

2024

Apartheid's Black Soldiers: Un-national Wars and Militaries in Southern Africa

Joseph Hammond

Lennart Bolliger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Hammond, Joseph and Bolliger, Lennart (2024) "Apartheid's Black Soldiers: Un-national Wars and Militaries in Southern Africa," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 77: No. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol77/iss2/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

text requires the reader to have some understanding of the doctrinal airpower terms and campaigns Haun harnesses in making his case. That is not to say he does not offer any explanations along the way, nor is the book inaccessible to novices, but it is aimed at experts and policy makers who think and deal with airpower as a means of national power. Critically, it offers a lens through which policy makers, military leaders, and campaign planners must view the use and effectiveness of airpower. To that end, *Tactical Air Power and the Vietnam War* belongs on the bookshelf of all who style themselves academics or practitioners of airpower and national defense policy—or anyone who might strive to be one.

MATT DIETZ



Apartheid's Black Soldiers: Un-national Wars and Militaries in Southern Africa, by Lennart Bolliger. Athens, OH: Ohio Univ. Press, 2021. 292 pages. \$80.

The Cold War in southern Africa produced some odd bedfellows, and there are contemporary lessons to be learned from it, as presented by Lennart Bolliger, a lecturer in international history at Utrecht University.

Bolliger highlights some startling juxtapositions. At one point during the Angolan civil war, some two thousand Cuban soldiers were defending the operations of an American oil company. The irony of Communist internationalists defending an American oil company whose revenues were providing the majority of the funds for Angola's communist government may have been lost at the time.

Elsewhere on the continent, when Zimbabwe's then-new president,

Robert Mugabe, and the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) faced their greatest-ever test they ultimately were saved by elements of the old white Rhodesian government they had just displaced. Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) launched what is known as the Entumbane uprising in 1981. The Rhodesian African Rifles and elements of the Rhodesian Armoured Corps commanded by white officers decisively defeated a ZIPRA force. The four-day clash gave the Rhodesian military something it had never achieved on the battlefield previously—a victory that had both decisive military and political results. The defeat of the ZIPRA helped pave the way for Mugabe's decades-long rule and allowed him to break previously agreed commitments on military integration.

Bolliger's work provides many more such intriguing examples that have, until now, slipped through the pages of our history books. The book looks at Namibians who fought against the socialist South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) and mostly Angolan soldiers who fought with the South African army. The latter formed the core of the 32nd Battalion, which started out as a uniquely Angolan unit made up of former rebels who had fought against the Portuguese empire. Many of them became rebels once again when the socialist People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (abbreviated MPLA, after its name in Portuguese) took power in the country in the 1970s, and some were defectors from the MPLA itself.

There are similar parallels here with the Kit Carson Scouts, made up of former Vietcong fighters, used during the Vietnam War, but, as the author

points out, the very existence of such forces challenges the conventional narrative of African wars during the period being waged between conventional colonial-settler armies and unconventional guerrilla liberation movements (p. 182). The core of the anticommunist Mozambican National Resistance movement (known by its Portuguese abbreviation, RENAMO), for example, which fought a brutal civil war in Mozambique, was made up of ex-Portuguese colonial soldiers.

The Soviet Union committed advisers to the MPLA in Angola down to the brigade level as late as 1989. Yet, when the Angolan civil war ended, the 32nd Battalion was redeployed for urban police operations in Africa. Its officers largely were white and learned Portuguese to better interact with their men. Intriguingly, the unit at one point also absorbed a group of Lusophone rebels from São Tomé and Príncipe when a platoon seized a group of survivors who had launched an abortive rebel invasion of that country.

Rare for a scholarly work, Bolliger's book is a quick read. The introduction could have better served readers with limited exposure to the history of African decolonization with a more general history of the period. The first chapter presents a historical sketch of the former South-West Africa (Namibia) and Angola, and more background information could have been useful for the neophyte reader, particularly regarding Kaokoland, a proto-Bantustan in Namibia, which provided many of the Black police units that fought against the South West Africa People's Organization, which spearheaded the independence movement there and still dominates Namibian politics.

This is an excellent piece of scholarship that centers on the voices of participants, lifting a veritable veil of silence. Soldiers often express fatalistic accounts about why they ended up in factions within the wider conflicts, though some figures clearly possessed significant agency over their situations. Consider Daniel Chipenda, whose Eastern Revolt against the MPLA was shot in the arm by the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA, according to its Portuguese abbreviation). Commander Chipenda would jump back and forth between for and against the central government and rejoin the MPLA for a final time in 1992.

Those who fought for the various South African-aligned groups had various reasons for doing so. The 32nd Battalion had few options and effectively no place to return to once Angola had fallen to the communist MPLA. Koevoet (a former South African counterinsurgency unit) forces interviewed by the author expressed myriad reasons for joining. Often, members of their families had suffered at the hands of People's Liberation Army of Namibia forces. The interviewees offered different perspectives on the racism they encountered. Though such racism was pervasive, the author relates one instance of a white officer being stripped of his post and being told that distinctions of race mattered little in the bush.

Well into the 1980s, members of the 32nd Battalion enforced corporal punishment that included being brutally beaten with a sjambok—a rawhide whip that the author suggests had its origins in the FNLA rebellion in Angola (p. 109). The communist MPLA fought to impose communism and ironically enough, given its atheist

ways, also executed Angolan civilians for witchcraft during the civil war.

Postwar white officers often fared better, and many entered the private sector at the end of the southern Africa conflict. Indeed, the final section of the book looks at the fate of both groups in the ensuing decades. The author describes how some 32nd Battalion members became mercenaries—some became contractors during the coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003; others were involved in a 2004 coup plot in Equatorial Guinea. Some South West Africa Territorial Force (or SWATF) members fought in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the series of civil wars that stretched until 2013. In 2006, nineteen South Africans were arrested—mostly 32nd Battalion veterans—in a coup attempt against then-president Joseph Kabila. Both 32nd Battalion and Koevoet veterans reportedly worked as part of private military contractors in 2015 in Nigeria (p. 151). Others ended up in United Nations peacekeeping missions in Angola and Liberia.

In Namibia, the fate of the veterans of the various security units has been quite different, as various veterans groups formed to advocate for their rights. Bolliger argues that Namibia has never had anything like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (p. 126). While veterans of SWAPO have long been given preference, the author suggests attitudes in Namibia may be changing.

This is a book that should be of broad interest to students of African conflicts, the formation of proxy forces, and the critical issue of combatant reintegration.

JOSEPH HAMMOND



Generals and Admirals, Criminals and Crooks: Dishonorable Leadership in the U.S. Military, by Jeffrey J. Matthews. Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2023. 400 pages. \$38.

While examples of problematic leadership in the military grab sensational headlines for a short time (the Tailhook and “Fat Leonard” scandals may be notable exceptions for their scale and perseverance in news), there is less focus on looking at different kinds of behavior by senior leaders in a deep and systematic way. *Generals and Admirals, Criminals and Crooks*, by Jeffrey Matthews, who specializes in American history and leadership, does exactly that. It is organized into seven chapters, each dealing with a different leadership problem: war crimes, insubordination, moral cowardice, toxic leadership, obstruction of justice, sex crimes, and public corruption. Each chapter contains a core case, but also other narratives and examples on the topic for context and depth. The material is extensively researched and documented, including themes that cut across the cases and some interesting recommendations for leader development at the end of the book.

These themes cut across the different chapters and require some deep reflection. First, there were precedents and signs that were ignored; or, worse, problematic behaviors and dispositions were rewarded, especially with promotions or better assignments. Second, there was an organizational culture and leadership climate that did not address issues nor have hard conversations to confront obvious problems. Third, there is an interaction and tension between personal moral leadership and ethical leadership. Even in cases