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**BOOK REVIEW**

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Lennart Bolliger. *Apartheid's Black Soldiers: Un-national Wars and Militaries in Southern Africa*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2021. 240 pp. ISBN 978-0-8214245-5-1

*Apartheid's Black Soldiers* examines the experiences of combatants from Namibia and Angola who fought in the security forces of the apartheid regime, above all the Southwest Africa Territorial Force (SWATF), Koevoet, and 32 "Buffalo" Battalion. As the author, Lennart Bolliger, argues, these experiences challenge the dominant notion that southern Africa's decolonisation should be understood in terms of "national liberation" struggles, wherein liberation movements representing distinct African nations fought against colonial regimes and their "collaborators." Rather, the encounters and trajectories of Bolliger's research participants point to the complex and highly constrained circumstances in which black men joined the security forces and the social alienation which they have collectively experienced in post-apartheid Namibia and South Africa, the countries in which most now live.

The book's argument builds across six substantive chapters. The introduction begins with the story of a "collaborator", whose life trajectory is incomprehensible within popular and scholarly histories, and opens with a discussion of the book's central themes, methods, and arguments. Thereafter, the author offers a detailed narrative of colonial rule and "collaboration" with colonial militaries in Namibia and southern Angola (Chapter 1), followed by a nuanced discussion of why black Namibians joined SWATF and Koevoet (Chapter 2) and black Angolans joined 32

Battalion (Chapter 3). From there, the manuscript moves into an analysis of the distinct military cultures of SWATF, Koevoet, and 32 Battalion (Chapter 4) and of how the predominantly black membership of these units have adapted to life in post-apartheid Namibia (Chapter 5) and South Africa (Chapter 6). A brief conclusion, reiterating conceptual insights and suggesting new lines of research, rounds out the manuscript.

*Apartheid's Black Soldiers* is meticulously researched and a significant contribution to the historical literature on southern Africa's decolonisation in several respects. First, the book's focus on black "collaborators" in the South African military illuminates a dimension of southern Africa's anti-colonial struggles that have been almost entirely ignored in regional literature on decolonisation, including academic texts and popular memoirs. As such, the text fills a very significant empirical gap, pertaining to scholarship on southern Africa's armed conflicts from 1975 to 1989 and the aftermath of these conflicts for the soldiers and societies involved. In so doing, Bolliger extends the ground-breaking work of Jacob Dlamini's *Askari* in South Africa to the regional, transnational canvas in which the apartheid government's wars were fought.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the book makes a significant contribution to emerging work on the "un-national" liberation of southern Africa.<sup>2</sup> Although the topic has been framed broadly to include soldiers and organisations on both sides of anti-colonial struggles, existing scholarship has focused predominantly on liberation movements and the governments and organisations that aligned with them. As Bolliger repeatedly illustrates, black Angolans and Namibians' involvement in South Africa's security forces defies nationalist narration, shaped as it was by personal efforts to protect self, family, and community; local understandings of escalating violence; and the shifting political allegiances of organisations involved in these conflicts, which, especially in the Angolan case, "often seem[ed] to escape comprehension, let alone articulation" (69). In such contexts, terms like "national" and "transnational" are inadequate, for, at best, they capture one aspect of the lives of the participants in southern Africa's late twentieth-century wars at the expense of several other dimensions (8). To my mind, no existing publication demonstrates the analytical value of adopting an "un-national" approach to the liberation of southern Africa more thoroughly than this monograph.

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1 J Dlamini, *Askari: A story of collaboration and betrayal in the anti-apartheid struggle* (London: C. Hurst, 2014).

2 L White and M Larmer define this work in their seminal essay "Introduction: mobile soldiers and the un-national liberation of Southern Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 40 (6), 2014, pp. 1271–74.

Third, the text presents a unique analysis of apartheid military culture. As Bolliger maintains, contrary to their depiction as a single, static group, apartheid-era South African military units like the SWATF, Koevoet, and 32 Battalion reflected distinctive histories, practices, and identities. Although militarised masculinity was widespread across all three units, it did not take the same form, due to several factors, including the different circumstances in which these units emerged, the varying approaches to training and discipline adopted by the unit's respective leaders, and the manner in which each unit's soldiers made sense of what was at stake in the war in which they were fighting. For example, whereas members of Koevoet, tended to see themselves as members of an elite, "rogue" unit, SWATF members saw themselves as belonging to a more disciplined, professional army. 32 Battalion, moreover, stands out for the extent to which colonial paternalism featured in members' everyday lives, as soldiers who had formerly belonged to the *Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola* (FNLA) and became refugees' following the FNLA's defeat in 1975, found themselves highly dependent on white South African commanders who persuaded and/or coerced them to join the South African military.

Fourth, the book contributes significantly to the literature on southern Africa's post-liberation politics and ex-combatants – a topic which has received considerable attention in the region over the past two decades. Although the literature has widely noted the recurring significance of identities forged during anti-colonial resistance and the prominence of "ex-combatants" as "a particular kind of citizen" in southern African countries (12), attention has again focused on liberation movements and their members – not on black soldiers who fought with colonial/apartheid militaries and whose citizenship, irrespective of legal documents, is highly precarious. Bolliger traces the contours of this precarity and the prospects of more genuine citizenship – especially in Namibia where ex-SWATF and ex-Koevoet soldiers have mobilised politically, finding common cause with dissidents and ex-detainees of the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), Namibia's primary liberation movement and ruling party. This mobilisation is a significant topic in contemporary Namibian politics and Bolliger's expertise here is unique.

Fifth and finally, Bolliger makes a powerful case for the significance of oral history work in engaging critically with histories of war in late twentieth-century Southern Africa. The author develops this point in the section of his introduction titled "Methods and Sources" (14-17), wherein he notes the paucity of archival sources that illuminate the experiences of those who fought with colonial armies in Southern Africa, the value of conducting oral history interviews in this context, and his approach to engaging research participants in such interviews. As Bolliger illustrates, drawing from seminal

publications, oral history research should not be approached as an exercise in retrieving “authentic” or “objective voices” according to pre-ordained criteria (15). Rather, such research must seriously engage the circumstances that shape how people represent the past in specific settings – circumstances in which past events, contemporary politics, and the interpersonal dynamics of fieldwork are deeply intertwined. Although Bolliger does not make more of this point in the remainder of his text, it is an important intervention in an historiography wherein many topics are presented inadequately due to the narrow band of sources consulted, and deemed consultable, for scholarly research. In the future, Bolliger and others working methodologically at the intersection of history and anthropology may do more to emphasise and clarify this crucial insight.