as war zones or battlegrounds".¹³

3. SOMEONE TO LEAN ON: OFFICIAL JUSTIFICATION FOR MILITARY SUPPORT

As is the case in most countries, the notion of co-operation between the military and police sectors was nothing new. Between April 1983 and March 1984 more than 40 000 troops were used to support various police operations, although it should be pointed out that most of the soldiers, some 27 000, helped with such mundane tasks as manning roadblocks.¹⁴ Many army personnel were, however, also involved in more serious police operations such as the demolishing of squatter camps, the forced removal of whole black communities, in pass raids and in the

¹⁰ S Baynham, "Oproerbekeer en die veiligheidsmagte", **Die Suid-Afrikaan**, Autumn, No. 3, 1985, p. 21.

¹¹ **Ibid.**

¹² Cock and Nathan, p. 68-9.

¹³ **Ibid.**

¹⁴ Frankel and Pines, p. 128-9.

breakup of strikes.¹⁵ During 1985, 35 372 soldiers were used to back the police up in their operations in some 96 townships.¹⁶

1984 became something of a watershed year with regard to the relationship that existed between the police and the military. Until the time of Operation Palmiet, the supportive relationship that existed was somewhat patchy. But, from 1984 onwards, and in successive States of Emergency, the army would come to play a direct role on a national basis in actively helping to suppress township upheavals and destroy black resistance.¹⁷

Louis le Grange explained that the army was called in for the simple reason that the police did not have enough manpower and that there was nothing sinister about it. "Die regering is tans van mening dat ons nie met 'n situasie te make het wat net polisiehantering noodsaak nie", he explained in 1984. "Ons het veiligheidsmagte wat bestaan uit die Polisie, die Weermag en ander departemente - waarom moet ons dan aanhou sukkel met 'n gebrekkige getal manne...as daar ander dele van die veiligheidsmagte in Suid-Afrika beskikbaar is om gebruik te word daarvoor?"¹⁸ The Minister then added: "Die regering het besluit dat ons moet wegkom van die ou idee dat die Weermag net ingeroep word in 'n noodtoestand. Die beleid is nou dat die Weermag ook betrokke kan wees by die handhawing van die binnelandse veiligheid van die land."¹⁹

In the face of mounting criticism of the use of troops in the townships, the Government had to explain its decision to utilise the army internally somewhat more elaborately. To a large extent this duty rested squarely on Le Grange, and in a speech he gave during November 1984, he said that it was unfortunate that there was criticism from across the board of the Government's decision to use troops.²⁰ He said that the government could not ignore its responsibility to ensure peace and order and as such the state had to perform effectively in order to quell the unrest. Furthermore, he reminded his audience that the Government had warned people that urban violence would increase because of the ANC's strategies.²¹

¹⁵ **Ibid.**

¹⁶ A Prior, "The South African police and the counter-revolution of 1985-1987". **Acta Juridica** 1989, p. 199.

¹⁷ **Ibid.**

¹⁸ H Giliomee, "Louis le Grange", p. 15.

¹⁹ **Ibid.**

²⁰ **Louis le Grange private collection**, INCH, PV 778 pleg 6 / 261 (5 November 1984).

²¹ **Ibid.**

The Minister also explained the legality of using the troops inside the country to stamp out unrest, as made legally possible by the Defence Act of 1957.²² Section 3 of the Act set out the basic tasks of the South African Defence Force:

"The South African Defence Force or any portion or member thereof may at all times be employed:

- a) on service in defence of the Republic;
- b) on service for the prevention or suppression of terrorism;
- c) on service in the prevention or suppression of internal disorder in the Republic;
- d) on service in the preservation of life, health or property or the maintenance of essential services; and
- e) on such police duties as may be prescribed."²³

Le Grange played down the significance of the Botha Government's decision to use the army by pointing to various examples in the past where the Government had used the troops to quell internal unrest. He cited many examples, starting in 1914 when the armed forces had to help the police in breaking up a riot by mineworkers on the Rand. He moved on to 1922 when 14 000 members of the "Aktiewe Burgermag" were used to break up another strike on the Rand. In the aftermath of the Sharpeville shootings the army had also been used to assist the police in various townships. Le Grange also pointed to the work the army had already done during that decade in helping the police, such as the already mentioned example of manning roadblocks.²⁴ The Minister tried to water down the significance of the South African situation by pointing to various other countries where troops assisted police forces. He said that in France the military police was under the command of the civilian police force; in Italy the Corpo di Carabinieri was a military as well as police force. He also drew comparisons with West Germany and Northern Ireland. Rather interesting was that the Minister also likened South Africa's internal use of troops to that of Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe who also frequently sent his army to assist the police.²⁵

4. MILITARY MISGIVINGS: THE ARMY'S APPREHENSION ABOUT ITS AUXILIARY ROLE

Although it is an undisputed and logical fact that the army has always had a backup capacity with regard to the police, i.e. in certain crime fighting ventures, helping

²² **Ibid.**

²³ S de Villiers (ed.), **Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report**, Vol. 4, p. 247.

²⁴ **Louis le Grange private collection**, INCH, PV 778 pleg 6 / 261 (5 November 1984).

²⁵ **Ibid.**

out with relief during natural disasters and manning the police's roadblocks - it is also true that the army has always been very different to, and markedly distinguishable from the police - different in appearance, attitude and method. After Operation Palmiet this changed drastically as the difference between police and army methods and mentality started to disappear. The general viewpoint in the townships was that the police and army were the same basic entity. Seen as a single oppressive force the army and police became derogatively known among township dwellers as "die boere".²⁶

When asked how the Botha Government had reached its decision to send troops to the townships, Gen. Magnus Malan said, in 2000, that he could not recall whether such a decision had ever been formally debated.²⁷ He also said that when the practical security matters surrounding the first State of Emergency, i.e. exactly which areas were to be affected, had been discussed, the Government did not consult the army.²⁸

Le Grange's explanation not only seemed too lightweight for many non-governmental commentators, but also irked some military leaders. One of them who discussed his disdain, albeit diplomatically, for sending troops to the townships was the head of the army, Gen. Jannie Geldenhuys. In a 1985-interview the General said that it was not the army's primary role to operate internally and he admitted that it was not a task the army was primarily trained for: "Ek kan dit nie wegredeneer nie: dit is nie die primêre taak van 'n leër of 'n weermag nie. Dit is nie 'n taak waarvoor ons ons primêr toerus nie."²⁹

He continued by saying that the army preferred to remain a deterrent. The General also said that the army was used to conventional military weaponry and not police equipment: "Wanneer ons moet baklei, wil ons tenks, kanonne en skepe gebruik eerder as om in binnelandse oproer waterkanonne en skilde van plastiek te gebruik."³⁰ The General then stated quite frankly that "n man sluit nie daarvoor by die Leër aan nie en ons lei nie mense daarvoor op nie". He explained that as far as he and the army were concerned, the police had to take responsibility for that which they specialised in and that the army would only get involved where additional manpower was necessary.³¹

²⁶ Frankel, p. 132.

²⁷ **J-A Stemmet private collection**, interview with Gen. Magnus Malan, 12 August 2000.

²⁸ **Ibid.**

²⁹ H Giliomee, "In gesprek met Genl. Jannie Geldenhuys", **Die Suid-Afrikaan**, No. 3, Autumn, 1985, pp. 18-9.

³⁰ **Ibid.**

³¹ **Ibid.**

The army repeatedly underlined and highlighted the fact that their soldiers were only going to give backup support to the police and not take control or responsibility for the internal situation. The army's hierarchy therefore attempted to downplay their involvement internally - not only to quell criticism, but probably also to ensure that army personnel (and the police) understood that this was not going to become a permanent situation and that the townships were still, ultimately, the police's problem. Gen. Malan, at the time, said that the army was only supporting the police in an unrest situation, nothing more. "Ek verkies om te sê dat die Weermag is besig om die Polisie in 'n onlus- of 'n onrus-situasie te ondersteun", said Gen. Magnus Malan in 1986.³²

Spokesmen of the Botha Government and the army repeatedly said that the army was only going to be used in such basic tasks as cordoning off townships, protecting important points, aiding in logistical support, helping with communications and conducting some reconnaissance flights, and that the police were still going to do their own work – searching premises and interrogating suspects.³³ Whenever there is talk of the South African security forces it is important not to picture the South African Defence Force and South African Police as one entity - the only distinction being the colour of their uniforms. Of course, the police and the army made up most of the South African government's overall security umbrella, but these two institutions were created to fulfill two completely different tasks. The military and the police operated from within two different philosophical schools of thought. This implied completely differing strategic reasoning and tactical approaches. Therefore, not only does it come as no surprise, it is in fact only logical that in the handling of the internal South African situation the army and police did not always see eye to eye.³⁴

Over a period of decades, a sometimes subtle and at other times more overt animosity had developed between South Africa's two lines of defence. The police looked down on the army as being high-handed and domineering, but generally ineffective. The soldiers, for their part, regarded the police as being undisciplined, crude and boorish. These attitudes culminated in varying underlying levels of petty friction and sometimes more open managerial conflict.³⁵

As already indicated, the police chiefs complained that they did not have enough manpower to successfully deal with the internal situation and therefore the army

³² H Giliomee, "In gesprek met Genl. Magnus Malan", *Die Suid-Afrikaan*, No. 8, Winter, 1986, p. 12.

³³ C Cooper, p. 752.

³⁴ A Seegers, *The military in the making of modern South Africa* (New York, 1996), p. 178; **J-A Stemmet private collection**, interview with Gen. Magnus Malan. 12 August 2000.

³⁵ **Ibid.**

had to be called in. When asked whether this was really the only reason why the police turned to the army, Gen. Magnus Malan said in 2000 that manpower was but one reason. The General said that the police also had a shortage of expertise: "Hulle het mannekragprobleme gehad. Ek sou nie sê net mannekrag nie. Nie net mannekrag en getalle nie, maar ook kundigheid."³⁶ In other words, although manpower was the dominating factor there was also the more serious underlying consideration that the police had a managerial deficiency and that the army, on the other hand, had a very specific managerial philosophy.³⁷ According to the General many of the police's dilemmas were born from their own managerial ineptness. He said that when the police did indeed experience a manpower shortage the army sent them the needed enforcements, which they did not utilise correctly. He said: "Gee ons vir hulle dienspligtiges, roep hulle daai kêrels nooit weer vir 'n kamp nie."³⁸

The General was annoyed at the way the police had handled the men, because he reasoned that the army could utilise them more effectively.³⁹ The General said that the police were more interested in whether the men from the army could play rugby than how to use them professionally. "Hulle gebruik hom [the soldier]", said the General, "hulle wou veral weet of hy kan rugby speel. Ek's jammer dis 'n feit. Ek het hulle gestop dat hulle nie meer by ons kampe kon kom werf nie en ons vir hulle mense gee nie."⁴⁰

When discussing the internal introduction of the South African Defence Force it is important to point out that the Namibia-Angola war was still in full swing. This is important as a guide to understanding why many a militarist was apprehensive of the new internal role. The army had to divide its attention and resources between its longstanding military engagement up north as well as on the home front. The latter involvement was not by choice, but because the country's first line of defence, the police, had failed to get the situation under control and now the army had to go and help them to do their job. Although harshly or simplistically put, this was how more than one soldier saw the army's new policing role.

Some analysts noted that due to the military's new, although not unique, internal role, a polarised view of the army might evolve. They were trusted to ensure the safety and protection of liberty, but at the same time a possible threat to the very liberties they were protecting.⁴¹ In this regard the head of the South African Defence Force at the time, Gen. Jannie Geldenhuys, gave the assurance that the

³⁶ **Ibid.**

³⁷ **Ibid.**

³⁸ **Ibid.**

³⁹ **Ibid.**

⁴⁰ **Ibid.**

⁴¹ S Baynham, "Protest, police and public order", **Reality**, Vol. 17, No. 3, May 1985, p. 5.

army would remain "within constitutional boundaries" and that it was definitely not going to "resort to extraconstitutional means - as our 'enemies' hope". He then stated emphatically: "What we are seeking at all costs is to avoid a hardening of positions." He further underlined the point that because of the army's internal role it should not be regarded as some sort of violent and vengeful political equaliser. "There must be no question as to the political leadership of the Republic", said the General, "and no question that 'bloody-mindedness' is any part of it."⁴²

Dr F Van Zyl Slabbert, former PFP leader and academic, noted in 1986 that Operation Palmiet epitomised a "crucial shift" in the strategic reasoning of the authorities. According to him, by having sent in troops, there could not be any questions as to the army's impartialness - it "immediately politicised the role of the defence force" and, even more importantly, "militarised the nature of the domestic unrest".⁴³ Slabbert noted that "bringing the troops 'from the border to the townships'" was a symbolic act that "greatly polarised the internal debate into...liberation vs. oppression, or law and order vs. revolution." Expanding on the theme of polarisation he stated that the internal involvement of the army "fundamentally eroded the middle ground of South African politics". This was because those who tried to stay out of the scope of the political turmoil were increasingly forced to take sides. "If they do not, moderates are branded as sell-outs by either extremes of the spectrum."⁴⁴

"The police and the military are not seen as neutral observers and agents for change, for they themselves have a stake in the outcome of the conflict", concurred another analyst, Cynthia Enloe. "Because of this they become targets for opposition, and so serve to intensify already existing conflicts."⁴⁵ Accordingly, she reasoned that Botha's seeming readiness to send troops to the townships, created "the impression that a state of civil war exists in South Africa".⁴⁶

The strenuous complexities were vividly clear to both the supporters and opponents of the government's decision to call in the army. A practical dilemma was that the army was not a peace force; some would argue a force for peace, but definitely not a peace force. For some decades the army had been trained for and gained experience in the Namibia-Angola border or "bush war". Most soldiers' experience of how to act in violent conflict situations was gained in that theatre. Now the Government decided to send troops into the urban chaos of black townships. Soldiers were intensively trained to act in a highly disciplined fashion, but being an

⁴² J Roherty, *State security in South Africa* (Londen, 1992), p. 147.

⁴³ FVZ Slabbert, "South Africa beyond 1984", *Indicator SA*, Vol. 3, No. 4, Autumn, 1986, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Prior, pp. 199-200.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

army, also aggressively. The military heads had to send these men to be something they were not, an auxiliary police force.

Highly conscious of the good name that they had cultivated over the years, the army tried to ensure that soldiers conducted themselves accordingly and were more disciplined than they were aggressive. The heads of the army realised that a single indiscretion on the part of a single soldier in the townships during these tense times could do immense damage to the army's image and have a catalysing effect on anti-government violence.

Gen. Geldenhuys issued a pocket-sized card to all his soldiers who performed township duty in an attempt to ensure that his men behaved themselves and refrained from giving in to any spur-of-the-moment recklessness - and to make clear to them that he understood their disdain at doing police duty in the townships; and to explain why this service was crucial. The card also served to ensure that his soldiers and his critics understood that he was serious when it came to army conduct in the black areas. Importantly, it also set out how he viewed the soldiers' internal role.⁴⁷

He had composed the card personally and it would later become known as the 'I Trust You'-message. It read:

"Dear Fellow Soldier,
Your presence in the unrest areas,
in these times
is vital
for our country and all its peoples.
You must do your share
to return your country to normal.
This we do amongst others,
by protecting the majority of people
from a small element
of murderers, arsonists and those
seeking violence.⁴⁸
So that those who want to go to school can go,
those who want to go to work can go,
and those who want to travel on buses can travel.
Be firm and decisive
but courteous and just.

⁴⁷ J Geldenhuys, "Message from Gen. Geldenhuys", *Paratus*, Vol. 37, July 1986, p. 33.
⁴⁸ **Ibid.**

Carry out our superiors' orders
and respect people and property.
Stay calm. Set the example.
It is not easy, but I know you can - I trust you.
Lekker wees.

Jan Geldenhuys
Chief, SADF.
Pretoria 10 Jun 86⁴⁹

5. IN THE THICK OF THINGS: THE MILITARY'S APPROACH AND CONDUCT

A fundamental issue between the army and the police was which of the two groups had the final operational authority. Officially, the army was called upon to help and assist the police and therefore the police would logically take the lead. But, it is rather unlikely that the military commanders would relinquish authority over their men so that a policeman could come and order their soldiers about. Although not impossible, it does seem rather improbable.⁵⁰ Gen. Magnus Malan said, in 2000, that it was a dilemma, because two totally different departments now had to work closely together and that he had tried to get these groups to bridge their differences. He then noted that during the States of Emergency a much greater sense of unity ("samehorigheid") was to be found between the army and the police.⁵¹ The 1985 police-military relationship was managed by the so-called Joint Operational Centres (JOCs).⁵² These Joint Operational Centres were similar to army territorial command levels and below. Police and military units were under the direct control of their respective officers. Overall command was situated within the divisional command system of the police. In most of the areas where soldiers were stationed for long periods, the local army commando would exercise direct control over all troops in the relevant zone.⁵³

One such Joint Operational Centre was erected in Manenberg in the Western Cape. There 250 policemen, together with the South African Defence Force, as well as the South African Railway Police (SARP), worked together.⁵⁴ JOCs aside, it still seemed as if the chain of command was not always clear and that, in fact, the police and army were regularly at loggerheads. For example, in 1986 during joint

⁴⁹

Ibid.

⁵⁰ **J-A Stemmet private collection**, interview with Gen. Magnus Malan. 12 August 2000.

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Ibid.

⁵² **Die Volksblad**, 22 July 1985.

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G Cawthra, **Brutal force: The apartheid war machine** (Londen, 1986), p. 250; Cooper, p. 754.

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Louis le Grange private collection, INCH, PV 778, pleg 18 (Vol. 4), 1985-1986.

security action taken in the Cape Town townships, serious differences between the police and South African Defence Force surfaced. The Deputy Minister of Defence said that a confidential agreement between the two prescribed management of joint operations.⁵⁵ The police and army also clashed over who should take control of the gathering of intelligence. Both the hierarchies of the police and the army thought they were better equipped for intelligence work.⁵⁶

During 1985 the police remained in their frontline position regarding the township unrest, while the use of troops developed continuously. By the end of 1985, troops were moved to the northern border areas of the country. The reason for this was to try and increase the number of policemen with combat experience in the metropolitan areas, at the same time stepping up the military presence in the border areas.⁵⁷

After new strategic and security appraisals had been made and increasing numbers of ANC guerrillas were entering the country during the early 1980s, the Government announced that more resources were going to be diverted to the northern and north-western Transvaal border regions. Millions of rands were allocated to this undertaking. The 1982 Defence Amendment Act empowered the army to utilise extra manpower on a selective basis. This gave the commandos a greater geographical coverage. The army could call up men who had completed their national military service, who would then be made part of the controlled reserve. Those men who had no military training were allocated to the national reserve. Both these types of reserves could be used in so-called priority areas. Priority areas were basically the country's national borders and included northern Natal and various districts in the Transvaal, among others Piet Retief, Nylstroom, Messina and Pietersburg. So the army would concentrate on borders while the police took care of the internal situation - this, however, did not imply that the army's township presence was dramatically scaled down.⁵⁸

Troops sent into the townships received basic courses in the policing activities they were going to be involved in. These included patrolling townships, riot-control, road-blocks, searches and vehicle and foot patrolling⁵⁹ - the army's day-to-day activities included patrolling streets. After intensive bouts of violence, so-called pacification operations would follow. This meant that large numbers of troops would cordon-off areas while the police would move in and conduct searches.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Cooper, **Race relations survey 1986**, p. 810.

⁵⁶ Seegers, p. 247.

⁵⁷ Cawthra, p.250; Cooper, p. 754.

⁵⁸ Cawthra, p.250; Cooper, p. 754; **Die Volksblad**, 6 November 1985.

⁵⁹ Brewer, p. 296.

⁶⁰ Cawthra, p.252

The army regarded itself as less inclined to give itself over to unscrupulous brutality and rather busied itself with the more sophisticated long-term "hearts-and-minds war". The army also thought itself to be more answerable to the public, because of its reliance on conscription. The Defence Force's auxiliary role, which involved cordoning off townships and staying out of the action, while the police controlled the townships, suited the soldiers. And so, not surprisingly, during 1985 most of the complaints against security personnel were aimed at the police.

"Initially the police thought they could just crush the resistance, while the army had a more thought-out programme", said one Grahamstown resident, "but as the violence increased so the army became more and more brutal. Any distinction the township's residents had made between the army and the police collapsed completely." A Cape Town teacher at a coloured school said that "(t)he army is seen no differently from the police and the students, with whom I have contact, certainly do not differentiate between the two. In fact, the only difference I have heard expressed is that the army are the ones who wear brown uniforms 'and who carry those big guns'."⁶¹

The army did not want to be perceived as part of the police, because they correctly feared that by becoming entangled in the internal situation alongside the police, the South African Defence Force's image as an apolitical force operating above and beyond politics would be lost. The army chiefs also reasoned that the police did not have the strategic finesse to develop a "hearts-and-minds" strategy and would therefore only destroy theirs.⁶²

Major Brits, head of the army's Civil Actions Programme in Cape Town during the early 1980s, drew the following anecdotal distinction: "In 1981...we went out there in the townships unarmed and soon the people began to see us as protectors whereas the cops were seen as prosecutors - and sometimes by the way they behaved towards black people, I'm not surprised." He continued to say that in the rural areas the police had hampered the situation for the army by creating the impression that anything connected to the security or defence forces should be feared.⁶³

It is important to note that in many cases where the police and army acted together, joint groups were formed where a mixed batch of policemen and soldiers functioned as one unit. Soldiers were trained and disciplined to act in groups. Separated from their fellow soldiers and their superiors' supervision the possibility

⁶¹ Frankel, p. 131.

⁶² Cawthra, p. 28.

⁶³ Frankel, p. 133.

existed that some of them could get carried away, disregard their military discipline and follow the police's example. One National Serviceman's recollection of his time spent in Port Elizabeth can serve as an example. He told how the army was "mixed in with the police, with a couple of policemen in each Buffel. So for the black population, there has never been an opportunity to differentiate between the two forces, and the South African Defence Force almost immediately inherited the lack of credibility and bad reputation of the police. Not that there is always that much to choose between the forces. Discipline and communication control are greatly superior in the army, but the separation of troops in small allocated units has often allowed South African Defence Force members to get into the spirit of being a law unto themselves, and mirror the behaviour of the police, not only their attitudes."⁶⁴

Only two weeks after the official inception of the 1985 State of Emergency complaints of army misconduct in the townships began accumulating. This caused enough concern for the army to announce a program whereby indiscretion by soldiers in townships could be investigated. The result was the setting up of complaints centres where complaints could be lodged against defence force members operating in townships.⁶⁵ By 1986 some 500 complaints had been lodged regarding misconduct by security personnel - 40 of which concerned national servicemen.⁶⁶

When asked, during 2000, about soldiers' sporadic misconduct in the townships, Gen. Malan said that he could not remember any "big incidents".⁶⁷ He did add that the group the army experienced problems with were some of the men who had been transferred from the operational areas in the bush war. He said that some of them subconsciously saw blacks as being the enemy, "hulle het eintlik, onbewustelik, die swarte as die vyand ge-etiketeer". The General said that this type of attitude was an appalling mindset for any soldier to have had and that it blemished the name of the army and that which the army had tried to accomplish.⁶⁸

On the other hand, it needs to be emphasised that the army, like the police, was under tremendous pressure in the unrest areas. These men had been earmarked as targets by the ANC. One example of the intense violence facing these soldiers can be seen in the murder of the 19 year old soldier, Johan "Vaattjie" Schoeman, during October 1985. While finishing patrolling a Port Elizabeth township, Schoeman was confronted by a group of men. After having beaten him, the group hacked and

⁶⁴ **Ibid.**

⁶⁵ **Ibid.**

⁶⁶ **Ibid.**

⁶⁷ **J-A Stemmet private collection**, interview with Gen. Magnus Malan. 12 August 2000.

⁶⁸ **Ibid.**

stabbed him more than 70 times. After that the group poured fuel over him but before they could set him alight they were dispersed by security officers.⁶⁹

In general, though, many communities preferred the army's disciplined presence to that of the police. "Community members often prefer the army", wrote Khaba Mkhize in 1988, "who they say are impartial and make efforts to befriend the population. It is common that people call for the army to be dispatched in force and take control. Women of Ashdown have formally petitioned the government to send in the army."⁷⁰ During the 1980s the army was also involved in other non-security actions in the townships, which also complimented their image and the earlier noted "hearts-and-minds" campaigns. For example, in November 1985, the staff at Baragwanath Hospital went on the rampage and abandoned the hospital and their patients. Soldiers from the army's medical services tended to the patients in the hospital.⁷¹

6. CONCLUSION

It is ironic, and somewhat bewildering, that one of the most controversial aspects of South Africa's recent past, the deployment of the army in townships during the country's violent political crises, has generally received very little attention by historians. Through in-depth analysis, not only will another aspect of the, as yet, greatly unexplored 1980s, receive the attention it deserves but a fascinating aspect of South African military history will be explored as well. With any attempt at truly understanding the multifaceted processes and turmoil that marked the 1980s, it is vital that historians should take more than mere notice of the military's active involvement within the borders of the country. In addition, ever since the events of 11 September 2001 in New York, the application of security forces are being re-evaluated, so too the role of the military. Internationally, for example in Africa, South America and the Middle East, defence forces are deployed outside their conventional operational milieu. A study of the township experience of the South African Defence Force will prove relevant and can offer strategic, tactical and managerial insights.

⁶⁹ **Die Volksblad**, 15 October 1985.

⁷⁰ K Mkhize, "Blood River at Sleepy Hollow", **Frontline**, Vol. 17, No. 7, Feb. 1988, p. 15.

⁷¹ **Die Volksblad**, 22 November 1985.