

The Unofficial War in Natal: Pietermaritzburg under the knife

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If you drive out of Pietermaritzburg along the Edendale highway, past the hospital and the Plessislaer police station and into the townships which surround the town in a great arc from south to north, you pass through much of socialist Africa in about half an hour.

The War Zone

In the Natal Midlands, and more particularly in the townships and rural settlements around Pietermaritzburg, a civil war has been waging for two and a half years between supporters of the UDF- COSATU and members of the Inkatha Freedom Party. Here the familiar, the safe, the everyday have become unfamiliar, dangerous and bizarre. Memories and expectations habitually associated with people or places are now suspect as old connotations become obsolete. The old words are no longer sufficient and new ones are needed.

Comrades (the generic label for supporters of the UDF-COSATU) have taken it upon themselves to find the new terms, appropriate to their current circumstances. They have redesigned the map of the region, renaming areas according to the political affiliation of the residents.

The theatre of operations in the present war occupies a space of approximately 374 square kilometres. Conflict has chiefly occurred in the Edendale valley west of the city, and in the adjoining rural area of Vulindlela, a part of KwaZulu which stretches far to the west and north of Edendale. With the exception of a brief period at the end of 1987, this vast region has always been an Inkatha stronghold.

At the mouth of the Edendale valley there are two large urban townships: Ashdown, with a population of 8 500, and Imbali, with a population of 35 000. Stretching along the valley is a complex of some twenty villages on freehold land. This is Edendale, and it is here primarily that the old names, the old means of identification, have been replaced: What was Dambuza is now Angola; Nhlazatshe has become Sharpeville,

both Smeroe and Georgetown (in different parts of the valley) are now called Tanzania, Machebiso is Lusaka, Pata is Maputo and Wilgefontein and Taylor's Halt have been renamed Cuba. Only Harewood, hemmed in by a ring of UDF strongholds, remains Inkatha territory, and the township has accordingly become Ulundi.

The war is highly territorial and much of the fighting has been directed either at maintaining the ideological purity of certain townships or at crusading conquests of infidel neighbours. By recasting their areas in specifically political terms the comrades are appropriating new meanings which break down old conventions of geographical neutrality and are used instead to bolster and endorse their political position.

Unfortunately, the conduct of the war has not been confined to semiotic posturing of this kind. These names (which may seem incongruous or even fanciful to outsiders) are merely the outer gloss on a conflict which is intractable and brutally physical. Despite the lack of formal military rank and the ad hoc, unsustained nature of the campaigns and strategies, the fighting has assumed the proportions of a war, fought on political grounds in order to achieve territorial sovereignty over certain areas.

In the townships, the people who actually have to live through it all talk with natural ease about 'being at war'. They have no political or ideological brief – they use the word because it fits their experience. Insecurity is a fact of daily life, as palpable and inevitable as breathing. The people here have adapted their lives to the demands of the conflict. Alertness and caution inform every act.

The war is not a foreign phenomenon consigned to a distant border. In these ravaged areas, the war zone is everywhere. Every road, ditch, yard, river, house and hillside is a war zone. Buses, taxis, privately owned cars, police vehicles – all these constitute arenas of battle. There is no escaping this war, it occupies no defined space or time; it does not knock off in the evenings or at weekends and the spectre of sudden and arbitrary death hangs over the townships and robs the residents of their sleep.

The Nuts and Bolts of War

Out in the rural areas, chiefs and indunas – almost all of whom owe their allegiance to Inkatha – can exact their traditional rights from farmers and homesteaders in the form of military duty. In return for favours ranging from land allocation to the issuing of licences, these rural potentates can call on the inhabitants of their fiefdoms to fight when necessary. This is not a legal obligation, but a difficult summons to resist nonetheless. The chronicles of violence are littered with the stories of those families who did resist and were given an ultimatum – usually a day – to leave the area. If they failed to comply they were wiped out.

Another source of soldiers for Inkatha is the great crowds of men bussed in to attend Inkatha rallies. They are grafted onto the local army, thereby creating a force of formidable numbers. These armies are led by local leaders (usually dubbed 'warlords') or their seconds-in-command. In the main, the leaders are drawn from the ranks of the chiefs, indunas and local Inkatha branch chairmen. The warlords provide food, transport and bellicose incitements to action; and what guns there are, they distribute.

The foot soldiers of Inkatha use a variety of weapons. The most common are the knobkerrie – a wooden staff with a heavy bulb at one end – and the assegai – a short stabbing spear used in hand-to-hand combat. Also popular is the panga or bush-knife, a slightly curved broad-bladed knife used equally effectively for cutting back weeds, harvesting crops and hacking people to pieces. Soldiers often come equipped with pockets of stones and cans of petrol to start and finish the job. Finally there are a number of handguns, a few rifles and shotguns available to a privileged few. Many of these are purchased by warlords and Inkatha leaders who have been granted firearm licences. Others have a more murky provenance – no-one knows quite where they come from. In the townships there is widespread belief that warmongers in the security police are running guns to Inkatha members and that other guns come in from Ulundi through the KwaZulu Police, but there is no solid proof that this is the case.

The comrades for their part put together armies from a reserve of refugees, members of local UDF-affiliated youth organisations, and residents of non-Inkatha areas who are politically non-aligned but want to defend themselves from Inkatha attacks. There is also increasing evidence of men being press-ganged into joining UDF forces.

The comrades arm themselves with stones, sticks, pangas and smaller knives. They too are expert in the uses of petrol: at no stage during this war has either side made use of the infamous necklace method of killing, although many people have been burnt to death. The comrades also favour two other deadly weapons: the first is a club made from a solid metal rod with a heavy bolt welded across the bottom. The weapon is wielded like a mace, and one blow would disintegrate a skull of iron. The second weapon looks like a walking stick, except that a long metal spike protrudes out of the end. This can be concealed in the ground like the point of a shooting-stick.

When it comes to weapons the comrades have need to be inventive as they have practically no guns. Whenever one surfaces it is confiscated at once by the police, and its owners detained and charged with unlawful possession of firearms. To overcome this disadvantage, a variety of home-made guns have been manufactured, but these are rare and unreliable and there remains the problem of obtaining suitable ammunition.

The fact that Inkatha completely outguns its enemies has unquestionably kept the death rate in the war lower than would otherwise have been the case, but this objective consideration provides small comfort to the comrades.

In the early stages of the fighting, members of the various youth organisations appealed to the township youth to set about establishing defence committees to defend those non-Inkatha areas under attack from Inkatha supporters. Committee members would be constantly on the alert: at the height of the fighting, sentries would be posted throughout each area, awake and on watch all night waiting for the first whispering approach of a hostile force – with contingents of back-up fighters, asleep but able to be roused and mobilised immediately. Following Biblical precedent they slept with their weapons in their hands.

Defence committees from different areas established codes of communication. In the event of an attack, whistles from one defence committee would be heard and 'read' by another, which in turn would issue a call for all men to go to the assistance of the

section under attack. Armed, and following the direction of the whistling, this auxiliary force would arrive to reinforce its comrades.

The UDF forces are led by committee members of the youth organisations, sometimes boys no older than 15. Leadership is often split between those with an aptitude for political and military strategy, and those with an aptitude for fighting. The leaders of comrade armies do not have it easy. They are the first to be detained by the police or assassinated by their enemies. In addition, although it may be possible to gather an army together, it is not a simple matter to maintain it. Food and shelter are necessary, as are victory and hope, and these resources are not easily come by. More than that, a large body of young men suffers from a crucial problem – they are too visible. Any gathering over a certain size is immediately spotted by the police who arrive in copious numbers of yellow vans to break things up.

The Inkatha armies do not seem to share this handicap. Huge bands of armed men range over wide areas of the landscape, chanting, singing, threatening and even attacking people, and yet they are neither stopped nor challenged by the police. Velaphi Ndlovu, KwaZulu MP for Imbali and a senior Inkatha member, ascribes this unusual "laissez faire" attitude of the police to the essential 'Zuluness' of the Inkatha bands. "It's the necessary cultural thing", he says. By this he means that marches of armed Inkatha warriors are merely a harmless, cathartic cultural expression of tribal identity. Many Zulus living in the Pietermaritzburg area who have fallen victim to the cultural fervour with which Inkatha supporters play out their traditional role would disagree with Ndlovu's characterisation.

An Unofficial War

The people living in Pietermaritzburg townships sometimes say in despair that their suffering and experiences are hidden from the outside world, and that theirs is a forgotten war. While this is not strictly true, there is a tendency for those not closely involved in the conflict to discount the severity and continuity of the fighting. Discrete incidents, and unusually high death rates impinge on the national consciousness and for a short while the war in Natal becomes the focus of attention before receding again, slipping inexorably into the wings of South African politics.

Many white South Africans (and this includes people living in Pietermaritzburg as well) balk at the idea of a 'war' in the Natal Midlands. They are reluctant to come to terms with the implications of the word. Instead they dismiss the fighting as an outbreak of intra-tribal feuding. This banal analysis is symptomatic of a need to cast the conflict in a simple and unthreatening light, but it is also reflective of a specific cultural perception of war. Despite the war in Namibia and Angola and the pervasive ideology of militarism in the media and in advertising, most whites experience war vicariously and through a series of clichéd media images: war comics, war films, or clip shots on the TV news of Arab-colonial buildings in Beirut crumbling under mortar shells. There is always a sense that war is somewhere else, a foreign phenomenon which does not encroach on ordinary, normal life. The upshot of this attitude is that when there is a real, live war like the one in Pietermaritzburg, whites fail to recognise it.

The form of the war is too low key; the weapons are too crude. There are stones and iron bars instead of submachine guns, shotguns instead of ground-to-air missiles, and

petrol bombs instead of carloads of Semtex plastic explosive. But the fact of the matter is that more people have died in Pietermaritzburg in the last eighteen months than in 20 years of fighting in Northern Ireland.

Giving a name and a denotation to violence is not a semantic matter; for the groups involved, the description they employ is an entirely political choice. The police, for example, cannot tolerate having the situation around Pietermaritzburg described as a war. 'War' implies that there is a complete breakdown of the normal channels for defusing and controlling social conflict. In South Africa only the South African Defence Force is legally entitled to wage war and it is the role of the South African Police to prevent any other groups from doing so. Therefore to refer to an area of the country as a 'war zone' amounts to an explicit criticism of the police on the grounds of incompetence and a witting or unwitting failure to perform their proper functions.

Consequently the police use the word 'unrest' to describe political violence in black areas of the country. It is a weaker word than 'war', implying little more than a surge of discontent.

The state in its official pronouncements on the situation in Pietermaritzburg says either that everything is under control or that there is black-on-black violence taking place. This is a deceptive term coined by the government to diminish the importance of the protests in black townships around the country in 1984/5. Certain sectors of the media latched gratefully onto the phrase and even some foreign commentators were taken in by it. What is at best a dubious and flawed description is passed off as an explanation.

It is time that this expression was unequivocally rejected and abandoned. In this way the government excuses itself from addressing the real political causes of the violence because it claims there are none, only intra-racial and ethnic lines of cleavage in which it need not interfere.

The state does its best to ignore the existence of this embarrassing war, and its effect on the population of the region is consequently neglected by the authorities. This is an unofficial war and as a result is treated as such by the state. Glib expressions of concern, short-term efforts at containment, and a generally lackadaisical attitude to the most serious political eruption in South Africa in decades indicate an official indifference to the whole affair; an indifference which can easily be interpreted as contempt for the victims. The hundreds of people who have died do not excite pity or self-examination in official circles; they are cyphers, existing only as figures in the official unrest reports. What the government wishes is to prevent its white constituency from discovering that it has allowed a full-scale war to occur within the borders of the country for two years and more.

A Political War

Various commentators, writing in newspapers, journals, delivering speeches or in ordinary conversation have come up with a rash of different causes of the violence. Some write it off as merely criminal, others say it is the result of poverty and socio-economic malaise, yet others attribute the fighting in Natal to generational cleavage in

which traditional, rural communities take up arms against urban, cosmopolitan enemies.

All these factors are present to a greater or lesser extent – they thrive on the pervasive climate of violence – but the causes of the war, and the fundamental engine which sustains the conflict over months and years, are more deep-seated and party-political than these other analyses concede.

Both Inkatha and the UDF perceive the political nature of the violence. According to Chief Buthelezi and Inkatha, the present war is simply the latest development in an ANC-orchestrated campaign to destroy the organisation. The UDF, by contrast, claims to be the victim of a joint strategy devised by Inkatha and the state to destroy all progressive organisations in Natal.

It is not surprising that two such incompatible political movements should fall into dispute. Although it adopts an anti-apartheid stance, Inkatha is a strongly conservative organisation which relies on appeals to Zulu nationalism and pride. To create and maintain its constituency at mass rallies and on days of Zulu national celebrations, the Inkatha leadership puts on a spectacular show which employs traditional symbolism and language which harkens back to a nobler past.

The UDF, on the other hand, presents an aggressively modern image. Its largest support base is found in the urban townships, particularly among the youth, and its campaigns tend to focus on problems facing the urban black population. The UDF's broad, supra-ethnic appeal directly opposes the narrow nationalist ethic of Inkatha. This challenge is recognised by Inkatha and many of the anti-UDF denunciations issued by officials in the organisation are of a crudely racist stamp: loyal supporters of Inkatha are warned that the UDF consists predominantly of whites, Indians and Xhosa lawyers intent on creating mischief at the expense of honest and trusting Zulus.

According to Gerry Mare and Georgina Hamilton in their paper, "Policing 'liberation politics'", the conflict derives from a basic political difference between the two movements. Although both describe themselves as liberation organisations, Inkatha's version of liberation is rhetorical. As the ruling party of a self-governing homeland, (whether it is formally independent or not) Inkatha upholds apartheid structures. The Chief Minister's frequent demands for greater powers derive from his desire for greater control over the areas and population which fall within the political ambit of KwaZulu, rather than constituting a real challenge to apartheid.

The UDF was formed to protest and campaign against apartheid legislation and its effects on the daily lives of black South Africans. Inkatha, through the KwaZulu government implements this legislation in KwaZulu. It is therefore inevitable that these two organisations should clash. Inkatha does not welcome even moderate political opposition in its domain – KwaZulu has, in effect, a one-party parliament. The political challenge posed by the UDF is therefore completely intolerable to Inkatha and the KwaZulu government.

The gulf between Inkatha and various radical organisations such as the UDF, is illustrated by a long history of conflict of which the present war is the bloody outcome. Chief Buthelezi locates the antagonism as arising from a clash between Inkatha and the ANC in 1979. Then, when the UDF was formed in 1983, Inkatha was excluded from affiliating to the Front even in the unlikely event that it would wish to do so. Chief

Buthelezi correctly took this as a particular affront. In the Pietermaritzburg area, the Chief Minister has interpreted the various initiatives of the UDF and COSATU as a challenge and provocation to himself, his honour and the honour of his organisation. Inkatha viewed with alarm the rise of UDF-affiliated civic associations and the consequent eclipse of government-sponsored town councils in the mid-eighties. It was anxious to avoid a similar situation evolving in Natal where township councils are dominated by Inkatha.

During the 1980s a chronic antagonism arose between Inkatha and the UDF-COSATU. The political positions and campaigns adopted by each side seemed to directly contradict the other – in fact on several occasions Chief Buthelezi went so far as to accuse the UDF or COSATU of orchestrating a campaign for sole credit of undermining him and Inkatha. Any political activity in Natal undertaken by extra-parliamentary groupings was seen as a personal challenge by the Chief Minister.

It was only in late 1987, however, shortly after heavy floods had devastated large areas of Natal and KwaZulu, that the simmering antipathy between the two groups broke out into open war.

At the conclusion of the 1986 Indaba conference, a plan for the establishment of the federal political entity of Natal/KwaZulu was ratified by the various participants. As a political idea the Indaba won the support of the Inkatha Central Committee, many white residents of Natal, and certain sections of the local media. Certainly Chief Buthelezi and Inkatha stood to gain much from the implementation of the Indaba proposals, not least of which would be the extension of Inkatha's influence beyond the borders of KwaZulu and the elevation of Chief Buthelezi to the premiership of the province. However, to secure this new dispensation (leaving aside such other obstacles as the opposition of the South African government) the Chief Minister still has to prove his credentials. He has to bring into the scheme the black population of Natal which he claims to represent.

Chief Buthelezi's constituency has always been measured by the size of the membership of Inkatha, and this figure, though large in absolute terms, is small relative to the six million Zulus who live in the province. Inkatha's support is hardly universal among blacks in Natal and the shortfalls are most noticeable in urban areas. Pietermaritzburg, in particular, has never been an Inkatha stronghold and Chief Buthelezi's command over the allegiance of the population of this region is very weak compared with the support he carries in the more remote, rural areas of KwaZulu.

Even in Vulindlela, which falls within the borders of KwaZulu, support for Inkatha is passive rather than active. In the townships of Ashdown and Imbali, Inkatha-led town councils have been established in the past but they were so unpopular and unsuccessful that the former has ceased to exist. Most alarming of all for Inkatha, in Edendale, the largest urban township in the Natal Midlands, Inkatha's influence has veered from the negligible to the non-existent.

In his paper, "Inkatha, Political Violence and the Struggle for Control in Pietermaritzburg", Nkosinathi Gwala attributes the major causes of the present war to Inkatha's desire to win control over Edendale. Gwala points out that blacks have enjoyed freehold rights in Edendale since the early 1840s, a situation which chafes both the South African government and Inkatha: the former because it is faced with an autonomous township which escapes the controls of the Black Local Authorities Act,

and the latter because it would dearly like to incorporate Edendale into KwaZulu, or failing that, at least establish a town council in the township.

According to Gwala, Inkatha's political clout relies less on voluntary, popular support than on the organisation's access to bureaucratic entry points in black urban and rural areas of Natal. These entry points consist of control over the distribution of rights and resources such as access to land and employment and trading opportunities. Wherever Inkatha encounters resistance, it seeks to overcome this opposition either by strengthening its bureaucratic entry points where they exist, or where they are absent, through the incorporation of the troublesome area into KwaZulu.

In places such as Edendale where neither option is available, Gwala contends, Inkatha resorts to violence, often with the implicit support of the South African Police. The organisation attempts to increase its political influence through coercive recruitment.

Of course, Inkatha would dispute that its members ever resort to violence, but it is well known that for years the leadership of Inkatha has viewed with concern Inkatha's relative lack of support in Edendale and in Pietermaritzburg as a whole. The advent of the Indaba in 1987, coupled with the growing popularity of the UDF and COSATU in the region, meant that matters could no longer be left as they were.

In August and September 1987, the local Inkatha leadership began a saturation campaign to recruit new members into the organisation. In this way the need to swell the numbers on the registration books and to pre-empt and undermine the growth of UDF support in the region could be met. Certain members of the local Inkatha hierarchy – men who later became known as warlords – used coercion, expecting quick and satisfactory results. Some of the warlords even exploited the destitution visited upon thousands of people by the floods, only making flood relief available on condition that the recipient join Inkatha.

The warlords did not anticipate the reaction of the target population. Instead of remaining quiescent and passively acceding to the demands made of them, the local black communities formed defence committees and acted swiftly to resist the depredations of the warlords and their vigilantes. Instead of the victory they had anticipated, the warlords found themselves beaten back. Only the intervention of the SAP saved them from being routed in some areas.

Inkatha initiated the recruitment drive with complacent assurance that it would swell its ranks and stop the UDF and COSATU in their tracks. Instead the tactics used alienated local communities and drove people to seek help and refuge from the UDF and COSATU. This augmented the support and power of these nascent progressive organisations – the ultimate provocation for Inkatha.

"Close Down the Death Factories"

Parallel to the history of the war is a history of broken peace attempts. At least five different initiatives have failed for one reason or another, although a consistent pattern has emerged of intransigence on the part of Inkatha and Chief Buthelezi in particular. Now there is a new hope abroad once again: the police appear to be laying

aside their partisan attitude in favour of Inkatha and are acting more impartially against the perpetrators of violence. Most importantly, there is a sense that a peace parley between Chief Buthelezi and Nelson Mandela will enjoy a credibility lacking in previous rounds of talks.

At a rally at King's Park Stadium in Durban on 25 February 1990, Nelson Mandela called on all parties to lay down arms. "My message to those of you involved in this battle of brother against brother is this", he said. "Take your guns, your knives and your pangas, and throw them into the sea. Close down the death factories. **End this war now!**"

Mandela also made generous references to Inkatha's role in the struggle against apartheid and declared his intention to speak to Chief Buthelezi. At this point thousands of youths stood up and streamed out of the stadium. Later, one comrade said, "What Mandela said – to throw away the weapons – is good, but we can never do it. We would be slaughtered in the night."

This illustrates the chief difficulty in achieving that peace which even a year ago, perhaps, was still within grasp. The war has proliferated, spawning hundreds of personal feuds and vendettas. Experience has shown that the process of translating the decisions of top-ranking leaders into action at the grassroots level is fraught with difficulties. The fact that this is an unofficial war means that such conventions associated with peace as surrender, armistice and demobilisation do not apply. There is no organised, mobilised army, and no military structure to be dismantled. Instead the fighters are individuals or disparate groups who may choose to heed the calls to end the fighting, or they may choose to ignore them because they find the claims of vengeance or of power more attractive and compelling.

Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is that the appeals by high-ranking political players in COSATU-UDF, the ANC and Inkatha will have some influence on their local membership in the Pietermaritzburg region, and that these will coincide with and reinforce a natural reduction in the level of conflict caused by war-weariness and a desire for rest.

Note:

Certain sections of this paper were taken from my book *An Unofficial War*, David Philip, 1990, which was written in an attempt to expose the extent and the impact of the war – to lift a corner of the carpet under which this unsightly violence has been swept. I have been less concerned with academic dissertations on the causes of the violence than with its effect on the daily lives of people living in the war zone.

In his book, *Another Day of Life*, the Polish literary journalist, Ryszard Kapusckinski says:

The world contemplates the great spectacle of combat and death, which is difficult for it to imagine in the end, because the image of war is not communicable – not by the pen, or

the voice, or the camera. War is a reality only to those stuck in its bloody, dreadful, filthy insides. To others, it is pages in a book, pictures on a screen, nothing more.

As far as possible, and despite these limitations, I have tried to communicate the images of this war