

VETERANS OF PEACE IN POST-CONFLICT SOUTH AFRICA¹

WRITTEN BY **SUSAN E. COOK**

Post-conflict reconstruction in Africa has received a great deal of attention from scholars and policy-makers over the past decade, both because of the proportionally large number of conflicts on the continent, and because of the lessons learned from them about the role of democratisation in post-conflict reconstruction,² the importance of civil society and international organisations in socio-economic restructuring,³ and how different forms of post-conflict justice impact on social reconciliation.⁴

The process of post-conflict reconstruction is usually understood to include:

1. the cessation of hostilities;
2. military reorganisation;
3. political transition; and
4. social and economic reconstruction.⁵

When it comes to the “how” of this, international organisations reached informal consensus in the 1990s on the “democratic reconstruction model”, involving two major components: military restructuring (including the demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants into civilian life, and the formation of a new national army), and the promotion of democracy (usually consisting of a new constitution, formation of political parties, and the holding of elections within two years of the end of hostilities).⁶

South Africa rarely features as an example or case study in discussions of post-conflict reconstruction in Africa. It may be that events in Angola, Mozambique, Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Côte d’Ivoire better illustrate some of the now ‘classic’ problems of post-conflict reconstruction. But South Africa’s exclusion from the ranks of post-conflict countries is also the result of South Africa’s own self-construction as a ‘miracle’ transition, in which the forces of freedom and democracy prevailed over the deeply flawed logics of racism and oppression. Figures like Nelson Mandela, Walter

Sisulu, and Desmond Tutu became national symbols of moral and political heroism that stood not only for South Africa’s triumph, but indeed that of proponents of justice throughout the world. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s framing of a new official version of contemporary South African history cast the liberation struggle in terms of victims and perpetrators, with little room for realities and experiences that fell outside those categories.

In short, the architects of South Africa’s transition to democracy invested considerable energy in portraying the change as a seamless and peaceful one. The emphasis was on the future of the Rainbow Nation, and the problems of history were encouraged to recede from view. Nonetheless, few would deny that South Africa in the early 1990s faced many of the same problems as post-conflict countries elsewhere on the continent. This article focuses on one of the outcomes of South Africa’s effort to construct its transition to democracy as peaceful, negotiated, and transcendent. Specifically, I argue that those who fought in the armed struggle have been symbolically removed from the now-dominant understanding of how we got to where we are as a nation.

The demobilisation of the different armed forces that took part in the conflict between the 1960s and the 1990s has been well documented.⁷ What emerges from these accounts is a picture of a process that failed to identify or effectively address the wide range of needs and realities represented by the different groups of former combatants, including the South African Defence Force (SADF), the Bantustan armies of Transkei, Venda, Bophuthatswana and Ciskei, the African National Congress (ANC’s) Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), and APLA (the armed wing of the Pan African Congress). Even within these groups, there was significant heterogeneity in terms of age, length of service, and the social and emotional wherewithal to re-adapt to civilian life. The financing of once-off demobilisation grants was not well

THE GOVERNMENT’S EFFORTS TO HELP TENS OF THOUSANDS OF DEMOBILISED SOLDIERS TO REINTEGRATE INTO SOCIETY WERE INADEQUATE AT BEST



Many of South Africa's veterans are now in the 'security' business

thought out; the social and political aspects of the formation of a new army, the South African Defence Force (SANDF), left many with the impression that a handful of soldiers from the liberation armies were being incorporated into the SADF; and the services provided to those who were expected to return to civilian life were woefully inadequate, including skills training in the Service Corp and psychiatric services for those with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and other psychological problems.

At the time, some analysts wondered what the repercussions of this sub-optimal demobilisation process would be for South African society. Did the existence of so many angry unemployed men trained in the arts of war constitute a security threat? Would political stability be undermined by those in society who felt bitter towards the ruling party, which, in their minds, had done little to recognise their contribution to the struggle? And what of the project of nation-building and social reconciliation in a young democracy when all war veterans were understood to fall into one of two categories: a handful of heroes and patriots like Chris Hani, and the rest – the walking wounded – depressed

and violent men unable to overcome the traumas of combat and the institutions of war. The case study that follows of one ex-combatant fits into neither category, and therein lies the importance of examining it. Thabo's story suggests a category of men and women whose social and political ideals not only motivated them to leave home and join the struggle, but continue to underlie the civilian projects that they are busy with today.

Thabo N.⁹ is a clean-shaven, muscular, 47-year old man who lives with his wife and children in one of the townships north of Tshwane (Pretoria), South Africa. He wakes up before dawn each day to oversee the shift changes and staff assignments for his employees who guard commercial and residential properties throughout Gauteng. Thabo started his own private security company about five years ago, and has steadily increased his staff and client base to a point where the company nets approximately R3 million per year and employs about 300 people. Unlike other security companies that rely heavily on the skills of former combatants, Thabo's guards are young men in their 20s and 30s recruited from the townships around Pretoria. Very few of them were formally involved in the liberation struggle.

All of them first became involved with Thabo as students of karate. As a fifth-dan black belt, Thabo has trained thousands of students throughout South Africa. Those who advance through the stages of their training and show the necessary strength of mind, body, and spirit, are recruited to train as security guards. Thabo handles his staff with both authority and affection, and strongly believes in the power of personal and professional pride to transform individuals and families who have never known anything but desperation and hopelessness.

Wearing a coat and tie, gold watch, and polished dress shoes, sitting behind the wheel of his new-ish and spectacularly clean BMW, Thabo appears to be permanently on his cellphone, talking to his staff, clients, and associates. As sole shareholder and managing director of his own company, he is the picture of black economic advancement, an advertisement for the entrepreneurial opportunities open to all in the wake of apartheid. Beneath the surface, though, Thabo does his work, heads his family, and lives his life with constant and unsettling reminders of his time “in the bush”: the things he did and did not do during his nearly fifteen years as a soldier and commander in MK. Over lunch in a crowded

a gesture meant to symbolise that they were taking only what they needed to survive, Thabo promised never to eat tomato sauce with his food again for the rest of his life. Twenty years later, he’s never broken that promise.

Thabo’s ideas about equality, respect, and compassion reside somewhere so deep in his consciousness that he doesn’t attribute them to this or that political movement, or this or that period of time. While being interviewed recently by a group of foreign policy-makers interested in programmes that combat inner-city crime and juvenile delinquency (such as teaching young men from the townships self-respect through karate before they learn the security business), Thabo was asked, “Are you a very religious man?” His answer, after a few seconds of thought, was “I’m very cultural.” By which he meant that his commitment to equality and social justice for all South Africans, when he was young as now, derives as much from the lessons he learned from his elders as a child, as from his political education during the struggle.

Thabo, like many others, made a personal and courageous commitment in the 1970s and 1980s to help overthrow a regime that systematically discriminated against those it deemed inferior. He sacrificed his chance

BECAUSE OF THE COUNTRY’S ATTEMPTS TO DOWNPLAY THE VIOLENT NATURE OF THE CONFLICT, AND TO IGNORE THE MESSY AND NOT EASILY NARRATIVISED EXPERIENCES OF THE VARIOUS ARMED FACTIONS, SOUTH AFRICA’S FORMER COMBATANTS REMAIN ESSENTIALLY INVISIBLE

restaurant in Tshwane, Thabo tells me about an operation he conducted in a neighbouring country. He and the soldiers he commanded had been in the bush without food for days, and identified a local farmhouse where they thought they could obtain food and supplies. Thabo describes with “like-yesterday” detail, the expression on the face of the white farmer when he entered the house, sat down with the family, and explained who they were and why there were there. Thabo reassured the farmer that they would not be hurt, but that he and his men were fighting to liberate their country from racist oppressors, and they were very hungry. He told the farmer: “You don’t need to instruct your staff to cook for us; they’re outside with my men, and they’ve already begun preparing our meal.” He said the farmer and his family relaxed a little, and the “operation” proceeded without incident. It was important for Thabo to add that, by the time he left the farmer’s house, the farmer wept (with relief?), and professed support for the ideals of the soldiers. Thabo, in turn, thanked the farmer and his family for allowing them to raid the kitchen and storerooms of the farm. In

to be educated (he never finished high school), his chance to have a carefree and innocent adolescence, and his chance to feel truly relaxed ever again. He gave those things up of his own volition. He left home at 17, joined the underground, and was sent to Russia and North Korea for military training. He rose through the ranks and became a respected commander in MK, leading missions in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, Swaziland, and Namibia, and later serving as a covert operative in Bophuthatswana.

Thabo spent more than four years overseas. When he returned to South Africa in 1990, the ANC was unbanned, and the call came for MK soldiers to lay down their arms. Thabo complied. He had returned to a small family, no job, and no clear idea of what the future held. The people around him in the poverty-stricken urban dumping-grounds of Bophuthatswana were angry, unemployed, and looking for outlets for their frustration. Thabo propagated ideas of self-respect, self-control, and restraint in the interest of a cause. Some heeded his message. Others didn’t.

He independently intervened in gang wars and crime syndicates – to good, if temporary, effect. A hero to many, Thabo still couldn't grasp whether this was the new South Africa he had been fighting for all those years.

These experiences lie very close to the surface as Thabo goes about his daily life in the present. Having learned to withstand extremes of cold and heat, to do without bathing, and to maintain his razor-sharp focus despite being sleep deprived and hungry, he routinely works 20-hour days and seven-day weeks without complaining. He also seeks to instill the same kind of dedication and focus in his employees. His "zero tolerance"

economic battlefield. Cynical about the political path the country has followed, Thabo neither votes nor expresses surprise when political leaders don't live up to their promises. When he runs into former comrades in the course of his work, he is polite but distant. At home, he confides neither in his wife or children about the demons he battles when he closes his eyes. He expresses disappointment in the shallow goals and interests of the consumerist youth culture of South Africa today, but he also acknowledges that the freedoms his children enjoy today are those for which he voluntarily risked his life.

As a middle-aged former combatant trying to make

JUDA NGWENYA / REUTERS / THE BIGGER PICTURE



Former South African President, Nelson Mandela addresses a rally to mark the 40th anniversary of the African National Congress's (ANC) armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), meaning 'spear of the nation'

attitude towards insubordination, failure to comply with company policies, and any display of deceit or laziness leads to a certain amount of turnover in his company, but there never seems to be a shortage of new recruits.

More soldier than businessman, Thabo gives total attention to the mission at hand, and treats the people around him with impeccable manners and respect, but not a hint of self-disclosure. For him, every friendship contains a seed of betrayal and trust is a risk rarely worth taking. Limited objectives, careful planning, and well-trained cadres; those are his tools for success on the

his way in present day South Africa, Thabo's attitude could be characterised as one of ambivalence – a little disappointed that life hasn't improved more for so many South Africans, but also optimistic that things will get better. His unwavering belief in the possibility of a just, free society, and his desire to inculcate these values in younger generations through his work as a private citizen, is striking. He has few regrets about the decisions he has made, and carries himself with the pride and satisfaction of one who is confident that he has done his best along the way.

Analyses of former combatants in South Africa often



Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) soldiers arrive at a special public hearing of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

emphasise the dire circumstances in which many of these people found themselves, post transition.⁹ And with good reason. The government's efforts to help tens of thousands of demobilised soldiers to reintegrate into society were inadequate at best. But the country's failure to recognize the plight of those who, while functional, are socially, emotionally, and (arguably) economically disadvantaged, is also important to consider.

Former soldiers like Thabo understand the benefits of rigorous physical training, the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions, and the benefits of working patiently and steadily towards one's goals. As such, they are an important source of wisdom and leadership in a country suffering from multiple health crises, economic entitlement, and an instant-gratification consumer culture. And while it is true that the problems of crime and domestic violence in South Africa are not unrelated to the problems of ex-combatants, there are also those, like Thabo, who eschew violence with the passion that only those intimate with death can.

From the perspective of its former combatants, then, South Africa is undeniably a post-conflict country facing many of the challenges usually associated with other African countries. But because of the country's attempts to downplay the violent nature of the conflict, and to ignore the messy and not easily narrativised experiences of the various armed factions, South Africa's former combatants remain essentially invisible. As a result, the insights and ideas of those who have perhaps the deepest appreciation of all for their rights and freedoms are lost to the rest

of us. Isolated and lacking any collective voice, individuals like Thabo are but a faint reminder that the road to freedom in South Africa was a harsh and violent one. ▽

Dr. Susan Cook is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

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