

RIGHT OF REPLY

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Pallo Jordan goes round in circles in his caricature of my book, seeking to reduce it to a simplistic conspiracy theory which no one can seriously entertain.

In fact, the book provides a balanced and comprehensive account of the political transition. It deals in full with the killings that were committed on all sides in the period from 1984 to 1994, when some 20 500 people were hacked or shot or burnt to death for political advantage.

What distinguishes my book from others on the transition is that it holds up a mirror to the ANC's callous strategy of people's war. This strategy treats all individuals as weapons of war, regarding them as just as expendable as the bullets and guns of a conventional conflict. It deliberately targets civilians, seeks to eliminate political rivals, and views its own supporters as just as expendable as everyone else.

Jordan's version of people's war is a highly sanitised one which brushes over the key element of violence. If this is really how 'theorists in China and Vietnam' describe people's war, then it is absolutely vital to draw instead on acknowledged experts such as Douglas Pike. For Pike not only provides the theory but also explains how it resulted in South Vietnam in the deaths of 10 000 village chiefs and countless other rivals or potential 'enemies'. As Pike records, these killings were remarkably effective in inducing the ordinary South Vietnamese citizen to do as the insurgents wanted, for 'when death struck in his village against someone he knew, a scar of fear formed in his mind'.

During the ANC's people's war, necklace executions – in which a tyre was hung around the victim's neck, filled with petrol, and set alight – were particularly useful in generating that 'scar of fear'. The necklacing in 1985 of a black local councillor who refused to resign was doubtless effective in persuading others to step down. The necklacing in 1986 of a schoolboy who disobeyed a school-boycott call no doubt helped galvanise others not to do the same. The necklacing of rail and mining workers who disobeyed strike orders in 1987 must have had a similar effect. The necklacing of three Inkatha men in KwaMashu in 1986 was a powerful warning of the dangers of supporting Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi. The necklacing of an Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo) activist in Soweto that year warned against supporting the Black Consciousness cause, prompting another Azapo member to say of the United Democratic Front, the ANC's internal wing: 'The UDF's game is fear and that's why they're in the majority.'

People are indeed intimidated if terror is acute. This was evident again in 1992 when four people were burnt to death in a Soweto house after one of them had failed to heed a call for a hospital strike. Said a terrified neighbour: 'We are afraid to speak about how we want to live our lives. The only thing left to do is to follow orders. If somebody says don't go to work, don't go. It makes no difference whether you believe it is the right thing to do. Do it to save your skin.'

If reports of this kind had been given major and repeated coverage, this would have damaged the ANC's moral standing and democratic credentials. This made the propaganda element in the people's war particularly vital, for it distracted media attention from revolutionary violence and provided other targets to blame.

The greatest propaganda myth was that regarding the Third Force. The ANC needed to explain the upsurge in violence in the early 1990s, when political killings increased three-fold from their average in the 1980s. For the period from 1990 to 1994 was a time when the National Party government had abandoned apartheid and committed itself to peaceful talks, while more than 13 000 armed and trained ANC insurgents had been allowed to return from exile.

Lest the finger of blame be pointed at these insurgents – whom the ANC refused to demobilise – the organisation and its supporters repeatedly accused former state president F W de Klerk of talking peace while using a Third Force (comprising elements in the police and Inkatha) to wage war on ANC supporters. But no credible evidence of such a strategy has ever been found. By contrast, the ANC itself had an avowed ‘dual strategy’ of using constitutional negotiations as nothing but an ‘additional terrain of struggle’ and thus persisting with its people’s war throughout the talks.

The fact that the police and Inkatha were clearly to blame for numerous killings gave the Third-Force theory a superficial plausibility. But the theory also had major weaknesses, for it could not explain why the Third Force should have killed so many of its own: more than 800 policemen in fewer than four years, along with many thousands of Inkatha leaders and supporters.

It is neither ‘churlish’ nor ‘silly’ (as Jordan alleges) for the book to highlight the extraordinary success of the ANC’s propaganda campaign. But this is also not Jordan’s true gripe. What really concerns him is the book’s effectiveness in stripping away the myths and laying bare what the ANC has gone to enormous lengths – so far successfully – to conceal.

The book comes too close to the bone. That is why Jordan resorts to derision and vituperation; and why he asserts that the book expects readers to ‘suspend reason and accept what is self-evidently an extremely improbable scenario, on faith’.

This is hardly a convincing response to 540 pages of comprehensive and chilling evidence about the people’s war: about the terror and other tactics deployed by the ANC to gain a hegemonic power it could use to advance its further revolutionary aims.

William Gumede attempts to caricature the book in a similar way. He regurgitates the Third-Force theory without attempting to deal with its weaknesses. He also claims the UDF was separate from the ANC when in fact, on the front’s formation, 24 of the 25 people on the UDF’s national executive committee were underground members of the ANC.

Gumede also cites the book as saying that ‘apartheid’ was ‘not particularly brutal’. This is dishonest. For *People’s War* in fact quotes Jeremy Seekings as having written that repression under emergency rule was ‘not particularly brutal by comparison with undemocratic regimes elsewhere in the world’, though it was ‘brutal by South African standards’.

It is Gumede’s critique which is ‘simply not true’ and not the book itself.

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