

Re-discovering narratives of South African Defence Force servicemen through the informal digital archive

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Abstract

The South African Defence Force (SADF) has become a point of contention in post-Apartheid South African public memory. From 1966 until 1989, approximately 600,000 white males were conscripted into the SADF to fight in conflicts around Southern Africa as well as at home in South Africa. While much academic work has been done on the SADF during the latter half of the Apartheid era, it is filled with rampant apologia relating to the actions of the SADF as well as the narratives of those that served within it. The stories and experiences of SADF conscripts and soldiers has essentially been ‘sanitized’ by academics and authors attempting to make them suitable for the post-Apartheid era. Yet, on internet forums and social media websites, many SADF veterans have found a space to express their narratives freely without the input of reconciliation conscious reviewers. In this informal digital space, a plethora of material has been deposited by these ex-servicemen which now serves as a digital archive from which researchers can gain valuable insight into the actions and experiences of SADF veterans. The unfiltered narratives found in this informal digital archive shines new light on the current academic understanding of the SADF. Instead of the narrative pushed by many academics and authors of young men filled with remorse for fighting a war they understood little about, this material tells a different story. White supremacy, braggadocio and light-hearted discussion on war crimes committed by the SADF fill these digital spaces, creating a counter-narrative to

the apologetic stance of many historians and sociologists who have written extensively on the Border War. This paper will explore some of these informal digital archives and seek to answer not only why SADF veterans feel comfortable expressing their narratives freely in the digital space, but also why they have been largely ignored by mainstream academia.

Keywords: Archive, forum, media, SADF, online

1 Introduction

The South African Border War (Namibian Liberation Struggle) has for decades permeated the military history of South Africa. Countless books, articles and journal papers have been written on this conflict which spanned Southern Africa. Of particular interest to many academics has been the experiences and narratives of the over half a million white conscripts of the South African Defence Force (SADF), the military of the Apartheid state. The historiography relating to the SADF’s white conscripts is a relatively niche field in the South African academic space, despite the vast number of publications on the subject. Controlled by a handful of historians, this historiography has taken on an element of unmistakable mythmaking. These myths mainly centre around conscripts and SADF servicemen at large are often posited as ignorant young boys fighting a war of which they had little understanding, and in the post-Apartheid era are remorseful of their actions in propping up the last vestiges of colonialism in Africa. This mythmaking is perhaps unsurprising, given that many of the historians who publish extensively on the SADF were at one time conscripts and professional soldiers in the organization themselves. As with many inaccuracies and fallacies which have accrued in South African historiography, this myth is long overdue a challenge. This paper aims to play a small part in pushing back on the dominant narratives surrounding the experiences of SADF

servicemen, introducing the informal digital archive to explore the unfiltered narratives of these servicemen. While it would be ignorant to claim that the narratives of all ex-SADF servicemen are uniform, the views of many SADF veterans expressed online provides a starting point to challenge the myths crafted in nearly three decades of post-Apartheid SADF historiography. Given the politicization of memory surrounding the actions of the South African security forces in the Apartheid era, few veterans are naturally willing to put down their stories in print. Those that do craft narratives suited to post-Apartheid expectations of remorse and guilt over their roles in the conflict. Yet, in anonymous online forums and unfiltered social media groups, a different narrative emerges. Veterans prevalent in these groups are often proud of their service and believe that they should be lauded for their role in helping create the new South Africa, despite their deriding of the democratic state. Discussions on war crimes, white supremacy and what they deem to be positive aspects of their military service are done light-heartedly and without fear of criticism or accusations of racism. This paper will therefore explore the content of some of these informal digital archives and seek to answer not only why veterans are so comfortable expressing their views in such a manor but also why they have been largely ignored by mainstream South African academia. While this research will introduce a new method of exploring the narratives of SADF veterans using the digital space, it also contributes to several other areas of burgeoning academic research. Dylann Roof, he murderer of five Black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina wore patches displaying the flags of Apartheid South Africa and colonial Rhodesia whilst committing the massacre. This attack has coincided with a surge in apologia and pseudo-history of the South African Apartheid state (as well as Rhodesia) that has

occurred online in recent years (McGreal, 2015). The link between the global far-right and the South African-centric internet spaces explored in this thesis is woefully understudied. This paper, however, serves as a foundation for future research into how Apartheid nostalgia is proliferated online by South Africans and the ways in which this is reflected by the far-right in other places.

2 Online Forums

The online forums that many ex-servicemen of the SADF frequent are, unfortunately to historians, being closed as domain names are expiring and websites left not cared for. Luckily, several have survived and are even active until today. These forums are completely open to the public and require no registration to enter. They bare names such as “SA-Soldier.com”, “warinangola.com” and “SAWeermagvereniging.com”. What these websites lack in creative naming they more than make up for with the content within. Some, particularly “warinangola.com”, contain extensive discussion forums about topics ranging from detailed accounts of SADF operations to discussions around the popular music of the 1980’s. The people who post on the forums contained within this website are often startling to the academic keenly interested in the Border War. Journalists such as Willem Steenkamp and Piet Nortje are frequent visitors, as well as SADF veterans whose names made headlines. Private Robert Wilson, an SADF conscript who was captured in Angola in 1975 amid much fanfare, makes an appearance on a post made by other veterans discussing his own capture (Schoeman, 2013)! While much of the discussion is nitty-gritty discussions and arguments relating to operations or technology relating to the Border War, the mere fact that such figures are openly disseminating information on these forums more than proves their worth as an archive. The forums on “warinangola.com” and other websites are often heavily moderated and

have policies that remove any overtly racist comments or posts. This is very much in line with the clean image of SADF veterans that many academics and activists have attempted to portray in the post-Apartheid era, especially regarding race relations. This is a task often done by one or two people moderating the website and it is a task they do well. The number of gaps and deleted comments on these forums, especially amongst more controversial topics, attests to this. This does not mean, however, that these forums cannot be used to counter mainstream liberalized narratives of the SADF. One post on “warinangola.com” in particular entitled “Did the SADF use gas against their opponents in Angola?”, reveals some interesting information on undisclosed war crimes committed by the SADF. In reference to a passing comment in Igor Zhdarkin’s book “We did not see it even in Afghanistan. Memoirs of a participant of the Angolan war (1986–1988) Oral history of forgotten wars”, a conversation is sparked on the supposed use of poison gas by SADF forces in 1987/88. Probably owing to the obscurity of the book, the claim made by Zhdarkin that the SADF gassed Cuban and Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) forces has never been engaged with by academics (2008). Yet on the forum post, user ‘dougbev’ confirms that chemical weapons in the form of poison gas was used on at least two occasions by the SADF. This user claims that the recorded instances of the MPLA using chemical weapons on SADF soldiers and their allies were in fact deceptions drawn up by ‘Dr Death’ Wouter Basson to cover up the use of these weapons by SADF forces. If this is in fact true, then this action constitutes a war crime based on the rules of the Geneva Convention (Schoeman, 2013). While this user’s evidence of the claim that they have it on good authority from, “the guy who ran the deception,” does not meet any academic standard of reliability, this casual forum

debate certainly opens doors to further research into this previously buried topic (Schoeman, 2013). Further evidence of personal photographs showing SADF soldiers in gas masks at the supposed site where these chemical weapons were used adds some credence to their claim but still does not reach a benchmark of academic credibility. The users of this thread have no reason to lie about their experience and certainly nothing to gain from posting such on a forum populated by their former comrades. So, whilst the evidence remains fragile on this action, the mere fact of it being available on an online forum shows the potential for researchers to use these forums as a digital archive. The camaraderie of SADF veterans displayed on these forums has created a ‘safe space’ for them, wherein such activities can be shared without fear of judgement or backlash. For the researcher willing to read between the reminiscing’s and minutia of discussions and arguments on the surviving SADF veterans forums, there is a wealth of informal archival material waiting to be discovered. The above case of chemical weapons usage is only one small example. If academics are willing to put themselves directly within these digital spaces that SADF veterans occupy, more previously unknown activities and war crimes undoubtedly lie waiting to be discovered.

3 Social Media

Social media, as is often refrained, brings out the worst in people. Yet, as Ekman has pointed out, “Engagement on social media platforms generates feelings of belonging and mutual recognition”. This statement is seemingly especially true for veterans of conflict, who can use it to bond over their shared trauma and experiences. It should then come as no surprise that many veterans of the Border War have found a home in Facebook and other social media groups. Most of these social media groups require no registration and are open to the general public. These groups vary in their

engagement, with some (such as “GRENDOORLOG 1966- 1989 BORDERWAR on Facebook) containing multiple posts a day and others now defunct like many of the internet forums. Some social media sites provide veterans with a layer of anonymity (Reddit, for example) and others (namely Facebook) usually have users display themselves with their real name and a profile picture. This distinction undoubtedly leads to a differentiation in the amount of freedom ex-servicemen feel that they have in expressing certain views. With the recent prosecution of several South Africans expressing racist views on both Twitter and Facebook being criminally charged with hate crimes, many are cautious to use racist imagery and instead resort to dog whistles. It would be disingenuous to cherry-pick examples of SADF veterans expressing racist and vitriolic views on different social media applications and proclaim that this is the totality of their discussions. Most of the discussions on these platforms are, after all, mundane much like on veteran internet forums. However, it must be stated that these platforms are indeed filled with latent white supremacist views and a yearning for the ‘good old days’ of Apartheid. One key example of this is the repeated use of the Oranje, wit and blou (Orange, white and blue), the flag of pre-democracy South Africa which is used a symbol of the Apartheid state which adorns many veterans’ groups on social media. Other examples include users responding positively on r/SouthAfricanBorderWar (a Reddit forum) to a statement proclaiming, “[it’s] a shame they didn’t actually win” (Reddit, 2022), when referring to the SADF and the bastardisation of the racial slur ‘Kaffir’ to ‘K@ffir’ on both Twitter and Facebook, presumably to circumvent policies on hate speech. This racism, sometimes covert and other times unashamedly overt, proliferates these social media pages. What makes the acceptance and dissemination of racism on SADF social

media pages particularly interesting is the findings of Alsaad, Taamneh and Al-Jedaiah, who have concluded after much study that social media platforms do not necessarily lead to the reproduction of racist thought. Instead, they have argued that “the Internet offers merely a platform for a lone wolf extremist to search for and collect information”, in relation to racism and confirmation bias (2018). The question then must be asked, how many ‘lone wolves’ make up the users of SADF veteran groups? The issue does not lie within the fact that some users choose to actively post racist and derogatory speech or images, but that they are accepted and supported within these groups. Combining the online presence of the far-right growing globally and a plethora of insular social media groups spreading racist and apologist propaganda – It is entirely possible that South Africa soon may see its own modern Dylann Roof.

4 Video Sharing Platforms

Popular video sharing platforms, specifically YouTube, has become another digital space for SADF veterans to share their experiences and thoughts on the conflict in which they served in. In contrast to the generally insular nature of internet forums and social media video sharing platforms allow these veterans to contribute video media to an international audience. The prevalence of YouTube as an informal archive has before been explored, with Pietrobruno writing that, “social archiving [on YouTube] has the potential to counter official heritage narratives” (Pietrobruno, 2013). Given the confusing milieu in which the Border War exists in South African public memory, the media disseminated via YouTube by SADF veterans does not necessary counter existing narratives but nonetheless serves as an addition to a growing informal digital archive. This media is often clips from documentaries, South African Broadcasting Company (SABC) reports and news programs. There is, however, novel archival

material posted to YouTube frequently. Whilst videos taken by SADF servicemen while serving in Namibia and Angola are hard to come by, interviews of veterans can easily be found. These include discussions with moderately famous SADF veterans such as Wynand Du Toit, who was captured in a disastrous raid on Cabinda and held prisoner in Angola for two years (Tales less told Podcast, 2020). Other examples include interviews with prolific author and ex-special forces soldier Koos Stadler (The Team House, 2022). These interviews, as well as many others available on video sharing platforms, contribute to the building of the informal digital archive.

Novel footage of the Border War and interviews of its veterans makes up only a small percentage of SADF-related media uploaded to YouTube. Most videos found on the site comprises of the aforementioned snippets of traditional media as well as ‘video-essays’ purporting to give a historical analysis of the conflict. These ‘video-essays’ are mainly made by international content creators and not SADF veterans, so offer a far more balanced version of events. Yet, the comments sections of such YouTube videos often devolves into the same apologetic and racist narratives found within SADF circles. Examples of this behaviour in YouTube comments sections are much too abundant to pick specific examples of. What is more of interest than individual examples of Apartheid apologia is the international audience that those apologists have on YouTube as well as the possible effects of this. In a study of YouTube comments relating to racism against Roma people in the United Kingdom, Breazu has contended that, “under the guise of anonymity and freedom of speech they [YouTube commentators] claim the right to be racist” (Breazu, 2023). This contention certainly applies to views expressed in the comments section of media relating to the Border War and SADF at large. Whilst anonymity and racism has been

discussed previously in the context of internet forums and social media, the key difference with YouTube comments is the international reach that they have. As opposed to forums and social media groups, which are ostensibly available for the public but in reality, almost exclusively attract SADF veterans, the comments on YouTube videos feature engagement from an international audience as well. Anonymous commentators claiming to be SADF veterans extolling the virtues of the SADF will no doubt have an effect on at least some of those they come into contact within the digital space. This is more than an unfortunate side-effect of this frontier of the informal digital archive but is instead a phenomenon that warrants serious study. Especially given that these comments could be a radicalizing force for the resurging far-right such as Dylann Roof and other Apartheid nostalgists.

5 The Silence of Mainstream Academics

Historians who have dedicated much time to studying the ‘afterlives’ of SADF servicemen will themselves admit that veterans will have certain biases. Gary Baines, a prolific writer on SADF veterans, has himself admitted that internet forums and groups of veterans will have a right-wing bent (Baines, 2008). After researching these online groups, however, this characterization feels like a vast understatement of the reality and another way to scrub the narratives of veterans clean. The white supremacist undertones of many of these groups and the overtly racist commentary found within paints a picture that is almost completely devoid of politics. Instead of merely taking a right-wing stance, these groups actively yearn for the days of Apartheid and many within them lament that the SADF ‘lost’ their war. Seemingly, the implication here is that if they ‘won’ then the status quo of racial segregation and white domination would still be the order of the day. Despite attempts by academics to clean up this narrative through verbose articles and

the attempts of moderators on internet forums to do so through the deleting of posts/comments, the reality is quite clear to see. The above could very well point to the reason as to why mainstream academics have shunned this informal digital archive in their work. Both the latent and overt white supremacy of many online veteran's groups which form this digital archive are counter to the reconciliatory narrative that many academics want to push in relation to the SADF. While Baines was indeed correct when he stated that, "ex-conscripts are not a homogeneous group and do not speak with a single or cohesive voice", the platforms that many use to express their voices are filled with Apartheid apologia and outright racism (Baines, 2008). Even if these veterans are not cohesive in extreme views, their tolerance and often times support of these views' points to a level of acceptance of them within ex-SADF servicemen circles. Another reason for the reluctance of mainstream academics to interrogate the informal digital archive are the demographics of the academics who study the narratives of Border War veterans. As was previously stated, the majority of academics who do these studies are veterans of the Border War themselves. Apart from their assimilation into the post-Apartheid milieu of liberal academia and the effects this has on their writings, this fact means that these veterans-cum-academics are at least in their mid-fifties. Therefore, the aspect of technological proficiency in modern social media and internet culture must be accounted for. It is neither natural nor usual for older academics to use these sites as a

digital archive. Coupled with a lack of recognition. It is therefore likely that age and culture play a role in the unwillingness for mainstream academics who study the Border War to utilize these digital archives.

6 Conclusion

This paper has explored social media sites and internet forums as an informal digital archive of the narratives of ex-SADF servicemen. These online spaces have been shown to be 'safe' for veterans to express their real views due to the anonymity and community that they provide. The research conducted into these archives has found that they are breeding grounds for racist and white supremacist thought amongst SADF veterans, which is counter to the mainstream academic narrative surrounding veterans. It has also been shown that the informal digital archive produced through websites and social media platforms allows for new discoveries relating to the actions of the SADF, as was shown through the brief discussion on the use of chemical weapons against MPLA and Cuban forces during the Border War. This approach to looking at online forums as an informal archive has been shunned by mainstream academics due to the content of them not conforming to their expectations as well as a lack of understanding of their use as an archive. There is still more discussion and debate to be had surrounding the informal digital archive in relation to the narratives of ex-SADF servicemen, with many angles still left unexplored. Hopefully, this short paper serves as a launch pad for these debates in future.

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