



REVIEW ARTICLE

SOUTH AFRICA'S "BORDER WAR": CONTESTED NARRATIVES AND CONFLICTING MEMORIES

Gary Baines, *South Africa's 'Border War': Contested narratives and conflicting memories*. London: Bloomsburg Academic, 2015. Series: War, Culture and Society. ISBN 978-1-474255-05-9 (paperback).

All wars have an afterlife, in which the meaning of the war is contested long after the shooting has stopped. As the recent controversies over the display of the Confederate Flag in the United States of America (USA) demonstrate (Diamond and Scott 2015), the memories of civil wars are particularly fraught, the issues still raw after more than a century and a half. Although South Africa's "Border War" was fought in neighbouring Namibia, and was primarily a conflict over the control of that territory, it had many of the characteristics of a civil war but also, when it spilled into neighbouring Angola, was a particularly toxic regional conflict. Nearly thirty years have elapsed since the end of the war, but its particular afterlife continues.

Gary Baines, a Professor of History at Rhodes University, has established himself as a leading scholar in the area of the South African "Border War". In 2008, he co-edited (with Peter Vale), an important collection of essays entitled *Beyond the Border War: New perspectives on Southern-Africa's late-Cold War conflicts*. Written from a range of disciplinary perspectives, although tending towards literary and cultural criticism, the collection testified to a growing scholarly interest in the area. Since then, there have been an even greater outpouring of popular writing, video documentaries, and other forms of cultural production inspired by the memory of the conflict. His new book seeks to subject some of these developments to scholarly scrutiny.

Described by its author as, "the first extended study of the afterlife of the 'Border War'" (2014:7), the volume under review is a collection of Baines's own writings, which have appeared as scholarly articles in various journals since 2003. The book should perhaps have been called "Contested narratives and conflicting memories", with the

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subtitle “South Africa’s ‘Border War’”, because Baines’s interest is not the events of the war itself — he assumes his reader is already familiar with, “the broad contours of, and the context in which, the ‘Border War’ was waged” (2014:7). The focus of Baines’s research is not the shooting battles, but the “memory battles” in South Africa over the meaning and significance of the war after the 1989 settlement.

The “memory battles” under his scrutiny range from the ongoing arguments over which side won the “battle” of Cuito Cuanavale; to the moral status of the trauma presented in the recent crop of “troepie memoirs”, written by emotionally damaged conscripts; to the struggle over public memorials to the war dead in post-apartheid South Africa; to the appropriation of the American war in Vietnam as a template for the cultural construction of the “Border War”.

Baines describes his approach as influenced by the “cultural turn” in war studies (2014:7); but there is also justification for his focus on the memory of war, since the actual events of the “Border War” are so often inchoate and under dispute. On the South African side, it was an undeclared war that was conducted under a blanket of tight censorship during the hostilities. It was war about the South African control of Namibia that spilled across and overlapped with the civil war in Angola and a broader arena of “late Cold War conflicts” (Baines and Vale 2008:1). And perhaps most significantly for the perspective of this book, it was a war with a profound, but contested relationship to the demise of apartheid and the achievement of democratic rule in South Africa itself. As the military historians, Ian van der Waag and Deon Visser, concluded in their 2009 review of the current state of historical writing on the war (139), “[t]he history of the Bush War, or the Border War, The Angolan Conflict, call it what you will, remains unwritten. Too little time has elapsed, emotions run high and wounds inflicted are painful, exposed and they refuse to heal”.

Those emotions and exposed wounds are the stuff of the discursive conflicts or “memory battles” which have flared up in South Africa following the formal end of hostilities in 1989 and that are the subject of critical scholarly attention by Baines. The guiding thesis of Baines’s study is that “the meaning of the ‘Border War’ is neither fixed nor inscribed in the event itself but [is] shaped by memory communities after the fact through discursive conflicts” (Baines 2014:1). These memory communities consist of “memory agents” who “fashion” the meaning of an event which can be accepted, rejected or reinterpreted by the “memory bearers”. This ongoing process of negotiation and dispute over the meaning of events takes place within various memory communities and between dominant and minority mnemonic groups in society. In some ways this is a concern with “cultural memory”, and Baines’s analysis of these processes draws from a cultural studies paradigm with tools taken from discourse analysis, but his approach is primarily, “informed by the nascent discipline of memory studies”(2014:7).

The field of memory studies, however, has often been positioned in opposition to history. As Pierre Nora (1989:9) writes, "History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it". Most memory scholars associate history, with its positivistic reliance on documents and its search for an objective truth, with a hierarchical and disciplinary power wielded by professional historians. Memory, with its softer and more folkish boundaries, suggests fluidity and a point of opposition to orthodoxy and History. The difficulty is that memory is an inchoate topic, while the academic field of memory studies, is by Baines's own admission, a "nascent discipline" (2014:7). While memory is undoubtedly fundamental to an individual's sense of identity, the relationship between individual memories and social memory is less clear.

Unlike oral history, the discipline of memory studies has been influenced by the study of testimony, particularly the fraught memories of Holocaust survivors and victims of sexual abuse. As such, it has developed a particular concern with "traumatic memory" and the difficulties of representing or articulating such experiences. The strategy that Baines employs to deal with this theoretical incoherence is, he declares, "unashamedly selective and eclectic" (2014:8). However, a consequence of this approach is evident in the proliferation of terms that are scattered across the various chapters of the book. "Collective memory", "traumatic memory", "bonded memory", "multidirectional memory", "cosmopolitan memory" are terms dropped into his account without any developed theoretical account of how these terms fit into a coherent field of investigation into memory. As argued in this review, these unresolved theoretical issues, or incompatibilities, sometimes result in a contradictory approach to this topic.

Baines asserts that, "memorialization is often a highly charged political process" (2014:156) and his chapter on the "memorial wars" in post-apartheid South Africa is the strongest in the book. In this case, we have a clear example of memory agents operating to fashion the current political meaning of a past event. In other words, it is a struggle over the representation of the past. It is also a struggle that manifests in public discourse and physical structures; so it is collective memory in its most explicit form. In this chapter, Baines follows the struggle over the inclusion/exclusion of the names of the South African Defence Force (SADF) "Border War" casualties from Freedom Park, the major public monument in post-apartheid South Africa.

Freedom Park was established on the recommendation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Intended to continue the process of mourning, reconciliation and healing initiated by the TRC hearings, the Park was pointedly situated on Salvokop Hill opposite the Voortrekker Monument, outside the South African capital city of Pretoria. As a commemorative symbol, the Voortrekker Monument, more than any other architectural memorial in South Africa, represents and celebrates an exclusively Afrikaner nationalism. By contrast, Freedom Park was intended by the TRC to be an inclusive structure, honouring

the variety of African cultures in South Africa (including Afrikaner culture), while also memorializing the suffering and heroism of the historic conflicts that, in the words of the founding document, “have shaped present day South Africa” (Freedom Park). This was to be achieved through the list of names carved on the eight sandstone tablets of the S’kumbuto Wall, one of the central features of the Park; each tablet dedicated to one of the conflicts deemed to have shaped present day South Africa, including the genocide of the San and Khoi peoples in early colonial South Africa, the Anglo-Boer Wars, the First and Second World Wars, and, finally, the Liberation Struggle.

Baines does an excellent job in tracking the “discursive conflict” that erupted over the proposed inclusion of the names of the “Border War” casualties on the S’Kumbuto Wall by an SADF veterans association. It was perhaps a conflict that the veteran representatives were doomed to lose, particularly since the Freedom Park Trustees, under the leadership of the notoriously rebarbative black struggle poet, Wally Serote, were clear about their view that names of SADF casualties, who they dismissed as defenders of apartheid, had no place on the Wall. To further rub salt into the wound of the SADF veterans, the trustees announced that the names of all the Cubans who had died in the Angolan conflict would be included. Despite a series of meetings and conciliatory workshops between the contending sides, no mutually acceptable solution was reached. The result was that the SADF Veterans Association, in partnership with an Afrikaans cultural association and the management of the Voortrekker Monument, elected to build a, “counter-memorial, carrying the names of the SADF war dead, and situated in the shadow of the Afrikaner Nationalist monument”. This mnemonic struggle was possibly the first death knell of the national reconciliation project that had begun with the TRC in a newly democratic South Africa.

The problem with taking a memory studies approach is apparent in the chapters where Baines moves from conflicts over representation (as in the Freedom Park memorial battle) to conflicts about what actually happened in the past. For example, in his analysis of “the Battle for Cassinga” (2014:89), he takes a studiously detached view of the discursive battle which has raged over the incident that took place deep within Angola on 4 May 1978. Cassinga, in his view, is, “a floating signifier (in the Barthesian sense) that attaches itself to a chain of meanings” (2014:90). Baines summarises the SADF and the South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO)’s accounts of the incident. According to the former, it was an audacious and successful air borne raid on SWAPO’s main command and logistics base in Angola. According to the latter, the incident was a brutal attack on a refugee camp containing mostly women and children, a massacre, “on a par with atrocities such as Guernica, Nanking and My Lai” (2014:5). Although he “highlights inconsistencies” in both the SADF and SWAPO accounts, Baines refuses to reach any historical judgement on the veracity of the competing claims. Citing the impact of post-modernism and the

“linguistic turn” on the writing of history, Baines (2014:102) declares that, “rather than attempt to establish the veracity of history facts, it is more productive to interrogate competing narratives about past events in order to understand how history is used (and abused)”. The difficulty with this approach is that it is difficult to determine “abuse” without any reference to what actually happened. If Cassinga exists purely as a “floating signifier”, then the competing narratives can only be contemplated, not interrogated. The University of the Free State historian, Leo Barnard’s attempts to pin down the actual events that took place on the 4 May are dismissed by Baines (2014:94) as “naïve” because, in his view, “the veracity of the SADF’s version of events can no more be vouchsafed than that of SWAPO or Cuban narrators by appealing to objectivity.” However, the actual facts of a disputed event are important, often vitally so. It does matter whether or not one of the founding myths of the Namibian nation state are true. Unlike the controversies over which side “won” the “Battle” of Cuito Cuanavale, which are questions of interpretation, the Cassinga controversy is about who was actually inside the camp when it was attacked by the SADF paratroopers.

To take an example from beyond Southern Africa, it was vitally important for the political health of the Polish nation that the perpetrators of the Katyn Massacre in Poland were correctly identified. Katyn is a shorthand term for the murder of an estimated 22 000 Polish officers and intellectuals in April 1940 in the Katyn Forest and other locations by the Soviet People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*, NKVD). As was finally confirmed in 1990 by an investigation of the Soviet Union’s Prosecutor General’s Office, the massacre was carried out under the direct instructions of Stalin and the NKVD chief, Lavrently Beria. However, for more than forty years, the Soviets and the Polish Communist government claimed that the massacre was perpetrated by Nazi-German forces in 1941 and denied any responsibility. As has been documented, the cover up by the Soviets included intimidation of witnesses, the planting of false evidence and the propagation of seemingly absurd claims, followed by a blanket censorship of any discussion. Baines (2014:100) concludes his summary of the SWAPO account of the event with the rather astonishing observation that, “as far as SWAPO is concerned, political expediency trumps truth for what actually happened is often of less significance than how it is remembered”. By taking a position not dissimilar, Baines refuses to adjudicate or deliver a verdict.

The difficulty in maintaining this position is apparent in the next chapter, where Baines critically assesses the conflicting interpretations over who “won” the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. Using Cuito Caunavale as “shorthand” for all the military engagements between the SADF-UNITA (Union for the Total independence of Angola) forces and the People’s Armed Forces of Liberation of Angola (FAPLA)-Cuban forces in Angola from August 1987 – August 1988, what the military historian Helmoed-Römer Heitman (1990) has called the final

South African phase of the Angolan War, Baines chooses to focus on the SADF and African National Congress (ANC) perspectives. The prime objective of this chapter is to dispute what Baines (2014:105) calls the “battle-centric view of history” — the view that wars and major developments in the political sphere are determined by the outcome of specific battles. Here, rather surprisingly, Baines (2014:10) sets out to “debunk myths”. The myths that he tackles are 1) the belief that there were clear cut winners of the series of battles and stand-offs around the Southern Angolan town of Cuito Cuanavale in 1987/88; 2) that Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) soldiers were active participants in the battle; and 3) that the battle’s outcome, “determined the trajectory of the transition in South Africa” (2014:105).

In contrast to his hands-off treatment of the SWAPO narrative that Cassinga was a refugee camp, the ANC claims that their soldiers were involved in the defence of Cuito Cuanavale are disproved with exactly the kind of “objective research” that Baines was dismissive of in his previous chapter. The ANC narrative, which will apparently be supported by the construction of a monument at the site of Cuito Cuanavale, is firmly dismissed as “not the case”, with Baines drawing on the “disconcerting facts” of documentary evidence and testimony supplied by a senior MK officer who commanded troops in Angola, but not at Cuito (2014:112-114).

As previously mentioned, the “nascent” discipline of memories studies is rooted in the investigation, and often, the valorization of trauma. The complexities that this notion of trauma poses for a moral assessment of ex-SADF soldiers is apparent in Baines’s analysis of trauma narratives in his chapter called, “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Victimhood”. In this chapter, Baines attempts to answer two questions. Using as his central case study a memoir by a white conscript who suffered the shattering effects of the intense battles around Cuito Carnevale, Baines asks if the narration of traumatic war experiences can provide closure or therapy for the damaged individual. His conclusion, based on an assessment of the memoir, is yes, it can. The second, more challenging question is whether the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress (PTSD) can serve as an “alibi” for the actions of SADF members. Recognising that PTSD was introduced into the public discourse in South Africa through the testimonies before the Truth Commission, Baines seems to struggle with the conundrum of ethical judgement and the recognition of human suffering. On one hand, he recognizes that national service was an onerous burden, particularly on individuals who failed to live up to the harshly masculine and authoritarian mores of military training; yet, on the other hand, he believes that everyone who was in anyway involved in the SADF should, “own up to their part in preserving white power” (2014:82).

However, if everyone who served in the SADF during apartheid is to be held responsible for preserving white power, there is little point in trying to assess the different levels of experience that were involved in military service.

This is also important because, as Baines recognizes, if the blanket ascription of victimhood to anyone who suffered through conscription and military service is to be punctured it has to be through a more precise differentiation of roles and experiences and culpabilities. Otherwise, there is a danger that analysis simply replicates the exclusions represented by the “memorial war” over the lists of names at Freedom Park.

Finally, there are also methodological limitations in his study, notably in the most ground-breaking chapter of his book, Baines’s account of how the arguments over the meaning of the war have moved into cyberspace. Here we have the possibility of glimpsing and analyzing “collective memory” at the moment that it takes shape, and not mediated through other cultural forms, such as monuments and literary texts. Baines (2014:175) coins the useful term “neterans” for the SADF veterans who have successfully taken their discussions onto websites, chat forums, and now social media platforms.

My intuitive sense is that Baines is correct about the importance of this development; but he doesn’t give any indication of how these discussions are to be captured, documented and analysed. One peruses Baines’s text in vain for what could be considered examples of best practice in this emerging field of analysis. Too often Baines’s analysis is merely anecdotal and obfuscated by his own points of view which are presented as a counterargument, not always easy to distinguish from the online discussion he is analyzing. For example, Baines identifies two themes which he claims are to be found in the discourse of SADF veterans in cyberspace. One is the “camaraderie of war”, but he provides only one online reference in support of this claim. Similarly, he identifies “another recurrent theme” as the sacrifice of self for country. This is illustrated by a quotation taken from a single Facebook posting by someone called “Dave” (2014:184-186). If we apply Baines’s own model of “mnemonic communities”, as outlined in his introduction, we are left asking who are the formative agents who “fashion” the dominant meanings and how do the “memory bearers [...] accept, reject or reinterpret” these meanings in cyberspace communities of SADF veterans? In one intriguing, but undeveloped insight, Baines (2014:182) states that he has, “examined various sites of interest to those who served in the SADF”. Some of these sites form part of an online entity called “the Southern African Military Web Ring”. Baines (2014:182) notes that, connected to this “Web Ring”, are, “sites related to the Anglo-Zulu War, the Anglo-Boer War, The Rhodesian Bush War as well as a number of international conflicts”. If nothing else, this list strongly suggests that the “mnemonic communities” that exist in cyberspace include more than just SADF veterans. What does this indicate about the nature of online memories and the memory wars?

This leads to another concern with Baines’s approach to this topic. In his introduction he recognizes the deep “fault lines” that ran through the SADF. Over and above the usual hierarchy of rank, there were divisions between professional

soldiers and conscripts, the informal pecking order of different types of unit (fighting forces versus administrative and support services), and, perhaps most significantly, the cultural differences between English and Afrikaans speakers. Baines (2014:176) recognizes that certain fundamental descriptors of the SADF experience, such as *ballesbak*, *bosbefok* and *vasbyt*, seem to have no English equivalents. It is surely significant that all the conscript memoirs that Baines lists in his study have been written by English speaking conscripts. This is most likely because English speaking conscripts had an ambiguous or ambivalent relationship with what was often experienced as an Afrikaner military project. Baines also recognizes that in the arguments over who “won” the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, “sectors of the white (Afrikaner) population have vested their sense of collective self-worth in their own narrative of this conflict” (2014:116).

This contextual analysis needs to inform the memory battles, particularly when it comes to understanding how these divisions, or fault lines, have played out in the memory wars after the conflict. It is surely important to note that the “memorial battle” over the names of the SADF casualties on the S’Kumbumbo Wall at Freedom Park was led by Afriforum, an Afrikaner lobby group, and that the “counter-memorial” with the names of the SADF war casualties has been erected below the Voortrekker Monument.

With this book, Baines (2014:119) makes a case for the claim that, “the revision of history happens at the interface of memory, politics and historiography”. Although his account is hampered by the limited consideration given to the theoretical problems inherent in this claim, he has, in these essays, identified a wide variety of memory conflicts and presented a vigorous analysis of the different ways that the struggle over the meaning of the “Border War” continues to be fought in South African contemporary politics.

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