

War and Resistance

Rauch, J. (1994). *War and Resistance*. In Cawthra, G., Kraak, G. & O'Sullivan, G. (Eds), *War and Resistance: Southern African Reports*, Macmillan Press: London.

In Cawthra, G, Kraak, G & O'Sullivan, G (eds), *War and Resistance: Southern African Reports*, Macmillan Press: London, 1994.

Janine Rauch is an independent consultant.

Introduction

From the mid-1970s onwards, militarisation and military conflict were central features of South African life as the government sought to maintain white domination in the face of rising resistance. Inside South Africa the most visible aspect of this was the system of compulsory conscription which forced young white men to commit the formative period of their lives to service in the South African Defence Force.

As opposition to apartheid mounted, troops were deployed against protesting black citizens, and the SADF wrought havoc in the sub-continent, where South Africa's rulers sought to bring the independent, post-colonial governments in neighbouring countries under their control. At home, there was a crisis of conscience in sections of the white community.

Young whites began to leave the country rather than serve in the military. In exile, they set up the Committee on South African War Resistance (COSAWR) to mobilise support for conscientious objectors in South Africa and to highlight the repressive role of the military. *Resister*, the journal which COSAWR published, became the primary source of information on the militarisation of Southern Africa. The *Resister* articles are now an invaluable record of the period.

COSAWR prepared the ground for the emergence of a domestic war resistance movement, the End Conscription Campaign (ECC), formed in 1984 to campaign against compulsory conscription. It won a huge following in the three years before it was outlawed by the state. Implicit in the critiques of both COSAWR and the ECC was the view that the SADF was an illegitimate institution – the central pillar of the unjust and indefensible apartheid system which it maintained through violence and repression.

The ECC, in particular, drew thousands of young whites into the mainstream of the anti-apartheid struggle and helped shape its non-racial character, thus competing with the state for the minds of white South Africans. Dissent over conscription, and the body bags returning from the battle-lines in the second half of the 1980s, caused growing concern in the white community. This was an early intimation that apartheid could not be maintained in perpetuity, and presaged the state's abandonment of white

majority rule in February 1990 in favour of negotiating a new constitution with the black majority.

The 'Nationalisation' of the Defence Force

During both the First and Second World Wars, the South African government refrained from compulsorily conscripting white men into the Union Defence Force for fear of resistance. The white parliament's decision to join the Allied war effort in 1939 was taken by a slim margin, with many Afrikaans-speakers either supporting the National Socialist cause in Germany or wishing to remain neutral.

The National Party came to power in the 1948 white parliamentary election by mobilising Afrikaner interests in a campaign to consolidate the *volk* (the Afrikaner nation) and protect it from marginalisation by English capital and the black majority. The imposition of the Nationalists' programme of apartheid marked a new era in civil-military relations in South Africa. As Kenneth Grundy has pointed out:

The National Party government's initial policy agenda concentrated on the systematic construction of the apartheid state. Questions of racial separation and dominance and an elaborate legal apparatus had to be fashioned to secure what was an inherently inequitable and unpopular regime. Once having set in motion these distinctive racial policies, the government turned to remaking the Union Defence Force and South African Police to eradicate the vestiges of the imperial mentality and English-speaking dominance in high ranks. All government institutions were converted into apartheid institutions to strengthen the party's hold on the state apparatus. (The Militarization of South African Politics, Oxford University Press, 1987: 8).

Conscription by ballot for white men was introduced by the National Party government in 1957, during the process of 'nationalisation' that transformed the Union Defence Force into the Afrikaner-dominated South African Defence Force.

The institutionalisation of the Nationalists' apartheid policies was matched by rising resistance from the black population. In the 1960s and the decades that followed, increases in the scope and duration of conscription, and the more frequent use of military force to secure white minority rule, were a measure of the increasing level of resistance to the imposition of apartheid.

In the 1950s, mass protests against National Party policies were organised by the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). As it prepared to declare South Africa a

white republic and further entrench white domination, the government demonstrated its resolve to crush all opposition with the police massacre of protesters at Sharpeville in 1960. The subsequent declaration of a state of emergency, the arrest of thousands of anti-apartheid activists and the banning of the ANC and PAC forced the liberation movement underground.

In 1961, having exhausted peaceful means of protest, the ANC formed Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), its armed wing, and began a campaign of sabotage against political and industrial targets. The Umkhonto leadership anticipated a lengthy guerrilla war to force the government to concede majority rule. This view was informed by developments in other countries in the region where guerrilla armies were fighting anti-colonial wars.

The Regional Balance of Forces

In the 1960s the Popular Front for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) launched armed struggles in the Portuguese colonies. In Rhodesia, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) took on the white settler regime which had unilaterally declared independence in defiance of Britain, the colonial power.

The major concern of the SADF in the period 1967-77 was to defend its borders and weaken the forces of liberation in neighbouring states, lest a 'domino effect' isolate South Africa as an enclave of white rule. To muster forces the government replaced the ballot system with universal compulsory conscription for white males in 1967, with little resistance from the white community. In 1972, the SADF moved into Namibia, the former German colony it had received in trust from the League of Nations after the Second World War, to support the South African Police (SAP). The police force had been unable to contain guerrilla activity by the South-West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) which was fighting for independence in northern Namibia. South African police were also deployed to help Rhodesian and Portuguese forces, with the aim of maintaining a *cordon sanitaire* of white settler regimes around South Africa and so prolonging white minority rule.

The 1974 coup in Portugal led to a change in the balance of power in the sub-continent. The Portuguese colonial regime in Angola, with which the apartheid government had collaborated, collapsed. To prevent the Marxist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) from coming to power, the SADF invaded the country supported by the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), which opposed the MPLA. With assistance from Cuban troops, the MPLA staved off the South Africans and became the new government of Angola. It supported SWAPO and the ANC, allowing guerrillas of the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN, SWAPO's armed wing) to operate from bases in Angola. But with South African assistance, UNITA was revived and protracted civil war ensued, punctuated by major invasions by the SADF, as part of a low-intensity war conducted in northern Namibia and southern Angola against PLAN guerrillas and Angolan government forces until the late 1980s.

In South Africa, disquiet followed the 1975 Angolan incursion, the first occasion on which large numbers of conscripts had been committed to combat. All news of the

invasion was withheld from the South African public by military censorship. The war was fought in secret until reports of SADF incursions in the international media and troop deaths forced the government to concede the presence of units in Angola. By this time the war was almost over. The SADF withdrawal was hastened by two main considerations: unexpectedly stiff resistance by the MPLA, now assisted by Cuban forces; and the unwillingness of the USA, UNITA's other backer, to support further action.

The 1976 Uprising and the Advent of the War Resistance Movement

In June 1976 South Africa erupted after school students in Soweto, who had been protesting about enforced instruction in Afrikaans, were shot at by the police. As protests swept the country, the police – backed by the army – moved into the townships. By the time the rebellion had been put down early in 1977, up to a thousand people had been killed. The uprising had a profound impact on potential conscripts. News of the army's role in crushing civilian resistance and in protecting key economic installations was rigorously suppressed. As resistance spread across the country, however, and progressively larger numbers of people were involved, the SADF's role became indisputable. The initial period of compulsory military service was extended to two years in 1977. 'Camps' (annual periods of retraining and operational service) were increased to 30 days a year for eight years after initial conscription. The government mounted an all-encompassing offensive against the perceived threat on its borders and in the townships. For black South Africans, it took the form of political repression; for whites, a stepped-up propaganda campaign using Cold War rhetoric to project anti-apartheid resistance as the work of Communist countries seeking world domination through client guerrilla forces. The military was popularised and white culture militarised: civilian defence structures were set up which trained and prepared the white population for war.

The 1975 Angolan invasion and the ruthless suppression of the 1976 uprising, together with increasing ideological control and indoctrination, alienated many critical young white South Africans, notably in the student movement and in the English-language churches. In 1975-76, many conscripts from politically liberal middle-class backgrounds were choosing to emigrate rather than serve in the armed forces. In 1978, the SADF was forced to admit that thousands of men had failed to report for military service in each of the three previous years.

In this climate the war resistance movement was born. The first conscientious objectors to make political arguments against service emerged in 1977 and 1978. At the same time, the mainstream English-language churches began campaigning against conscription. COSAWR was set up in London and Amsterdam in 1978 to assist and organise draft-dodgers who had gone into exile. Conscientious objector Peter Moll became the focus of international attention when he refused to fight in defence of apartheid. COSAWR's campaign on his behalf gathered international support for his position and highlighted the repressive role of the SADF.

The government was increasingly worried by these developments and the number of draft-evaders. In 1978, an Amendment to the Defence Act tightened the penalties for refusal to serve to a maximum of two years in jail and repeated call-ups. Trials under the new law served to mobilise support for conscientious objectors. The Amendment

also made it an offence to encourage conscripts to refuse to serve, with severe penalties for doing so.

P W Botha and the Total Strategy

When P W Botha became Prime Minister in 1979, he moved swiftly to consolidate the state-wide security strategy he had envisaged as Minister of Defence in the 1977 Defence White Paper. 'Total Strategy', based on French colonial experience in Algeria, combined reform and repression to secure white domination, and was informed by a conviction that the war in South Africa was only 20 per cent military and 80 per cent economic, social and political. Total Strategy focussed on the granting of limited trade union and political rights to disenfranchised blacks, to win black quiescence, combined with repression of opposition forces and control of information and propaganda.

The doctrine of Total Strategy took concrete form in the creation of the National Security Management System (NSMS), a massive militarised bureaucracy which managed security, intelligence, constitutional, social and economic issues at both national and local levels. With its thorough penetration of both state and civil society, the NSMS was a vehicle for intense militarisation of South African society during the 1980s.

The impact of Total Strategy was felt initially in South Africa's neighbouring states. After an abortive diplomatic initiative to co-opt other Southern African governments into a loose political and economic federation, South Africa fell back on repression as the instrument to bend neighbouring states to its will. In 1980 and 1981 military action was taken, or threatened, against a number of neighbouring states. In January 1981, the SADF raided the homes of exiled ANC members in Matola, a suburb of Maputo, Mozambique, killing 14 people. Later that year, in an operation code-named 'Protea', the SADF invaded Angola to destroy SWAPO bases and support UNITA forces.

In the early 1980s, South Africa's war against the front-line states took the form of selective and intensive military attacks, ostensibly to neutralise SWAPO and MK bases. However, these attacks on neighbouring states were never simply aimed at SWAPO or MK targets, but formed part of a programme to consolidate South African political and economic hegemony in the sub-continent by destabilising and disrupting governments which might otherwise develop into a counter-force. In Angola the SADF continued to back UNITA, and in Mozambique it trained and equipped the nucleus of the Mozambique National Resistance (MNR or RENAMO) which was to devastate large areas of the country.

Total Strategy failed to dampen internal resistance. In 1980 in Cape Town, black students who were boycotting classes in protest at the quality of their education joined forces with striking workers and commuters protesting at fare rises on busses. Trade unions, student organisations and community groups began co-ordinating strategies. The Defence Act was again amended in 1981, specifically to make provision for the deployment of troops for 'the suppression of internal disorder'. Shortly afterwards, SADF troops were deployed against boycotting scholars in Cape Town.

This continued military involvement in the sub-continent and at home prompted further disquiet about compulsory conscription. Fifteen conscientious objectors took a stand against service in the period 1979-82, most of them Christians. The broader white community was unsupportive and often hostile. Large numbers left the country rather than serve. In 1982, conscription was further extended to foreigners resident in South Africa. People who had permanent residence permits were now also expected to serve.

In 1983-84 the government further revised its strategy to secure white domination. It attempted to ensure the support of the Indian and Coloured minorities by allowing them representation in their own parliamentary chambers and control over education, welfare and other aspects of government in their own communities. More broadly, the reformist aspects of Total Strategy were enhanced to 'win the hearts and minds' of the urban African population. In the words of a senior official:

Drastic action must be taken to eliminate the underlying social and economic factors which have caused unhappiness in the population. The only way to render the enemy powerless is to nip revolution in the bud by ensuring that there is no fertile soil in which the seeds of revolution can germinate.

Government funds were allocated for township development and powers of local government for Africans in the townships were upgraded. Popular organisations mobilised against this co-optive programme, achieving a momentum which led to the emergence of the broadest anti-apartheid front since the banning of the ANC two decades earlier. Opposition was grouped under the banner of the United Democratic Front (UDF), representing workers, students, women, communities, religious groups, and significantly, a number of affiliate organisations from within the white community.

At the end of 1983, the SADF launched its third major invasion of Angola, Operation Askari, which involved over 10 000 white troops. The invasion was ostensibly aimed at SWAPO bases in Angola, but it was timed to support a UNITA push northwards against the MPLA government within Angola by drawing FAPLA troops to the south. FAPLA fought more strongly than the South Africans had anticipated. More than twenty white conscripts died during the operation, provoking for the first time a critical reaction from the white public and mainstream press.

At the same time, the number of objectors increased, with a shift to more overtly political stands by objectors, epitomised by Brett Myrdals stand in 1983:

My ideals have led me to strive, along with many other South Africans, for a new South Africa, free from the hatred of apartheid. The Freedom Charter, drawn up in 1955 by representatives of millions of South Africans from all walks of life, best reflects these ideals; of a non-racial and democratic South Africa in which the people shall govern. I

see my decision to conscientiously object as the best way in which I can serve South Africa and its people.

In 1983 the Defence Act was again amended in an attempt to contain the rising number of objectors. It provided for a six-year maximum jail sentence for objectors refusing to serve. A Board for Religious Objection was set up to adjudicate applications for religious objector status. Only universal pacifism grounded in recognised religious doctrine gained exemption from service. The options available to these objectors were to accept non-combatant service in the SADF for the same period as military service; to perform non-combatant service in the SADF in non-military uniform, in which case they would have to serve one-and-a-half times as long as ordinary soldiers; or to do community service, usually in a state department for a continuous period one-and-a-half times the length of military service outstanding. Taking into account possible 'camps' after initial service, this meant that community-service objectors who had not done any army training were obliged to serve for six years. None of these options were made available to non-religious objectors or to religious objectors with political reasons for refusing to fight: these people faced trial in criminal court and jail penalties of one-and-a-half-times the length of military service – up to six years.

For a short time after the 1983 amendment, militant conscientious objection was constrained by the new legislation. But in 1984 a national organisation opposing compulsory military service, the End Conscription Campaign (ECC), was launched amid growing pressure on the South African government to end its illegal occupation of Namibia, its destabilisation of the region, and the deployment of the SADF in the townships. While it had no formal links with the ECC, COSAWR campaigned internationally in support of the new organisation.

In 1984, the South African government entered into accords with Mozambique (the Nkomati Accord) and Angola (the Lusaka Agreement). In exchange for an end to South African support for rebel groups opposing their governments, Mozambique and Angola agreed to end or restrict operational support for SWAPO and the ANC. The ceasefire and withdrawal agreement in Angola were part of a broader diplomatic initiative, supported by Western governments, to resolve the question of Namibian independence. In 1985, however, the SADF once again invaded Angola, where UNITA was being threatened by a FAPLA offensive. The invasion, and the capture of an SADF officer sabotaging oil installations in northern Angola, gave the lie to South Africa's supposed withdrawal from Angola. Similarly, in Mozambique, the South Africans continued to support the MNR forces after the signing of the Nkomati Accord.

The Crisis of the Mid-1980s

In the mid-1980s the balance of forces began to shift in favour of anti-apartheid forces, both inside the country and in the sub-continent. At home, resistance to apartheid reached a new level of intensity. In 1984, the SADF was deployed on a large scale in the townships to help the SAP control an insurrection in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vaal region. The war, previously fought 'on the borders' of the country, was now being waged on the doorsteps of the white suburbs. The deployment of troops in the townships was a turning point for the war resistance movement. The launch of the ECC in 1984 proved a watershed. The Conscientious Objector Support

Groups (COSG) and the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) had led the initial campaigns against conscription. The inspiration for a wider campaign came from the Black Sash, a long-standing organisation of liberal white women who had publicly called for an end to compulsory military service. The ECC, a broad-based coalition, embraced NUSAS and the churches, and even drew some support from the youth wing of the official parliamentary opposition party of the time, the Progressive Federal Party.

The ECC aimed to increase awareness of, and resistance to, the increasing militarisation of South African society, and the role the South African military was playing in the front-line states and in the townships. It called for the withdrawal of troops and for an end to the system of compulsory conscription. It campaigned primarily in the white community, yet became an important vehicle for the creation of a non-racial, oppositional youth culture.

The ECC's initial surge of growth stemmed from public indignation at the deployment of troops in the townships in October 1984. When the government declared a State of Emergency in parts of the country in 1985, soldiers and police were given wider powers and indemnity for their actions. Over 35 000 SADF troops were deployed in townships in 1985, despite opposition from township residents. By 1986, the security forces had not managed to bring resistance under control, so the government declared a nation-wide State of Emergency, which was to last until mid-1990. It included severe restrictions on reporting on the activities of the security forces, and made SADF activities in the townships invisible to outside observers.

The military and other excesses of emergency rule helped the ECC to win a broad following in the liberal white community, and to make some inroads in the Afrikaans-speaking areas. The organisation increasingly became the object of state concern. In 1986, the SADF Chief of Operations was reported as saying that 'ECC has only one aim in mind, and that is to break our morale, and to eventually leave South Africa defenceless'. During the nation-wide State of Emergency declared in that year, the ECC itself became a target. Detentions, restrictions and harassment forced the organisation on to the defensive and into a lower profile role. The focus of the campaign against conscription shifted away from broad anti-militarist demands to mobilisation of support for individual objectors, tried for refusing to serve. They included Philip Wilkinson, the first to be sentenced under the new legislation. His refusal to report for military camp duty was based on motives at once Christian and explicitly political. He said the 'the SADF commits crimes against humanity as long it defends the universally condemned system of apartheid'. Ivan Toms, a medical doctor, refused to serve because of the activities of the soldiers and police he had witnessed while working in a clinic in the Crossroads squatter-camp near Cape Town.

A more collective response to the crisis was also beginning to develop. In response to the mid-year call-up in 1987, a group of 23 conscripts delivered to military headquarters in Cape Town a joint statement of their refusal to serve in defence of apartheid. The group consisted of English and Afrikaans conscripts closely associated with the ECC. The collective stance – a tactic later repeated to good effect – signalled that service in the military had become the key issue among many young whites in defining their opposition to apartheid, and the anti-draft movement was gathering momentum, provoked by the sense of crisis gripping the country. The stand of the 23 objectors had a short-lived impact on the white community but elicited a warmer response from the broad democratic movement in South Africa.

Angola: The balance tips

In 1987, the SADF once again struck deep into Angola in support of UNITA forces, a manoeuvre which was to last well into the following year. FAPLA had launched an effective military offensive against rebel UNITA bases in southern Angola and these were under threat. The SADF repulsed the attack on UNITA, although South African casualties were high – over 200 South African troops had died by the end of 1987. The SADF then moved towards the strategic town of Cuito Cuanavale, where the Angolan air and radar defences were located. By this time, the Cuban forces had been drawn into the battle in defence of FAPLA. After a prolonged period of conventional battle, the SADF lost air superiority to the combined Cuban-Angolan forces, and was suffering heavy personnel losses. The battle of Cuito Cuanavale, in which dozens of South African conscripts died, decisively shifted the balance of forces against the SADF. The defeat came at a time when rivalry between the international superpowers was receding in response to the reform process initiated in the Soviet Union. The USA and other Western countries were no longer willing to support South African aggression in the region against other countries they had previously regarded as Soviet client regimes.

Military defeat, the enormous cost of the war and domestic concern over the rising death toll forced the South African government into the series of peace talks that led to a ceasefire between South Africa and Angola, and, ultimately, Namibian independence.

In South Africa, the struggle between objectors and the state continued. David Bruce, a 24-year-old graduate, was sentenced to a full six years in prison in July 1988, the same month that the SADF agreed to the ceasefire and withdrawal from Angola. At the same time there was another collective stand against conscription: 143 conscripts in four cities announced their refusal to serve in August 1988. The group was made up of English and Afrikaans professionals and students, a third of whom had done some service in the SADF. Some had already been granted religious-objector status; for others it was their first act of defiance.

The significance of their stand was emphasised by the State's response. The 143 had tried to distance themselves from the ECC and stressed that their action was an independent initiative. However, a few weeks later the government banned the ECC under the Emergency regulations, provoking a strong reaction from the white liberal community and the mass democratic movement inside South Africa, and from the international community.

After the banning of the ECC, the focus of the war resistance movement within the country shifted to the smaller, regional Conscientious Objector Support Groups, which campaigned for objectors imprisoned and awaiting trial, and for an alternative system of national service. In exile COSAWR meanwhile gathered international support for the war resistance movement and continued to highlight the issues of conscription and resistance in the context of intensifying civil war in South Africa.

In September 1989, a group of 771 objectors stated their refusal to serve, returning the issue to the centre of public attention. Because of the de-escalation of the war in Namibia and Angola, the 771 objectors shifted the focus of their argument from South Africa's role in the region to issues of the rights of conscripts and objectors. Two more

objectors were sentenced to lengthy prison terms in 1988 and 1989: Charles Bester (only 18 years old) and Saul Batzofin. By the end of 1989, four conscientious objectors were incarcerated in South African jails. Denied political prisoner status, they were held in cells with criminal prisoners.

The stand of the 771 also served to launch a National Register of objectors, a statement of public mass protest in keeping with the Mass Democratic Movement's Defiance Campaign, which had been launched in defiance of apartheid laws in mid-1989. From that time onwards, objectors forwarded their names for inclusion in the ever-growing Register, instead of making a public statement. Simultaneously, COSAWR organised exiled war resisters to sign a parallel external register under the patronage of the President of the British Anti-Apartheid movement, Archbishop Trevor Huddleston. The publication of the Huddleston International Register in the South African press in late 1989 signalled the desire of hundreds of exiled resisters to build a closer relationship with the domestic war resistance movement.

F.W. De Klerk's Military Reforms

A reduction of the influence of the military in the government and the rise of technocrat politicians marked the ousting of P W Botha and F W de Klerk's assumption of the State Presidency in December 1989. Although De Klerk did not specifically address conscription in his landmark reform speech of 2 February 1990, old -style conscription had become redundant in the new climate. The De Klerk government reduced the period of full-time military service by half, to one year, and objectors' sentences were accordingly also cut by half. Although the military budget was reduced, priority was given to police functions – described by some commentators as a new process of 'internal militarisation' – and the hawks of the P W Botha regime, ministers Vlok and Malan were retained in De Klerk's cabinet. This was due, in part, to De Klerk's reluctance to alienate hardliners in the National Party leadership and in the white electorate. However, subsequent patterns of political violence which continued to wrack South African townships led many to conclude that the security forces, and particularly the Department of Military Intelligence, were clandestinely destabilising the ANC in the pre-election period.

There was no amnesty for imprisoned objectors and two remained in jail. Batzofin had been released due to the changes in the length of objectors' sentences, and Toms was out on bail, pending an appeal which would be heard under the new regulations. When his appeal was heard, together with that of David Bruce, in the Appeal Court in March 1990, the Appellate Division judgement concluded that the Defence Act allowed for discretion in the sentencing of conscientious objectors, and that the maximum penalties which the objectors had received should be reviewed. This decision, combined with a new ruling that objectors could receive remission and parole on their sentences, meant that Toms, Bester and Bruce were freed.

War resisters now had another option. In November 1990 Michael Graaf, an objector sentenced after the release of the three, was granted indemnity under an agreement which had been negotiated between the ANC and the government on political prisoners. This was especially significant because it created the legal precedent for objectors to be treated as political, rather than criminal, prisoners.

The initial political optimism which pervaded South Africa in 1990 and led many to assume that conscription would soon be ended severely disrupted the ECC. Many ECC activists had joined the liberation movements when they were unbanned in February 1990, and the de facto moratorium on objector trials from mid-1991 had removed the main focus of ECC activity.

In London, COSAWR took the decision to close down the exile operation and return home. The final issue of *Resister* declared: 'We are now entering a new era of struggle. To contribute fully to shaping the new South Africa, we need to be in South Africa itself'. However, the returning war resisters still faced call-ups and possible prosecution for refusing to serve in the SADF. The return of an advance party of COSAWR members to the country was partly an attempt to force the government's hand on conscription.

Three of the returnees received call-ups within a month of their arrival in South Africa. One of them, Francois Krige, announced his refusal to serve, but was never charged. His belief that the government could ill-afford to enforce minority white conscription at a time of supposed reconciliation, proved correct. The repeal of the Population Registration Act, that cornerstone of apartheid, which provided for the racial classification of all citizens, meant that conscription which applied to white men was discriminatory and legally questionable. The anomaly of racially exclusive conscription in a country which had formally deracialised its statute books became the central issue for ECC campaigns in 1991 and 1992.

In mid-1992, the government introduced a new amendment to the Defence Act, which provided for moral, ethical or religious objection to military service. Although conscription had not yet been abolished, years of struggle and sacrifice by objectors were formally acknowledged in law. The Draft Bill attempted to reinstate mandatory prison sentences for objectors, but this clause was changed after a massive lobbying effort by ECC. The new legislation gave objectors in South Africa a range of options comparable with many Western democracies, but the fundamental problem of racially exclusive conscription into an illegitimate army remained.

In late 1992, the ECC's court challenge to whites-only conscription, which argued that conscription of whites only was illegal after the repeal of racial classification laws was dismissed. The ECC, which now included a number of war resisters returned from exile, responded with the launch of a new 'Register of Non-Co-operation' with the SADF. This initiative served to revitalise much of the ECC's dormant support base, particularly among conscripts and resisters.

The parties involved in the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), charged with negotiating a new constitution, agreed early in 1992 to the abolition of conscription – but this, and other agreements concerning the future of the security forces, were not formalised, because of the breakdown of the CODESA talks. However, at its policy conference in May 1992, the ANC made very clear its commitment to a future volunteer army.

The anti-militarisation movement, both at home and in exile, made a significant contribution to the debates about the nature of military and other security forces in a democratic South Africa. Many supporters of the objector movement and the ECC now share a new vision of security in the post-apartheid period which has also been influential in ANC policy formulation. This vision demonstrates concerns for regional

peace and stability, for the rights of members of the armed forces and veterans, and for the vulnerability of the Southern African environment. It thus directly addresses the problems created by apartheid militarisation.

Resister and the Politics of the War Resistance Movement

The Editors

When COSAWR was set up in London in 1978, one of its first acts was to found Resister, to give voice to the war resistance movement. What began as a pamphlet-style publication opposing conscription and the imprisonment of conscientious objectors in South Africa developed into a specialist and increasingly authoritative journal on militarisation.

In South Africa the provisions of the Defence Act made it an offence to encourage resistance to military call-ups. The Act also placed restrictions on the reporting of a wide range of military affairs. Newspaper could not, for example disclose to the South African public at the time that the SADF had invaded Angola in 1975. Other forms of censorship further restrained internal opposition organisations from developing a critique of militarisation. Coverage of the activities of the police was also restricted, as were details of key strategic industries and the armaments industry. The States of Emergency after 1985 tightened restrictions even further, effectively blacking out all information about police and military deployment to put down protest. Nor was it legal to quote the many proscribed organisations, including the liberation movements, or to report on many of their activities.

It fell largely to publications circulated clandestinely inside the country to try and break through this shroud of censorship. Resister became the leading source on militarisation, appearing without interruption every two months – and later quarterly – for an 11-year period. The magazine was written by war resisters, deserters, exiles, and supporters. It was produced by a sub-committee of COSAWR open to anyone who could string a sentence together and who was interested in the issues. The membership of the sub-committee shifted and the articles in Resister reflected the variety of styles, sometimes rather idiosyncratic, of those who contributed to it. Over the 11 years, well over 100 people contributed in various ways. Some writers developed areas of specialisation and went on to write for other publications and to prepare documentation for anti-apartheid and other international bodies, such as the United Nations. Others stayed for only a few issues and then moved on. But there were always enough contributors to sustain the publication. An editorial committee of three to four people ensured continuity and tidied up copy.

The articles were based on news-cuttings and military publications from South African and international sources, debriefings of deserters, and information provided by the liberation movement from its own sources. In the coverage of the Angolan, Namibian and Mozambican wars, the media in these countries were also consulted, providing a counter to the biases and selective coverage of both the South African and international media. Resister was financed from the general budget of COSAWR and was a subsidised publication, receiving only a small proportion of its income through subscriptions. COSAWR's main supporters were European development NGOs in the

Netherlands, Belgium, France, West Germany and the United Kingdom. Some income was also raised through public fund-raising events.

The people who founded COSAWR in the late 1970s mostly had university backgrounds. Many had been activists in the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), the white, mainly English-speaking, student movement which opposed apartheid. At the time NUSAS operated in relative isolation from black opposition groups. While the 1976 uprising was a watershed after which began a revival of the non-racial tradition of the ANC, the Black Consciousness Movement was still dominant inside the country. Some of COSAWR's early members were sympathetic to the Black Consciousness organisations; others had worked with the emerging trade unions, were left wing socialists, and were suspicious of broad multi-class organisations like the ANC.

The question of how COSAWR should relate to the exiled ANC was therefore a central debate in the first months of its existence, and the later alliance between the two organisations was not achieved without acrimonious debate in COSAWR ranks, particularly in the Netherlands, where a branch of COSAWR had been established in 1979. While COSAWR was always autonomous and only a few of its members formally joined the ANC, the organisations were close.

COSAWR's foremost achievement was that it helped to shape the most visible strand of white opposition to apartheid – war resistance- and drew it into the ANC alliance and the non-racial tradition of opposition politics. It created the political framework in which the internal groups opposed to conscription, notably the ECC, came to operate. While it was in the ANC's interests to have COSAWR under its wing rather than operating as a looser force, COSAWR also influenced the ANC's thinking on war resistance and persuaded the movement to include and address the constituency of war resisters in the country. The ANC took this to task seriously and its propaganda after 1980 consistently addressed the issue of war resistance, calling on young whites to evade service and indicating that there was a place for them in the ranks of the movement. The ANC also played a crucial role in gaining international recognition for war resistance as a legitimate aspect of the struggle and establishing the right to exiled resisters to be recognised as refugees.

Internally, the ANC supported the formation of the ECC and helped create a climate among its allies and networks that was supportive of the campaign. The 'broad front' campaigning style of the ECC, emphasising the need to unite as many people as possible into an anti-apartheid campaign which would work on the cracks opening in the ruling bloc, was influenced by the political strategy of the ANC and its supporters.

Until 1984, when the ECC was formed, COSAWR was the only organised formation of war resisters. Inside the country, the realities of repression meant that resistance to conscription and to militarisation consisted of isolated, often individual acts: the public stands and subsequent imprisonment of individual resisters, the campaigns of support for them, the debates within the churches over the morality of service and the critiques developed by the student movement. In this period *Resister* drew together the different strands, gave them the semblance of a coherent position and brought war resistance to international attention through campaigns and representations to the United Nations and international anti-apartheid groups. In doing so COSAWR and *Resister* helped prepare the ground for an internal war resistance movement.

The process was not without tensions: in the student movement inside South Africa, for example, a damaging rift developed. Some argued that the main duty of anti-apartheid activists was to remain inside the country and contribute to internal opposition movements, even if this meant serving in the military in non-combatant roles. Others replied that there could be no justification for serving. It was the duty of white democrats to refuse -and therefore either go to jail, go underground, or leave the country. These antithetical positions were the starker manifestations of a debate about the role of the white anti-apartheid activists. The former group wanted to help to build a non-racial resistance movement inside the country in which white democrats would play a role. They felt that taking a prescriptive position on the issue of military service would narrow the role of white democrats to that of resisting the draft. Thousands would be condemned to prison, a twilight existence of evading the military police, or forced into exile, choices which would deplete the democratic movement of internal activists. The latter group wanted to build a mass draft-resistance movement along the lines of the movement that opposed US involvement in Vietnam and so provoke a crisis of control within the white establishment.

The debate was replicated in the ranks of the ANC and deepened the rift inside the country, with each side claiming the authority of the ANC for its own stance. The line taken by *Resister*, with its explicit calls to evade the draft and to desert from the ranks of the SADF, would at the time have appeared to favour the arguments of the ANC. In fact, COSAWR's position was more complex. There were sympathisers with both positions inside the organisation; there were even some in COSAWR who believed that in the long term it might be possible to build a movement of resistance *inside* the SADF. COSAWR persuaded the ANC to adopt a broad approach to the issue of war resistance, which would accommodate a range of opinions and actions. The ANC subsequently called on whites to find ways to 'Resist Apartheid War', but did not prescribe particular courses of action. *Resister* also refrained from directly intervening in the debate. The differences inside the country persisted, however: some people remained in the country; others left. The rift was ended only when the ECC was formed.

The content of *Resister* changed over time to reflect other debates and events. The magazine functioned initially as a newssheet on the internal war resistance movement, imprisoned objectors and conditions in detention barracks. However, with the ascendancy of the former Minister of Defence P W Botha to the office of Prime Minister in 1978, the adoption of his 'Total Strategy' and the eclipse of civilian government by the military, a need arose for a forum to analyse what was happening and why. *Resister* took on the challenge. After 1980 the journal became increasingly analytical in style, although it still provided first-hand and anecdotal accounts of the experiences of deserters, and continued to cover and give coherence to the different strands of the internal war resistance movement.

The formation of the ECC in 1984 substantially affected the roles of COSAWR and *Resister*. Although the ECC was launched during a period of heightened internal militancy, fuelled by a sense that it was possible to push back barriers of state control, it was also the product of careful and informed strategy.

Limiting its call to an end to compulsory conscription, the ECC made no further political prescriptions. This allowed a broad swathe of opposition to fall in behind it, from the youth wing of the official opposition party (whose leadership supported the military but eventually favoured a volunteer force), through pacifists and various

shades of religious objection to anti-apartheid radicals, who regarded the SADF as an illegitimate institution serving the ends of apartheid. Although the ECC called for troops to be withdrawn from the townships, for an end to the occupation of Namibia and a halt to aggression against neighbouring states, it legally could not and did not explicitly urge conscripts not to serve, although this was its implicit, 'coded' message.

COSAWR continued to take a stronger, explicitly anti-apartheid position, calling on conscripts not to serve in the SADF, and on those in service to desert. *Resister* on occasion also published articles supportive of the armed struggle and the view that the army was a legitimate target of attack. This reflected the closeness of COSAWR's political position to that of the ANC, as much as the conviction that it should supplement the ECC's campaign by making calls that the ECC could not, both because the calls were illegal and because the ECC wanted to maintain a broad following. COSAWR's apparently harder line, its support for the armed struggle and its clandestine role probably alienated it from the broad spectrum of youth the ECC was drawing into the campaign with its less prescriptive position. The ECC was the broad church, COSAWR the harbinger of the party line.

COSAWR followed thinking in the ANC which judged that the climate in South Africa had become insurrectionary and, perhaps erroneously, that a short route to a seizure of power was possible. The army and police were identified as key areas for work. If these pillars of the state could be weakened and there were substantial defections from the ranks, they would collapse. In this shift of thinking the movement came to view the army and the police as sites of struggle in their own right. A dual strategy should be pursued – encouraging conscripts not only to serve, and sowing dissent among those already in the army by organising around potential areas of dissent like wages, conditions and the brutalisation of conscripts. *Resister*, which had long agitated for working within the armed forces, researched conditions in the military and issued a series of agitational pamphlets which exposed conditions for ordinary conscripts in barracks. The journal also began to publish material on how conscripts were organised in other countries, notably in the US (during the Vietnam war), in Portugal (where the grievances of soldiers forced to fight in an unpopular colonial war were a major factor leading to the 1974 coup) and in the Netherlands (where a successful soldiers' union had been built up). COSAWR hoped that these articles would stimulate debate within the war resistance movement in South Africa and within the ANC and other opposition formations, and this might lead to a reappraisal of strategy.

As it turned out, the state crushed the revolt at the end of 1986. But the exercise had proved a turning point for COSAWR. It had developed a sympathy for the conditions of conscripts and continued to treat the army as a possible site of mobilisation. Following moves towards unionisation by black members of the police force, COSAWR began to look seriously at the options for soldiers' unions. The ECC had also begun to look at issues of concern to serving conscripts, but from a different departure point. It sought to appeal to soldiers (rather than to alienate them) as a way of expanding its base and points of pressure in support of the abolition of compulsory conscription. When after 1989 it became clear that the transition to a post-apartheid state was on the cards, both organisations began to raise the question of what rights soldiers would have in a post-apartheid army, and to persuade the ANC to take a stand against a conscripted army.

There was no formal liaison between COSAWR and the ECC, and therefore no agreed common strategy until 1989, when conditions improved. Exposure of any prior, formal contacts would have damaged the standing of the ECC among its constituency and strengthened the state's spurious claim that the ECC was a tool of COSAWR and the ANC, controlled in turn by Moscow and the KGB, with an agenda to bring down the state.

The different approaches taken by the two organisations were ultimately complementary. *Resister* made explicit what was implicit in the ECC message – that the SADF was an illegitimate institution and that people should not serve. Many people politicised by the initial work of the ECC were receptive to COSAWR's position.

A member of *Resister's* editorial board commented that

In reaching out to people we were constrained by our self-regulatory approach in putting across the ANC line and this definitely affected our broad appeal. In exile we missed the nuances of the debates in the country and this made us strategically less effective. At the same time the fact that we were based outside the country did give us the bigger picture. It should not be forgotten that we also played a role in popularising the ANC's position in the white community. *Resister* was more accessible to whites, in terms of its style and content, than some of the ANC's more rhetorical publications. We played a bridging role, linking a natural constituency for the ANC to the organisation.

When the ECC was banned in February 1988 COSAWR once again became the leading voice of the organised war resistance movement and broadened its coverage to publicise the positions of the churches, the student movement, organisations which had escaped the ban (such as the COSGs) and individual resisters. COSAWR campaigned vigorously abroad for the lifting of the ban on the ECC and the release of individual resisters. It maintained its analytical coverage of internal repression and destabilisation of the front-line states. During the States of Emergency it provided detailed and accurate coverage of police and military deployment, and its coverage of the Angolan war was the most comprehensive of any publication after 1985 on Southern Africa.

The end of the Cold War in the second half of the 1980s had dramatic implications for South Africa. Western governments, in particular the USA, began to reassess their support for the destabilisation of Marxist Angola and Mozambique. The defeat of the SADF in Angola also shifted the balance of forces in the region to South Africa's disadvantage. The government succumbed to pressure for a regional settlement.

In South Africa itself, the revival of civil unrest in 1989 persuaded groups within the white establishment to put out feelers for an accommodation with the ANC, and the

liberation movement increasingly assumed centre-stage. COSAWR and the ECC, which had unilaterally 'unbanned' itself in 1989, took advantage of the more defiant climate to establish formal links. In 1989 and 1990 the organisations pursued a common strategy, campaigning for imprisoned objectors, mobilising support for the registers of objectors, looking into the rights of conscripts and putting the shape of the security forces in a post-apartheid dispensation on the agenda.

Resister was aimed at three main groups: Western anti-apartheid, anti-militarist and peace groups; members of the liberation movement; and potential resisters inside the country. About 3 000 issues of the magazine were printed and distributed each month, about one-third to each constituency. The magazine was distributed largely by mail and this was also the chief method of getting it into the country. COSAWR developed extensive internal mailing lists and the magazine was posted from different countries in envelopes of varying formats and on different dates, to evade interception of the post in South Africa.

Aiming at these three rather different audiences affected *Resister's* style. Much of the time it was rather academic, which became a problem after 1984 when a large domestic war resistance movement developed inside the country, mostly young and steeped in youth culture. *Resister's* approach was often out of tune with the style of the times. Attempts were made to use more accessible language, but *Resister* never really achieved a popular style and content. This was probably not a significant impediment, as the publication had a small circulation; its main impact was on a layer of leading activists in the war resistance movement and its influence was more diffuse than direct.

One of COSAWR's founders believes that

It was simply not feasible for us to aim for a mass readership. The publication was aimed at people who had already been converted to the cause and who were receptive to our arguments about strategy. We know that the magazine was read, sometimes sporadically, by activists, in the student movement and in the churches – and there is some evidence that it reached a wider audience. Some serving national servicemen, for example, claimed to have read it. We made our mark, because we always received responses to our more controversial interventions.

Resister had a marked impact on the Western anti-apartheid movement, where it was regarded as an unrivalled source of information on militarisation and was used substantially in anti-apartheid campaigns. Copies of *Resister* were also circulated in large numbers among the ANC membership, particularly those in the camps of the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), in East Africa and Angola. It was an important source of information about militarisation and influenced thinking within the ANC's ranks on the tactics of the war resistance movement. The magazine may have helped to sustain the non-racialism of the ANC, providing tangible evidence to the

mostly black members of MK of the involvement of young whites in the anti-apartheid struggle. According to one *Resister* editor:

***Resister's* impact on ANC thinking was seminal. It opened up the terrain of the military to contest and helped the movement understand militarisation. We helped make the issue of the military into a site of struggle. We seized the ground. Before COSAWR and *Resister* the issue had been discussed in anti-apartheid circles, but no strategy had emerged, possibly because no-one could gauge whether the white community would be receptive. With our experience as draft-dodgers, we felt that we understood our constituency and we understood that the issue of military service was a burning, living issue for young whites. It only needed to be given voice and an organisational shape to have an impact. In the late 1970s when COSAWR was founded, critiques of the SADF were confined to the student movement and the churches. We helped make it a major concern of the ANC and thus of the wider struggle, and that in turn helped prepare the ground for the ECC to emerge and be accepted as a partner in the anti-apartheid front.**

© Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation