

REVIEW

Pallo Jordan is a member of the ANC NEC and a former Cabinet Minister.



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People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa

‘History to the defeated, May say Alas, but cannot help or pardon’¹

Revolutionary wars became a feature of modern history after the American Revolution of 1776. It is no accident that the word “guerrilla” – whose original meaning was mini-war – derives from precisely such an experience in the mountains of Spain during the Napoleonic Wars.

The 20th century witnessed literally hundreds of “mini-wars”, some successful, some failures, others ending in stalemates. A number of societies were transformed, and colonial and semi-colonial countries freed themselves through such wars. Every military academy offers courses on the subject and both would-be-insurgents and counter-insurgents give the subject careful attention.

Revolutionary wars are waged to overthrow an incumbent government. In the eyes of the existing government and its supporters, those engaged in it, are involved in treason. They are life and death struggles, with a dark side involving acts of violence, brutality and acts of extreme cruelty. Every state and government faced with the threat of revolution has displayed a far greater capacity and willingness to employ these methods. It is a matter of record that since 1945, counter-insurgency experts amongst governments have networked extensively, exchanging information and teaching each other techniques.

One of the essential differences between revolutionary wars and conventional inter-state wars is that one of the parties to the conflict is a non-state actor. The non-state actor is initially the weaker, whose only hope for success is stripping the state party of popular support.

However arrived at, the outcome entails winners and losers. Inevitably highly differentiated and even contradictory accounts of the same events will emerge when the story is retold.

South Africa is proving no different.

A recently published book, *“People's War – New Light on the Struggle for South Africa”*, authored by Dr Anthea Jeffery, a researcher at the South African Institute of Race Relations, would have us believe that what South Africa has become is the outcome of an elaborate conspiracy, with a cast of thousands of witting and unwitting participants, including Archbishop Tutu, Alex Boraine, and all the Truth Commissioners, van Zyl Slabbert, Idasa, the 1994 Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), virtually every newspaper editor in South Africa, perhaps even the prosecutorial authorities in KwaZulu-Natal (who charged General Magnus Malan and co with incitement to murder) the World Council of Churches and

the General Assembly of the United Nations. All were either duped or otherwise induced to act in a manner that served the interests of the Soviet Union and the ANC/SACP.

'People's war' according to Dr Jeffery, is what an ANC delegation that visited Vietnam in 1978, came home with.

As explained by its theorists in China and Vietnam, 'people's war' entails engagement on a number of fronts among which the military can sometimes assume a lower profile or exist merely as a perceived threat. The war evolves through a number of phases, each designed to draw in wider popular participation, which might or might not culminate in a general military offensive or insurrection. The essential element is galvanising the people into active opposition to the incumbent government. This might commence in small scale actions which gradually escalate into mass actions. The insurgent movement must be familiar with local grievances and knit these into a coherent narrative about the illegitimacy of the existent order and the necessity for a radical transformation.

Rather than referring to the original works of the authors of this strategy, Mao and Giap, Jeffery offers us an account refracted through the eyes of Douglas Pike, delicately described as a US foreign service officer! Sort of like having Osama bin Laden explaining US foreign policy!

She repeats this odd methodology throughout her book! At Page xxxii of her introduction, for example, she writes:

"Said Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev on various occasions: 'Our goal is to control the two treasure chests on which the west depends – the energy treasure chest of the Persian Gulf and the mineral treasure chest of central and southern Africa.'"

Being somewhat familiar with Soviet rhetoric, I found the quotation a bit odd. Checking the endnotes, I discovered that in fact she was quoting a witness at the Denton Commission, who claimed to be quoting Brezhnev! Quite extraordinary!

Despite Jeffery being presented to the public as an 'objective' researcher who had one of the most extensive archives in the country at her disposal, the chapters tell a different tale. Dr Jeffery is an extremely partisan researcher. That hits one squarely between the eyes virtually from the first chapter!

I do not object to partisanship. Everything I have written over the last 40 to 50 years has been explicitly partisan. Jeffery's anti-ANC animus persuades her that something very sinister must have been afoot because an ANC, of which she heartily disapproves, is the dominant party in South African politics. To demonstrate this she resorts to some of the more absurd explanations that incumbents facing a challenge from below have fallen back on since the 19th century: The apparently omnipotent and ubiquitous "outside agitator" is trotted out; ordinary people are so very easily "intimidated"; and though their experience runs counter to it, the clever "propaganda" of the insurgents persuades them to support a revolt. And, of course, "violence" assists the hesitant to make up their minds.

No government faced with a revolt has ever bothered to explain why people who are not aggrieved lend an ear to strangers who incite them to do things

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that could put both their persons and their property at risk. Jeffery too could not be bothered. Suspend reason and accept what is self-evidently an extremely improbable scenario, on faith!

The opponents of insurgents invariably speak with forked tongues: While they must represent insurgents as weak and ineffective, they attribute some remarkable powers to them. Thus, even in places where they are unknown, insurgents can talk ordinary people into doing the most dangerous things. Endowed with near diabolic powers, they have an inexplicable capacity to move the political parties and bodies of their opponents and rivals around like pawns on a chess board. Their plans rarely go awry because they also have an amazing prescience that enables them - like the chess-masters they are - to anticipate the reactions of opponents, rivals and enemies. Says Jeffery, after the visit to Vietnam, the ANC too acquired these abilities because until then, according to her, it had been an inept and deluded group of perhaps well-meaning, but cynically manipulated, individuals.

Scholars the world over accept that war is politics, employing other means. The ANC and the Vietnamese proceeded from the same basic tenet. Not surprisingly, they found that the ANC delegation and they were singing from the same score. Except for pathological conspiracy theorists, there was nothing sinister about that.

Though every war since Crimea has relied heavily on communications, Dr Jeffery goes to quite extra-ordinary lengths to convince us that there was something scary about the massive use of communications in the South African liberation

struggle. Yet, since the armies of nation-states came to rely in the main on citizens in uniform, rather than on professionals or mercenaries, communications have played a central role in war. The German Imperial General Staff received an object lesson in this regard at Brest Litovsk, when the soldiers in the Bolshevik delegation began fraternising with the German troops and disseminating anti-war leaflets amongst them. When the German generals objected, Trotsky invited them to distribute pro-war material amongst the Russian troops!

Massive propaganda operations accompanied all twentieth century wars. They targeted combatants and non-combatants, the home audience, the enemy, and neutrals. Taking exception to the ANC employing accepted methods of waging war is not merely churlish, it is downright silly!

The sub-title of this book, "*New Light on the struggle for South Africa*", should read "A Rehash of the former National Party's Take on the Struggle for South Africa". It is replete with all the 'usual suspects' of yesteryear: A malevolent Soviet Union, inciting what would otherwise be merely 'restless natives' chafing under white rule, employing its local agents - the communists - who manipulate inexperienced or else cynical or plainly naive African political leaders, to embark on a violent revolution that bears little relation to its declared aims.

Jeffery recognises that Black anger about the injustice intrinsic to white domination was totally justified. But she disapproves of the means the liberation movement chose to fight it. She presumes she should, and can prescribe how the oppressed should conduct their struggle! So she rubbishes the means, its leading advocates and the only South African movement to apply them in earnest.

Contradictory histories of the struggle for democracy will continue being written. Perhaps they might, in the end, become mutually enriching. Many of them, like this book, will be propaganda for one or the other side of the conflict. But this book comes two decades too late! Dr Jeffery might have found a well-paying job preparing cases against ANC insurgents before 1994. These days? Sorry, No vacancies!

¹ "Spain 1937." W H Auden