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‘total war,’ ‘people’s war,’ ‘wars’ of inequality and education in South Africa

Linda Chisholm

Wars, whether of full-scale invasion and military aggression or on a lower scale of intensity, destroy educational infrastructure and aspirations. But during war, education can also hold out the possibility for alternatives. Using South Africa in the 1980s as a case of low-intensity war, this article shows how parts of the system became militarised but also how an alternative vision was created through and in education. Nationalism, militarism and gendered identities romanticising war and violence were closely linked in white schools. For black youth, militarism became a defence against state violence. Apartheid was defeated, but the violence produced by the conflict has lived on in the society in different ways. Redrawing the boundaries of the nation after apartheid has created new Others. Education can and must continue to create the possibilities for thinking about different ways of organising society and looking to a future without war.

Keywords: history of education, Militarism and education, people’s education, South Africa

I have a photograph, taken in the mid-1980s, of a workshop on The Curriculum and People’s Education conducted by the nascent, oppositional, anti-apartheid, non-racial teachers’ union. In the photograph, the wall behind the speakers is plastered with posters about how the hidden curriculum works in different subjects and what a ‘people’s education’ in each of them might mean. In the foreground young black and white teachers sing liberation songs, wielding papier-mâché AK47s. The image captures the complete complicity of the participants in all aspects of war: its contribution to militarism but also its possibilities for looking to a future without war.

What counts as war is a highly contested issue. However defined, the language and practices of war were evident in South Africa during the apartheid period. There was a pervasive language of war. For many black South Africans, a ‘people’s war’ was fought to liberate South Africa from white supremacy. This was fought in both neighbouring countries where the exiled organisations had bases that came under attack from the apartheid state as well as internally in the townships of the country. Similarly, the late apartheid state spoke of ‘total war’ or a ‘total onslaught needing to be waged against anti-apartheid forces. The South African Defence Force (SADF) waged what was known as the ‘border war’ in Namibia and Angola between 1966 and 1990 and mounted attacks against exiles who were part of the national liberation movements in Botswana and Mozambique. South Africa’s war and incursions into these territories were off-site, but required mobilisation of white society to fight it ideologically and militarily. Whereas the ‘total war’ of apartheid South Africa against black South Africans grew mainly out of Afrikaner nationalism, the war of liberation from it was also a nationalist struggle – albeit with a more expansive and heterogeneous, non-racial notion of ‘the nation’. It has been argued that these nationalisms have been the defining feature of South African history (Marks & Trapido, 1987).

There were several dimensions of the relationship of education to the war in the 1980s that were linked to the defence of white nationalism. Schools became sites for the preparation of war for white children and sites of struggle for black children; militarism pervaded both state and oppositional structures; gender identities became closely intertwined with the romance of the manly warrior with his feminine support waiting at home; and alternatives developed in both. Schooling for the majority of black children was massively disrupted and never fully recovered, despite a major reconstruction effort, not least because of the neo-liberal hegemony that coincided with South Africa's transition to democracy in the 1990s. And although militarism has been expunged from school curricula, it lives on in the nationalism that continues to create 'Others' out of non-South Africans and in much of the public discourse where 'War Rooms' (albeit to address poverty or state failure) are de rigeur, the police force assigns itself military ranks, one political party head goes by the title of Commander-in-Chief and even the national committee to run Covid was termed the Command Council.

After the Soweto youth revolt of 1976 and the independence of Mozambique and Angola in 1975 and 1976 respectively, the state's measures to defend white minority rule intensified and included the militarisation of all aspects of white society, including education. Many young black people, facing a future of poor education and unemployment, fled the repression in schools and townships for organisations in exile (Hyslop, 1988). The African National Congress (ANC) infrastructure channelled youth either into education programmes or camps for military training. The ANC school-in-exile in Tanzania, the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College, experimented with education with production in the curriculum (Morrow et al., 2004). This was an educational concept aimed at combining mental and manual labour that drew inspiration from ideas prevalent in socialist countries, and that was also akin to polytechnic education in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Internally, a movement of 'people's education for people's power' emerged in the context of the ANC's declaration at its Kabwe Conference held in Zambia in 1985 of a 'people's war'. In addition, black youth formed networks of militarised civil defence structures in townships challenging the SADF, whose tanks were often parked inside school gates.

The militarisation in the 1980s of white schools and black youth structures in opposition can be linked to opposing nationalisms. However, the role of violence in the constitution of South Africa's democracy and its continuation in the years since the democratic elections in 1994 suggests the need for additional explanations or perspectives, which I address further below.

Militarisation of White Schools in the 1980s

South Africa at war during the 1980s was as contested then as in the current Ukraine where the term 'military operation' is used by the aggressor and 'war' by the invaded. The South African Defence Force became involved in schools during the 1980s (Cock & Nathan, 1989, p. 2). The ideology of militarism was principally to legitimate state violence and create the conditions for acceptance of the white minority state's definition of the conflict. But it also played a role in the construction of violent masculinities. Although 'hearts and minds' campaigns were also directed at black schools, the focus from the late 1970s was on white schools which were used, physically and ideologically, in the preparation for war. Schools were active recruiting bases for the military, providing compulsory registration of white males for military conscription at the age of 16.

In white schools, a paramilitary form of training, the cadet programme was expanded, and a new compulsory Youth (Military) Preparedness Programme was introduced into the curriculum along

with veldschools as an extra-mural programme (Evans, 1989). Both boys and girls were encompassed by Youth Preparedness Programmes and veldschools. Cadets however had long been a part of activities in elite public and private boys' schools, dating back to the late nineteenth century and British colonial rule in South Africa. They were closely associated with the spread of militarism in these schools. Cadet training, as Lambert has pointed out, was part of the inculcation of a Britishness that defined manliness in military terms. Cadet training 'was believed to encourage physical fitness, instil obedience and respect for authority, and encourage leadership qualities. By acclimatising boys to the idea of military service and preparing them to be soldiers, it was seen to be every bit as important as sport in preparing them to rule the black population while also providing for defence' (Administrator, n.d.; Lambert, 2004, pp. 72–73). Cadets were closely linked to the military establishment, being affiliated to volunteer regiments. Many soldiers who fought in the first World War had learnt their military basics in cadet corps (Lambert, 2004, p. 73).

Cadets were brought under South African Defence Force control in 1976 to prepare white school boys for national service (Symons, 2020). The goals of cadet training became more explicitly geared towards developing a 'love of country and national flag,' 'instil[ling] civil defence in youth' and 'train[ing] them in good citizenship as a forerunner to their National Service' (*Paratus*, 1980, cited in Evans, 1989, p. 284). There was some variation in how the programme was implemented in Afrikaans and English-speaking schools across the country, with many becoming quite elaborate. They not only included training in how to recognise 'actual and potential enemies' (Evans, 1989, p. 286) but also physical exercise and sport. One school in Cape Town even had air, naval and signals sections. Incentives were created for teachers to take on leadership roles; they were rewarded with promotion and could also be exempted from SADF camps.

In 1972, Youth Preparedness (and Moral Preparedness) was introduced as a compulsory school subject for two periods a week in all white state schools. It grew out of the Voortrekker youth movement advanced by Afrikaner nationalism and its Christian National Education Policy from the 1950s (Crewe, 1989). Youth Preparedness programmes were concerned with civic duties, patriotism and moral preparedness (Christie, 1985). As with cadets, a central component of the curriculum was the 'communist threat,' 'terrorism' and how to combat such potential attacks on schools. Evans provides details of one of the Emergency Plans for schools that notes, amongst other things, that 'Training in the use of rifles is essential and will be given to teachers by commandos,' adding that young teachers who have completed their national service should be used to provide such training (Evans, 1989, p. 289).

The aim of veldschools was ostensibly to provide school pupils with environmental education combined with moral education. In practice, the SADF was again closely involved in the planning of what was to be taught in them. As in Youth Preparedness, the dangers of communism and the ANC were key themes, and teachers' promotion sometimes depended on their involvement. However, there was also some scepticism amongst teachers in English-speaking schools, and a critical literature emerged in some universities (Christie, 1985; Crewe, 1986, 1989).

As internal opposition under the auspices of the non-racial United Democratic Front (UDF) gained ground in the 1980s, campaigns against the militarisation of white schools were mounted by the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) and National Education Union of South Africa (NEUSA). Individual forms of resistance were also manifest as some students refused to participate in cadet training drills, field and shooting exercises and individual educationists, principals and teachers distanced themselves from it. The response of one interviewee, for example, was as follows:

> In veld school, we did communism, we did the South African flag, we did terrorism, and one whole lecture was about how sex, communism and drugs all go into the music we listen to…The propaganda was too crude and obvious. (Cock, 1991, p. 72)

The war had a damaging impact on many of the young white men recruited to fight in it. A Border War literature and music emerged during the war in Afrikaans that questioned it. Memoirs are still being written that try to come to terms with the experience and its physical and emotional scars (Ancer, 2022; Davies, 2017; Feinstein, 2011; McFarlane, 2022; Ramsden, 2007).

Militarisation of Black Youth in the 1980s

Whereas white youth were socialised into militarism through schools, black youth were socialised through the forms that opposition began to take from the mid-1980s. The ANC turned to armed struggle in 1961 but suffered a severe setback with the arrest and imprisonment of its leaders during the 1960s. The state introduced a barrage of repressive measures to crush the opposition. Internal resistance grew first with the Black Consciousness Movement founded in the late 1960s, then with the re-emergence of a trade union movement in 1973, followed by the youth revolt that began in Soweto in 1976 continuing throughout the country through the subsequent years, and the general uprising in the townships from 1984. From the 1980s, the different phases of the underground armed struggle became 'linked in complex and diverse ways' to the growing and widespread internal resistance in schools, factories and communities (Cherry & Gibbs, 2006, p. 569). Tight control inside the country meant that armed bases were established in neighbouring countries, many of which had gained independence in the 1970s, Zimbabwe being the last in 1980.

The link between education and war in this nexus took three forms in the different phases. In the first phase, until the end of 1982, when armed struggle was focused on spectacular acts of sabotage or 'armed propaganda' (Houston, 2010, p. 1141) the link was tenuous. In the second (1983–1985), when the emphasis shifted to preparing for a people's war through establishing potential guerrilla zones inside the country, it centred mainly on 'crash training courses' in guerrilla activity in neighbouring countries (Houston, 2010, p. 1093). The third phase (1985–1989) was marked by the move toward making the society ungovernable and was represented in the slogan 'From Ungovernability to People's Power' (Barrell, 1988, p. 61). It coincided with increasing state violence against youth, declarations of states of emergency, and the harassment, detention, and torture of youth activists. The emphasis now shifted to preparing for insurrection by linking up with popular struggles inside the country through the establishment of street committees, 'self-defence militias' and 'organs of people's power'. The aim of the campaign 'was to render organs of government inoperable through mass action or violent opposition. Revolutionary militarism became part of the discourse and practice of political organisations engaged in 'war' with the state' (Marks & McKenzie, 1998, p. 223).

During this period, basic paramilitary training of the ANC's military wing, *uMkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation) cadres 'lasted about six months and took place mainly in Angola, though there were also significant camps in Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia'. Hereafter cadres were sent to the Soviet Union and East Germany for more advanced instruction (Cock, 1991, p. 159). But there was now also increasing training in armed combat for youth who were at the forefront of the internal struggle against the repression of the apartheid state (Barrell, 1988, pp. 61–62; Houston, 2010, p. 1094). Teachers such as Mathew Goniwe in the Eastern Cape, later killed by apartheid security

police, played a significant role in linking under- and above-ground structures of the resistance (Houston, 2010, p. 1099). Ismail Vadi's book of oral interviews with youth activists from the dominantly Indian area, Lenz, shows how youth structures provided the base of recruits for the newly-formed Area Politico-Military Committees (APMCs) formed after 1985 to coordinate political and military struggles and establish a network of underground political and military units inside the country (Vadi, 2022, pp. 75–77).

As Marks and McKenzie have pointed out, the militarisation of South African society in the 1980s included not only formal state security structures and their personnel, but also civil society (Marks & McKenzie, 1998, p. 222). In the process, many educational institutions in black communities were physically destroyed and the routines and disciplines of schooling were attenuated. Tropes of a 'lost generation' circulated, and young school-going activists were mobilised to return to school through an appeal to it being the foundation of a transformed future (Essop, 1992). In many areas such as Lenz, however, as Vadi's interviews show, teachers and scholars were closely integrated into networks of resistance that many valued as providing a sense of purpose, political education, and discipline.

Youth defence structures continued after the election of a democratic government in 1994. Organised youth formations dissolved and re-formed. But conditions had changed and many of those active in youth structures and underground formations were drawn into new state-building efforts. However, large numbers felt marginalised from negotiation processes, social reintegration programmes proved to be of limited value and without leadership their structures were quickly penetrated by criminal elements. By the end of the 1990s, in one account, the youth were disillusioned, disorganised and unaccountable (Marks & McKenzie, 1998). Here, there is a significant literature on the trauma and impact of apartheid on young black men and women (see for example Manganyi, 2016; van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2009), but perhaps less on the battles with the demons, 'insanities' and scars produced by the participation in war where the dominant narrative tends to be in the heroic mode (an exception is Motaung, 2022).

Aftermath: Education and Violent Conflict After 1994

Democratic elections signalled the end of the war. Within a year legislation had been introduced that swept away the structures supporting inequality and militarism in schooling and education more generally. When the SADF withdrew from all cadet activities in the late 1990s, most white schools, now de-segregating, ceased to have cadet training or parades. From 1994 onwards, education budgets were given precedence over military. Curricula were reframed to place human rights and social and economic justice at their centre. In a new post-Cold war era, 'people's education' was consigned to the past. In the context of the 1980s, however, both 'people's education' and the curriculum of the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College, whatever their limitations, were vital in thinking beyond the present and for the future (George & Molobi, 1986; Mashamba, 1990; Mathebula, 2013; Muhammad, 1996).

South Africa is not at war and no militias are fighting the government. And yet at many levels the society is at war with itself. Intractable inequalities, toxic masculinities, ongoing racism, and a society awash with weapons mean that South Africa today remains an extremely violent society. A high crime rate correlates with inequality and a continuing high youth unemployment rate, which has reached 65.5% (SAPS South African Police Service, 2020). Gender-based violence both in society and in schools remains a major scourge (Bhana & Chen, 2020; Mayeza & Bhana, 2020).

Violence of every kind finds expression in schools (Mncube & Harber, 2013; Mncube & Madikizela-Madiya, 2014). The impact on the environment remains uncalculated and incalculable.

Xenophobic violence is in this context an ongoing feature – and is mostly turned against migrants from other African countries many of whom have moved southwards because of regional wars and conflict, as in the case of Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Zimbabwe. Expressions of xenophobia are linked to new, more exclusionary definitions of the nation and the inevitable processes by which nations create new Others (von Holdt & Alexander, 2012). School curricula and textbooks specifically have both promoted broader and more open definitions of the nation than was the case under apartheid and created a new national narrative focused on South African citizenship (Chisholm, 2008; Weldon, 2009, p. 180).

Yet there is substantial evidence that classroom teaching leaves students without the tools to deal with racism (including xenophobia) or the structural legacies of apartheid (Robinson, 2020; Teeger, 2013; Wassermann, 2017; Weldon, 2009). School-based practices limiting the rights of children of foreigners to schools have had to be fought through the courts (Buttle, 2020; Legal Resources Centre, 2019). Bullying both amongst South Africans and against foreigners has emerged as a major dynamic in schools (Adebanji, 2011; Crush & Tawodzera, 2011; Juan et al., 2018; Nnadozie & Morojele, 2018).

In this context sociologists have begun to theorise the continuing violence and disorder in the society as integral to how democracy in South Africa, as in many Latin American countries, has been made and is continually unmade and re-made through violence (von Holdt, 2014, 2019). In this perspective, the reproduction of social order foundational to much Anglo-American and European sociology does not hold in the Global South, where violence is seen as intrinsic to the making of a democratic 'order' (von Holdt, 2013). Whether this just accepts the 'normality' of violence and in so doing normalises the unacceptable is open to question, but it does signal the need for new ways of theorising the relationship. What the role of wars, past and present, may be in its continuity is a moot point.

Education may be part of the problem, but commonly only mirrors or refracts wider social phenomena. And while often used in the service of war and conflict, it can also provide alternatives and promote visions of a future without war and against violent conflict. The history of the conflict described above has been one of the factors shaping South Africa's response to wars and military conflicts elsewhere. Integral to this history was the Cold War, and alliances forged at this time. These have endured, along with new commitments by the state to negotiated solutions to conflict and war (see Chisholm & Fig, 2022). And while visions of a transformation of the social and education order may no longer be as cohesive as the call for 'people's power' and 'people's education' of the 1980s, they still exist in the localised and often collaborative transformative initiatives and pedagogies of several schools and educators as well as the efforts of many NGOs to mobilise civil society in support of a more equal and gun-free future. If Covid frustrated these initiatives, war in various parts of the globe continues to threaten a post-Covid era more attuned to the social and environmental disasters contingent on violent, high-carbon economic models.

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