

REVIEW

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

Anthea Jeffery's central thesis in her book, *People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa*, that the ANC deliberately killed thousands of South Africans in a scorched earth strategy to capture power at all costs from the Nationalist government in the dying days of apartheid, is simply not true.

I cut my political teeth as an active participant in the school, youth and community politics of the mid-1980s, and in the student and civics politics of the early 1990s. I was also a violence monitor, for the all-party National Peace Committee in the two years up to the first all-race democratic election in April 1994. Furthermore, I also worked as advice office community organiser, mediating in township disputes in the late 1980s and early nineties, and worked for extended periods on community newspapers.

This is the period under review in the book. The absolute terror wrought by third force vigilantes, whether through random attacks on commuters in taxis, trains or buses, or while sleeping at night and aided by the security forces, whether it was in Crossroads in the Cape, or on the East Rand, was very real. But the "killings, the terror, and the destruction that marked the period from 1984 to 1994", was not as a result of a 'people's war' by the ANC, as Jeffery argues, but as a result of a careful campaign by elements of the apartheid state, whether directly or through proxies which could not be traced to the government itself, to destabilise black communities.

In fact, if the apartheid government in the preceding periods had tried to show white South Africans the danger of the 'black peril' (ANC) and the 'red peril' (Communist Party) it wanted now through state sponsored violence directed at the black community to show to these black communities the dangers of the 'red peril' and the ANC. In addition, the Nationalist government and/or elements thereof clearly wanted to prove their thesis to the international community of a so-called phenomenon of 'black on black' violence, to show that without the white government in charge there would be a descent into internecine black violence.

For the period until at least 1990, most alternative media such as South, New Nation and then Weekly Mail were often banned, proscribed or sabotaged by the Nationalist government. Although the traditional media, the liberal English press did expose many of apartheid excesses, it was at best a partial picture. Furthermore, there was still at the time a clear suspicion in many white media establishments and society – even if they opposed apartheid – about the ANC alliance.

Of course, there was counter or defensive violence by local ANC committees, but to say that this was somehow orchestrated as a national campaign from Shell House is really untrue. Certainly, there were excesses by comrades associated with the UDF/ANC alliance in their response to state and state-assisted vigilante

violence. But to say that such regrettable excesses were carefully orchestrated centrally by the ANC as part of a "People's War" is hopelessly wrong. In fact, the leadership of the ANC and mass democratic movement (UDF, civics, trade unions and community groups) certainly went out of their way to urge restraint, often when communities demanded retaliation following extraordinary provocation from state-sponsored violence.

Firstly, in the 1980s the ANC did not orchestrate every single protest action from Lusaka. By the mid-1980s, although the ANC's political guidance was important, the struggle inside South Africa had begun to take on a life of its own. In fact, from the early 1990s onwards, the United Democratic Front (UDF), certainly in the day-to-day struggle politics, was a central driving force in the country. Of course, looking back now, the slogan 'no education before liberation', which was the guiding slogan for my generation, has meant that millions of black youths of my generation forfeited the skills essential to upward mobility. This generation has been let down by the ANC leadership. There should at least have been night schools for the youth on the same scale as those for white South Africans who returned from fighting in the Second World War. Clearly, the exile leadership dominant in the ANC post 1990 did not have sufficient appreciation of the sacrifices of this generation – that, I believe accelerated the momentum of the anti-apartheid struggle by sacrificing all for total liberation – and the future consequences of neglecting them.

For another, to say that apartheid was not "particularly brutal by comparison with undemocratic regimes elsewhere in the world" is silly. Apartheid deliberately deprived millions of black South Africans from gaining education and skills. As Francis Wilson has noted: "The mean-spiritedness which underlay the philosophy of Bantu Education, the inadequacy of the funds made available throughout most of the apartheid years, and the crippling effect of job preservation and the colour bar on the acquisition of skills and experience by the majority of (black) workers, could almost have been designed to prevent them from being adequately prepared for the challenges of the 21st century". The fact that black people could not own property or businesses, and were forcibly removed from their land and properties, also meant that in the era of globalisation, the social capital, whether collateral to take out loans to send their children to school, or for finding the means to survive in the modern world, was also taken from them. Apartheid also broke black families through the migrant labour system and by psychologically breaking the spirit of millions. It undermined the sense of self, whether black fathers who could not support their families or whether mothers unable to provide for their children. These are particularly brutal ways of oppression, whose effects will be with us for generations to come.

In sum, to argue that the ANC was responsible for orchestrating each and every incidence of violence during the brutal period of the early 1990s is to have lived in a different country. The ANC's appeal did not lie in stoking violence, but in whether it could avert or contain the violence. The longer the violence went on, the more the ANC stood to lose. In fact, by the early 1990s, a carefully plotted campaign of terror in black communities benefited the Nationalist government enormously, as they could hold it out to ANC supporters that under the ANC there would be chaos. On that note, the story still to be told in more detail is the extent to which the state was responsible for sponsoring vigilante terror – the accounts so far only scratch the surface.

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