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Comrades and child soldiers in South Africa, 1984-1994

Clive Glaser*

Abstract

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s the horror of child soldiers captured the attention of NGOs and university-based scholars. Literature about African child soldiers proliferated. It became clear that children between 10 and 18 years old were systematically recruited or forced into armies in numerous civil conflicts. Children and early adolescents were victims and perpetrators of appalling atrocities directed at civilians. There were many other examples in Africa, but Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Uganda were usually singled out as the largest scale and most egregious cases. South Africa was rarely, if ever, included in these discussions. Yet an argument can be made to view the South African comrade movement from the mid-1980s until 1994, though distinctive in many ways, through the lens of the African child soldier literature. While the child soldier pattern is perhaps most applicable to the extremely violent transition phase from 1990 until 1994, it is worth reviewing the comrade movement from its origins in about 1984. This paper attempts to bring literature on child soldiers in Africa into the conversation with South African research (from the disciplines of history, anthropology and social psychology) on the comrade movement. I begin with an overview of some of the key features of the child soldier phenomenon. I follow this by examining the South African comrade movement in relation to these features. I ask whether the comrades were distinctive and whether it is useful to view them as part of the broader trend of child soldiering in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s.

Keywords: Comrades; child soldiers; youth; anti-apartheid resistance; post-conflict trauma.

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Opsomming

Gedurende die 1990's en vroeë 2000's het die afgryse van kindersoldate onder die aandag van NRO's en universiteitsgebaseerde navorsers gekom. Navorsing oor swart kindersoldate het geweldig in omvang toegeneem. Dit het duidelik geblyk dat kinders tussen die ouderdomme van 10 en 18 jaar sistematies gerekruteer of gedwing is om as deel van weermagte aan verskeie burgerlike konfliksituasie deel te neem. Kinders en vroeë adolessente was as slagoffers van en as oortreders betrokke by ontstellende wreedhede wat op burgerlikes gemik was. Baie voorbeelde hiervan is in Afrika te vinde, maar Sierra Leone, Liberië, Angola, Mosambiek, die Demokratiese Republiek van Kongo, Soedan en Uganda word gewoonlik uitgesonder as grootskaalse en erge voorbeelde. Suid-Afrika is selde, indien ooit, in besprekings hieroor ingesluit. Tog kan geargumenteer word dat die Suid-Afrikaanse (*comrade*-beweging) kindersoldatebeweging van die middel-1980's tot 1994, alhoewel uniek op vele maniere, tog deur die lens van swart kindersoldaatnavorsing beskou kan word. Alhoewel die kindersoldaatstelsel meer van toepassing op die erge wreedaardige oorgangsfase van 1990 tot 1994 is, is dit van waarde om hierdie beweging van sy oorsprong in 1984 af te ondersoek. Hierdie artikel poog om navorsing oor kindersoldate in Afrika met navorsing (afkomstig van die dissiplines van geskiedenis, antropologie en sosiale sielkunde) oor die Suid-Afrikaanse kindersoldatebeweging in verband te bring. Ten aanvang word 'n oorsig verskaf van die hoofkenmerke van die kindersoldaat-verskynsel. Daarna word die Suid-Afrikaanse kindersoldatebeweging teen die agtergrond van genoemde kenmerke ondersoek. Die vraag of die Suid-Afrikaanse kindersoldaatbeweging eiesoortig was, word ondersoek asook die vraag of dit van waarde is om hierdie beweging as deel van die groter verskynsel van kindersoldaatrekrutering in Afrika gedurende die 1980's en die 1990's te beskou.

Sleutelwoorde: *Comrades*; kindersoldate; jeug; anti-apartheidverset; post-konfliktrauma.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s the horror of child soldiers captured the attention of NGOs and university-based scholars. Graća Machel headed a United Nations commission of inquiry which published a report in 1996 entitled *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. African case studies featured prominently in the report. The UN officially condemned this activity and issued a charter outlining the rights of children in conflict. As Machel noted, 'War violates every right of a child - the right to life, the right to be with family and community, the right to health, the right to the development of the personality and the right to be nurtured and protected.'[1]

1. G. Machel, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, United Nations Report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 48/157 (1996), 15.

Literature about African child soldiers proliferated. It became clear that children between ten and eighteen years old were systematically recruited or forced into armies in numerous civil conflicts. Children and early adolescents were victims and perpetrators of appalling atrocities directed at civilians. They were expected to kill, rape, torture and loot along with the older soldiers. Hundreds of thousands of civilians died in these conflicts, which affected women and children disproportionately. Millions were displaced. Most child soldiers were boys, but girls were also recruited into armed bands, sometimes as soldiers but more usually coerced into domestic and sexual service.

There were many other examples in Africa, but Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, Mozambique, the DRC, Sudan and Uganda were usually singled out as the largest scale and most egregious cases. South Africa was rarely, if ever, included in these discussions. Yet an argument can be made to view the South African comrade movement from the mid-1980s until 1994, though distinctive in many ways, through the lens of the African child soldier literature. While the child soldier pattern is perhaps most applicable to the extremely violent transition phase from 1990 until 1994, it is worth reviewing the comrade movement from its origins in about 1984.

This paper attempts to bring literature on child soldiers in Africa into conversation with South African research (from the disciplines of history, anthropology and social psychology) on the comrade movement. I begin with an overview of some of the key features of the child soldier phenomenon. I follow this by examining the South African comrade movement in relation to these features. To what extent were the comrades distinctive? Is it useful to view them as part of the broader trend of child soldiering in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s?

Child soldiers in Africa

At what age is it appropriate for young people to take up arms in war? Conventional national armies recruit, or conscript, youths from the age of eighteen, the usual age of voting rights (in a democracy) and legal maturity. Most students complete secondary schooling at eighteen or nineteen. Arguably, eighteen-year-olds, in terms of emotional development, are still children. But most countries conclude that young men – mostly, though not exclusively, men – are ready at this stage to play the role of 'defenders of the nation'. The international outcry about child soldiers was directed at soldiers under eighteen years of age. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF and several other independent groups, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the International Save the Children Alliance, all accepted the so-called 'Straight 18' principle. In other words, children were defined as under eighteen years of age, and all recruitment of soldiers under eighteen, and especially the use of children in combat roles, was condemned. Those violating this principle should be held accountable under international criminal law.

Of course this involves a number of assumptions, for the most part assumptions in rich western democracies, about the age of maturity. As Honwana and others point out, in Africa, life stages are not rigidly age-determined. Youths undergo gendered processes of maturation. These are determined by the sort of work and responsibilities in the family, eligibility for marriage, marriage itself, parenthood. These stages of transition were marked by specific rituals. Colonialism, capitalism and urbanisation unsettled these calibrated age hierarchies; they often remained powerful (usually encouraged by colonial administrations to maintain political order) but in adapted forms. Nevertheless, even when states defined age by number, social roles and responsibilities more than age continued to determine understandings of maturity. In most African societies there exists a hiatus between childhood and adulthood, a period when youths can no longer be thought of as children yet are not quite ready for adulthood (usually determined by marriage and an independent household.) Young men might become warriors or migrant labourers during this phase, a rite of passage to full manhood. Warriors were traditionally understood to be defending a broader community under the authority of older people. Regardless of age definitions, Honwana argues, African societies recoiled from the idea of youths becoming soldiers before having undergone the necessary socialisation and preparation for that role. The notion of someone still regarded as a child, with its connotations of innocence and immaturity, becoming a soldier, was troubling. Even more so, when those children rejected elder authority.[2]

In this article, I will use the term 'youth' to refer to the intermediary phase between childhood and adulthood. When I use the term 'child', I refer to younger prepubescent boys and girls who have not yet entered this life phase.

The very notion of 'child soldier' in human rights discourse has been widely critiqued. Writers such as Rosen and Ah-Jung Lee, for example, argue that youths under eighteen have fought in wars across cultures for centuries. Moreover, they were usually treated as heroes for protecting their communities. The interpretation of childhood is thus culturally and historically variable and youths who participated in war often had more agency in their decision to join armies than is often acknowledged. The 'child soldier', Rosen and others argue, was an invention of rich western countries at a particular historical moment in the 1990s and early 2000s. It suited their interests to marginalise non-state armies and militias who made use of very young soldiers. Repressive states could also use this discourse opportunistically

2. See A.M. Honwana. 'Innocent and Guilty: Child Soldiers as Interstitial and Tactical Agents', in A. Honwana and F. De Boeck, eds, *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Post-colonial Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005), 31-36; see also A.M. Honwana, *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2012), Introduction; M. Chelpi-den Hamer, *Youngest Recruits: Pre-War, War & Post-War Experiences in Western Côte d'Ivoire* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 52.

to condemn resistance movements for mobilising youth to fight against them. The human rights discourse implicitly supported the norm of adult authority and responsibility. Patriarchal leaders eagerly adopted child soldier discourse to reimpose age hierarchies that were unsettled during civil conflict. On the other hand, in post-conflict settlements communities were often enraged that children under eighteen who committed war atrocities were protected by the human rights framework. Human rights interventions generally failed to take account of local contexts, and their interventions were thus often very clumsy.[3]

These writers clearly make important observations. The eighteen years of age cut-off is arbitrary and unhelpful. It is important to recognise significant elements of youthful agency in war recruitment, nor is the restoration of age hierarchy necessarily an appropriate solution. Nevertheless, we should not over-state cultural relativism. The international focus on child soldiers, however crude, did draw attention to the trauma of youth in war. Their participation was also particularly striking in widespread 'unconventional' but brutal civil conflicts throughout the world from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. Although their participation in war was not unprecedented, the phenomenon seemed to be extraordinarily (and very visibly) concentrated during this period. In any case, the broad principle of discouraging very young people from participating in war is surely worth fighting for, irrespective of specific cultural norms.

The child soldier phenomenon emerged in a context of poverty, mass youth unemployment and stunted upward mobility for young men. In a number of countries across Africa, youth encountered a storm of problems. By the 1970s, the continent began to experience a significant demographic bulge. With vaccination campaigns and better access to medicines, infant mortality rates declined and, with birthrates still extremely high, the youth grew steadily in proportion to the rest of the population. The HIV/AIDS pandemic distorted the ratios even further. By 2000 half of sub-Saharan Africa's population was 18 or younger.[4] Weak states struggled to absorb the youth into the economy. While youth unemployment worsened, patriarchs in the countryside were increasingly stretched to find bride-wealth and land to accommodate the new generation of young men.[5] The route to full manhood was obstructed. Young women,

3. See in particular: D. Rosen, 'Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law and the Globalization of Childhood', *American Anthropologist,* 109, 2 (2007), 209-306; Ah-Jung Lee, 'Understanding and Addressing the Phenomenon of "child soldiers": The Gap between the Global Humanitarian Discourse and the Understandings and Experiences of Young People's Military Recruitment', paper for Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford University, 2009; M. Ensor, 'Participation under Fire: Dilemmas of Reinstating Child Soldiers in South Sudan's Armed Conflict', *Global Studies of Childhood,* 3, 2 (2013), 153-161.
4. A. McIntyre, 'Children as Conflict Stakeholders: Towards a Discourse on Young Combatants', in J. Abbink and I. Van Kessel, eds, *Vanguard or Vandals: Youth Politics and Conflict in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 229.
5. J. Abbink, 'Being Young in Africa: The Politics of Despair and Renewal', in Abbink and Van Kessel, eds, *Vanguard,* 1-5, 11.

in turn, had to wait longer to marry. While this could be welcome in certain contexts, generally it meant delayed entry into socially recognised womanhood. This created seething inter-generational tension. Youth were less inclined to accept traditional age hierarchies. What, after all, could their elders offer them? The culturally accepted process of initiation into adult society had failed. Youth often suggested that the older generation had failed them, had 'reneged on their obligations'.[6] The child soldier phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s occurred against a backdrop of massive disruption, even at times collapse, of cultural deference towards elders.[7]

Weak or failed states, unable to provide sufficient schooling, jobs and welfare, were generally also unable to establish their political authority effectively or consistently.[8] In this vacuum of power, rebellious movements, guerilla armies and local militias proliferated by the 1980s. This sparked civil wars rather than conventional wars between nations. In some cases, notably Liberia and Sierra Leone, young men themselves drove these movements.[9] In other instances, competitive elites, eager to gain, or retain, control of the state's resources, recruited willing youth to fight for them. In Angola and Mozambique counter-revolutionary armies were heavily supported by the South African state in the late 1970s and 1980s; in the 1990s they continued to operate effectively by tapping into local grievances with the embattled, newly independent states and they readily recruited anyone willing to fight.[10] Precarious state armies often followed suit. For many frustrated boys and adolescent men throughout these conflict zones, the military offered an alternate route to power, dignity and material wealth.

Children were recruited into these militias in different ways. Coercion was extremely common. At the most extreme end, the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda systematically kidnapped children and turned them into soldiers. In Mozambique and Angola, primarily referring to RENAMO and UNITA, Honwana notes, 'the majority of the children who participate in these wars were abducted, many at a very tender age.'[11] Many boys throughout these various African combat zones faced formal or informal local conscription. In other words, they were expected to join local militia to protect

6. Abbink, 'Being Young', 7; see also J.M. Jok**,** 'War, Changing Ethics and the Position of Youth in South Sudan', in Abbink and Van Kessel, eds, *Vanguard*, 148-149; R.E. Van Gyampo and N.A. Anyidoho, *Youth Politics in Africa, The Oxford Research Encyclopaedia, Politics* (OUP, 2019), 2.
7. See Jok, 'War', 148-149; K. Peters, 'Reintegrating Young ex-Combatants in Sierra Leone: Accommodating Indigenous and Wartime Experiences', in Abbink and Van Kessel, eds, *Vanguard,* 289; R. Banégas, 'A "Warrior" Generation? Political Violence and Subjectivation of Young Militiamen in Ivory Coast', in N. Duclos, ed., *War Veterans in Postwar Situations Chechnya, Serbia, Turkey, Peru, and Côte d'Ivoire* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.)
8. Abbink, 'Being Young', 1.
9. Abbink, 'Being Young', 16-17.
10. See Honwana, 'Innocent and Guilty'.
11. Honwana, 'Innocent and Guilty', 36, 40-41.

communities. Failure to do so could result in persecution. Their families could also face risks. Often children were displaced through war. They might be separated from their families and communities and join militias for sheer survival. In some of the worst cases children were orphaned in village raids or battles and left utterly dependent. Militias were always looking for new personnel and willingly absorbed these desperate children.[12] In some instances, more scrupulous commanders placed them in non-combat support roles, but a large proportion of them, after cursory training, fought with guns in combat roles. As Machel notes in the UN report, powerful weaponry had become easily accessible and easy to use: 'these guns are so light that children can use them and so simple that they can be stripped and reassembled by a child of 10.'[13]

Some of the more ruthless militia actively encouraged child recruitment because vulnerable children were seen as easily manipulable and willing to carry out terrible acts of violence without compunction in order to please their patrons. For example, children in Mozambique, were sometimes forced to kill members of their own families and communities to prove their loyalty. They were also made to perform gruesome initiation rituals.[14]

In urban areas, youth gang subcultures with violent territorial traditions were often drawn into political conflict. These gangs usually included boys in early puberty through to men in their late twenties. In Sierra Leone, for example, Ibrahim Abdullah argues that ideologically driven university students, fed up with a corrupt one-party state and a rigid patriarchal order, fused with a macho drug-soaked urban youth subculture known as 'the *rarray* boys' to create a particularly explosive, violent mix. 'It was marked by the evolution of a common language, a shared cultural space and the emergence of a political discourse which privileged violence as the medium of social change.'[15] This 'town and gown' link, Abdullah argues, explains the extreme violence of the militias in the 1990s. It 'allows us to understand why widespread looting was dubbed liberation, why abduction of innocent children was considered a rescue operation, and why collective gang rape was seen as remuneration for combatants!'[16] In Cote Ivoire government forces in the early 2000s recruited (or paid off) urban youth gangsters to repel oppositional movements and militias. They were responsible for repeated civilian atrocities.[17]

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12. See Machel, *Impact*, 17-18; Honwana 'Innocent and Guilty'; Peters, 'Reintegrating'; I. Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2007.)
13. Machel, *Impact*, 14.
14. Machel, *Impact* 16, 19; Honwana, 'Innocent and Guilty', 38, 42.
15. I. Abdullah, '"I am a Rebel": Youth, Culture and Violence in Sierra Leone'. in Honwana and de Boeck, eds, *Makers and Breakers*, 174.
16. Abdullah, 'I am a Rebel', 184.
17. See Banégas, 'A "Warrior" Generation?' and Peters, 'Reintegrating', 269-270. See also D. Pratten, 'The "rugged life": Youth and Violence in Southern Nigeria', in P. Ahluwalia, L. Bethlehem and R. Ginio, eds, *Violence and Non-Violence in Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2007) on youth gang culture and militias in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

Displaced children in war zones found themselves in a desperate double-bind. The reputation of brutal child soldiers had preceded them. If groups of displaced children arrived in a village looking for shelter or food, they were usually treated with extreme suspicion, hostility and even violence. Where else could they turn but to militias who were willing to absorb them?[18]

Criminal and military activity inevitably blurred in war situations. Militias justified looting on the grounds of necessity: they needed to buy weaponry, feed and clothe themselves. But many warlords and their underlings enriched themselves through looting and 'protection' levies. They would set up regular roadblocks to fleece travellers. Children who had lived in poverty under strict elder authority had the opportunity, through war, to acquire expensive clothes, televisions, furniture. They could attract or coerce women into sex.[19]

As I noted earlier, children did not simply join militias through coercion and desperation. They did often exercise a degree of limited agency. For a variety of reasons – avoidance of arduous domestic or agricultural chores, boredom, poverty, revenge, defence of homes, a sense of a blocked future – joining militias could be a deliberate choice.[20] By becoming soldiers, they could sidestep the usual interminable route to manhood; through guns they could get access to power, loot, land and women. They could exact revenge on those who harmed their families and communities. Many joined out of genuine political commitment. While it is crucial to note a degree of youthful agency, children faced overwhelmingly difficult conditions. UN and human rights groups have questioned whether children can ever genuinely give consent, or have real choices, in war situations. For Human Rights Watch, 'Children cannot be considered to have the maturity to make an informed decision to join an armed force'.[21] They fail, of course, to address the complex question about when children reach 'maturity'.

Displaced and orphaned girls were exceptionally vulnerable. Their choices were even more limited. Militias often swept them up into their ranks to act as domestic servants and sex slaves. 'In Uganda', Machel notes, 'girls who are abducted

18. This is graphically illustrated in Beah's memoir, *A Long Way Gone*.
19. M. Utas, 'Agency of Victims: Young Women in the Liberian Civil War', in Honwana and De Boeck, eds, *Makers & Breakers*; Banégas, 'A "Warrior" Generation?'; Jok, 'War'.
20. Abbink, 'Being Young', 3; Jok, 'War'; Peters, 'Reintegrating', 269, 293; McIntyre, 'Children', 229; Banégas, 'A "Warrior" Generation?'; Hamer, *Youngest Recruits*; Honwana, 'Innocent and Guilty', 47-50; M. Mendelsohn and G. Straker, 'Child Soldiers: Psychosocial Implications of the Graça Machel/UN Study', *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 4 (4), (1998), 399-413. See also Rosen, 'Child Soldiers'; Ah-Jung Lee, 'Understanding and Assessing'; and Ensor, 'Participation under Fire', who all make this point strongly in their critique of humanitarian child soldier discourse.
21. Human Rights Watch (1996) quoted in Hamer, *Youngest Recruits*, 51. See also Honwana, 'Innocent and Guilty', 47-50; Machel, *Impact*, 17.

by the Lord's Resistance Army are "married off" to rebel leaders. If the man dies, the girl is put aside for ritual cleansing and then married off to another rebel.'[22] They might get some form of limited (albeit usually coercive) protection if they attached themselves to one particular male soldier, but even this was precarious. Occasionally, though relatively rarely, girls and young women became combat soldiers themselves. This gave them an element of agency. Many of these women soldiers, in order to prove themselves, were known to be particularly brutal combatants.[23] Girls and young women, even if not displaced or recruited into militias, faced sexual coercion. In localised struggles youth militias often felt entitled to sex with local women in the communities they were 'protecting'.[24] Rape, as in so many conflicts, was used as a weapon of war against the civilian population of the 'losers.'

A common theme running through these case studies is the normalisation of violence. Children were exposed to daily scenes of death and destruction. They were made to witness and perform horrible acts of torture and murder. Homes were ransacked and burnt; families were forced to flee. Child soldiers, in order to survive psychologically, developed a numbness to the violence around them.

After hostilities tapered off, war-ravaged countries struggled to reintegrate child soldiers. Their families and communities had frequently been destroyed or dispersed. They found it extremely hard to adapt to civilian life, especially if they had been fighting in relatively unstructured militias dependent on personal networks and patronage. They had lost many years of schooling, weakening their position in the labour market.[25] Adult former soldiers in recognised military forces were often integrated into post-war armies and police forces. Some even received small pensions or pay-outs. Children who fought in irregular armies were generally not recognised as soldiers, so they were often left out of demobilisation programmes.[26] They were 'considered old enough to carry a Kalashnikov but … too young to receive a couple of hundred dollars in cash.'[27] NGOs became involved in several countries in Africa to help with reintegrating former child soldiers into civilian life, but they could only scratch the surface of what was needed. Reintegration camps were set up where some former child soldiers learnt skills that could potentially help them in the workplace. Though left with deep psychological scars, few received adequate counselling for trauma. State actors and NGOs tried to convince communities to accept former child soldiers back into their communities. Success was mixed.[28] There was powerful stigma attached to these former soldiers. Boys were seen as untrustworthy killers who had

22. Machel, *Impact*, 18
23. Utas, 'Agency'.
24. Jok, 'War', 146-147; 152.
25. Peters, 'Reintegrating'; Banégas, 'A "Warrior" Generation?'; Machel, *Impact*, 19-20.
26. Machel, *Impact*, 19; Hamer, *Youngest Recruits*.
27. Hamer, *Youngest Recruits*, 56, on Cote Ivoire demobilisation.
28. Banégas, 'A "Warrior" Generation?', Hamer, *Youngest Recruits*.

committed atrocities; girls were sexually 'compromised' and 'unmarriageable'.[29] Many former soldiers, with little education and few skills other than fighting and handling guns, drifted into criminal networks.[30]

Comrades

From the 1976 Soweto uprising until the early 1990s, there was a dramatic generational shift in South African opposition politics. School children drove the internal political revival in 1976-1977. In spite of massive state repression, school mobilisation continued, notably with the formation of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in 1979. While older politicians and trade unionists worked hard to develop new national structures, much of the local township and village-level politics from around 1983 or 1984 was dominated by an emerging youth subculture which came to be known as 'the comrades'.[31] Comrades were mostly between 13 and 25 years old, although they did include some younger and older members.[32] Unlike the school children of 1976-1977, who were heavily influenced by Black Consciousness ideology, comrades were closely aligned with the Congress movement. They especially admired the ANC's armed wing, Mkhonto we Sizwe (MK). Though it was

29. Utas, 'Agency'; Machel, *Impact*, 20.
30. Banégas, 'A "Warrior" Generation?'; Utas, 'Agency'.
31. I am drawing a composite picture from a variety of descriptions of comrade activity and culture: A. Sitas, 'The Making of the Comrades Movement in Natal 1985-1991', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 3 (1992); M. Marks, *Young Warriors: Youth Politics, Identity and Violence in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2001); M. Marks, '"We are Fighting for the Liberation of Our People": Justification of Violence by Activist Youth in Diepkloof', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 41 (1996/1997), 137-165; J. Seekings, *Heroes or Villains? Youth Politics in the 1980s* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1993); J. Seekings, 'Township Resistance in the 1980s', in M. Swilling, R. Humphries and K. Shubane, eds, *Apartheid City in Transition* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1991); T. Lodge and B. Nasson, eds, *All, Here, And Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1992); C. Carter, '"We are the Progressives": Alexandra Youth Congress Activists and the Freedom Charter, 1983-1985', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 17 (1991), 197-220; C. Campbell, 'Learning to Kill? Masculinity, the Family and Violence in Natal', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 3 (1992), 614-628; K. Naidoo, 'The Politics of Youth Resistance in the 1980s: The Dilemmas of a Differentiated Durban', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18, 1 (1992); L. Bank, *Home Spaces, Street Styles: Contesting Power and Identity in a South African City* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2011); P. Delius, *A Lion Amongst the Cattle: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Northern Transvaal* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996); E. Ritchken, 'Leadership and Conflict in Bushbuckridge' (PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1995); I. Niehaus, 'Towards a Dubious Liberation: Masculinity, Sexuality and Power in South African Lowveld Schools, 1953-1999', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26, 3 (2000), 387-407; P. Reynolds, *War in Worcester: Youth and the Apartheid State* (Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2014); G. Kynoch, *Township Violence and the End of Apartheid: War on the Reef* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2018).
32. Approximately 60% of Sitas' sample of comrades in Natal, for example, were under 18 years of age. See Sitas, 'The Making'.

illegal to do so, they brazenly displayed ANC and Communist Party insignia. The subculture acquired its name from the widespread use of the term 'comrade' when addressing one another. It conjured up radical politics and revolutionary solidarity. Comrades were based in the streets rather than the schools. Unemployed youth were at the core of the movement. They felt marginalised and angry and, unlike students or workers, lacked institutional spaces to organise. Students and young workers also joined comrade bands, but they were almost by definition less available for political activity in the streets. When prolonged school boycotts set in between 1984 and 1987, the distinction between school and unemployed youth often fell away. Their style of dressing, revolutionary jargon, iconic 'toyi-toyi' dancing, and their angry rejection of mainstream bourgeoise values gave the comrades a subcultural distinctiveness. While the majority of comrades were male, girls and young women had a substantial presence among them. They usually entered the movement through student structures. As confrontations became more militarised, female membership tended to taper off, but by no means disappear.[33]

Comrades saw themselves as the moral and political guardians of communities.[34] The mass arrest of older leaders, especially during the states of emergency, left a leadership vacuum which, almost by default, conferred greater authority to the comrades.[35] Parents were seen as too cautious and passive, too willing to work with the 'system'. Comrades responded vigorously to the ANC's call in 1985 to make the townships ungovernable. Much of their political activity was aimed at ensuring conformity in opposition to the state. This could involve, for example, destroying local institutions perceived to be collaborating with the apartheid state. Black local councillors were put to flight. They burned down Council offices and beer halls. In the countryside, state recognised chiefs and headmen came under attack. They killed, or punished, numerous local residents deemed to be informers. The grizzly necklace method was used as a stark warning against cooperating with the state. By policing townships' entry and exit points, comrades also ensured that boycotts and stay-aways were enforced, even if they were not

33. See E. Bridger, *Young Women Against Apartheid: Gender, Youth and South Africa's Liberation Struggle* (Suffolk: James Currey, 2023); Seekings, *Heroes*; Sitas, 'Making'; Kynoch, *Township Violence*, 155.

34. Marks, 'We are fighting'; Sitas, 'Making'; V. Barolsky, 'Childhood in the Shadow of Violence: Kathorus, South Africa', in Ahluwalia, Bethlehem and Ginio, eds, *Violence and Non-Violence*, 183.

35. Among others, see: P. Gobodo-Madikizela, 'The Rupture of Necklace Murders: A Need for Psychological and Broader Strategies of Reparation', in E. Doxtader and C. Villa-Vicenzio, eds, *To Repair the Irreparable: Reparation and Reconstruction in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2004), 256-264; S. Mokwena, 'Living on the Wrong Side of the Law', in D. Everatt and E. Sisulu, eds, *Black Youth in Crisis: Facing the Future* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1992); M. de Haas, 'Violence in Natal and Zululand: The 1990s', in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*, Vol 6, part 2, South African Democracy Education Trust (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2013), 939; Sitas, 'Making'.

broadly accepted through processes of consultation. They believed in personal sacrifice and wanted to instil political discipline. So, they would, for example, confiscate goods bought from white-owned outlets during a consumer boycott. They would stop workers from going into work during stay-aways. And punish those who did go to work. Comrades could often be seen patrolling bus and rail stations wielding sjamboks.

Internationally, they were best known for their courageous defiance of apartheid security forces. They defended their 'liberated zones' against well-armed military columns that were trying to restore and protect local government structures. Until the 1990s they rarely used guns. They became adept at using Molotov cocktails and threw stones. They blocked roads with burning tyres and rocks. They policed neighbourhoods with sticks, sjamboks and whatever else they could lay their hands on.

From the very late 1980s, and especially from 1990, when the ANC and other oppositional groups were unbanned, the conflict shifted into a different phase. It became a turf war between the Inkatha, rebranded in 1994 as the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the Zulu nationalist party backed by the apartheid state, and the ANC-aligned groups. Most of the fighting took place in the Kwa-Zulu bantustan and the former Natal province, or in townships with a strong Zulu migrant presence in local hostels. In this phase both sides were heavily armed. The South African government covertly supplied weapons to Inkatha and the closely linked Kwa-Zulu Police force, while the ANC smuggled guns, mostly AK47s, to hastily formed ANC-aligned local self-defence units (SDUs.)[36] This transitional phase, 1990-1994, was the bloodiest in the anti-apartheid resistance.

Why were the comrades never really thought of as child soldiers in the literature on 1980s and transition era political resistance? First, the movement was clearly fighting for a just cause in trying to overthrow the universally condemned apartheid system. In the post-apartheid struggle narrative, they are seen as heroes. Revisionist historians tend to be more cautious, often viewing them as unnecessarily destructive and harsh, or doing damage to themselves by sacrificing their education. Few, however, seem willing to question the ethics of child or teenage participation in violent conflict. Second, youths who joined the comrades were very rarely coerced into doing so or forcefully displaced from their family homes through war. Fighting was very localised, with comrades mostly staying in, or close to, their own neighbourhoods. Many of them even continued to go to school sporadically and spent most nights at their family homes.[37] There were also lengthy periods of calm between

36. De Haas, 'Violence in Natal', 879; Kynoch, *Township Violence*. Young comrades came to control most SDUs. See Kynoch, *Township Violence*, 153-155.
37. Kynoch, *Township Violence,* 149.

moments of conflict. None of this fitted in with the typical child soldier pattern of lengthy displacement in continuous war. Broadly speaking, comrade armies also did not have to loot for survival. There was some looting, but it was regarded as ill-disciplined, rather than a central feature of their operations. In many other African civil wars, child soldiers were widely regarded as predatory. Third, the comrades saw themselves as part of a broader political movement and recognised their allegiance to the ANC or UDF or local civic associations. Although the comrades often spiralled out of organisational control and scorned the caution of the parent bodies, they never directed attacks against the affiliated parent bodies themselves. In other words, there was at least some element of cross-generational mediation and influence. Fourth, the ANC's guerilla army, MK, was, on a formal level, scrupulous about avoiding under-age military engagement. While comrades often thought of themselves as MK soldiers, and generally received encouragement and assistance from the ANC, they were never formally listed as soldiers. Fifth, the scale of slaughter, though significant, was substantially lower than in most other civil conflicts in Africa. At its most intense, the TRC estimates that about 14 000 South Africans died in conflict between 1990 and 1994.[38] Intensive fighting was confined to specific pockets in the country. Compare that to Liberia, for example, where anything between 100 000 and 200 000 (estimates vary considerably) died in the 7 years between 1989 and 1996 out of a population of about 3 million people. A quarter of the population fled the country and most of the rest were internally displaced. The majority of girls and young women in Liberia probably experienced some form of sexual coercion.[39] South Africa's conflict was rarely described as a civil war. Conflict was localised; none of the actors were in a position to seize the national state. Terms such as unrest, resistance or uprising were common. At the peak of transition violence, some used the term low-intensity war.[40]

It is perhaps understandable, then, that comrades were usually excluded from discussions on child soldiers. I believe, however, that it is a mistake to under-state the impact our own civil conflict had on youth and children. There were many aspects of the comrade movement which bear resemblance to 'children in combat' in other African civil wars. I shall focus here on changes in generational authority, local vacuums of state power, the normalisation of extreme violence, the proliferation of guns in the hands of youth, the overlap between political and criminal activity, and extensive sexual abuse. Finally, I focus on the post-war transition to civilian life.

38. Kynoch, *Township Violence,* 1.
39. Kynoch, *Township Violence*; Utas, 'Agency'.
40. See M. Kentridge, *An Unofficial War: Inside the Conflict in Pietermaritzburg* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1990), 14-18. He argues that anything other than the term 'war' trivialised the intensity of the conflict. Note that he was commenting in 1990 before the conflict escalated significantly.

Child soldiers in South Africa

As in other parts of Africa, South Africa experienced generational upheaval in the 1970s and 1980s. Whether in urban areas, where unemployment was high, or in the bantustans, where land was scarce amid rising populations, youths were frustrated with their parents' inability to offer them a meaningful inheritance or route to adulthood.[41] By 1992, more than half of the black population was under the age of 19. In a context of a declining economy, the state failed to provide the necessary resources or create enough jobs to absorb youths.[42] Politically, young people were increasingly critical of their parents' passivity in accepting low wages and apartheid oppression. Children, often more educated than their parents, had little material incentive to be deferential towards elders. This is not to suggest that deference disappeared – cultural deference for elders ran deep – but it was taking significant strain by the late-1970s and 1980s.[43] Comrades filled the local political space in ANC-aligned areas, and they expected older people to accept their leadership. Some parents and elders tried, with various degrees of success, to mediate or provide guidance, but it was clear where authority lay. 'The sjambok,' as Ritchken observed in the sprawling peri-urban district of Bushbuckridge in the mid-1980s, 'changed hands'.[44] Sometimes their sense of power could become 'heady'.[45] The violent IFP response was at least in part a traditionalist backlash against the disrespect of youth. Youth did also play an important role in IFP armies. They dominated SDU equivalent structures called self-protection units (SPUs). But, while they occasionally operated independently, they were generally under the firm control of IFP elders.[46]

In a context of blunted social mobility, comrade culture offered an alternate route to dignity, local power and, for boys, manhood. As Emily Bridger has shown, it also attracted young politically conscious women who rejected gendered

41. Note that this was not a new phenomenon. These patterns had begun to set in from the late 1800s when migrant labour unsettled rural generational hierarchy. In the urban context, youth gangs were in many ways a generational rebellion. But the scale and politicised nature of the 1976-1994 upheaval made it distinctive.
42. See C. Bundy, 'Introduction', Mokwena, 'Living on the Wrong Side of the Law' and R. Riordan, 'Marginalised Youth and Unemployment', in Everatt and Sisulu, eds, *Black Youth in Crisis*.
43. See Mokwena, 'Living on the Wrong Side'; Kynoch, *Township Violence*, 18; Campbell, 'Learning to kill?', 618-622; M. Langa and G. Eagle, 'The Intractability of Militarised Masculinity: A Case Study of Former Self-Defence Unit members in the Kathorus Area, South Africa', *South African Journal of Psychology*, 38, 1 (2008),152-175,166; T. Gibbs, 'Inkatha's Young Militants: Reconsidering Political Violence in South Africa', *Africa*, 87, 2 (2017), 362-386.
44. Ritchken, 'Leadership and Conflict'; Mokwena, 'Living on the Wrong Side', 34-36.
45. Langa and Eagle, ''Intractability', 166.
46. Kynoch, *Township Violence*; Gibbs, 'Inkatha's young Militants'.

conventions.[47] Comrades thought of themselves as soldiers responding to the ANC's call to make townships ungovernable. Younger children looked up to them as heroes and joined their ranks as soon as they were able.[48]

It is striking that state authority collapsed in many townships and rural districts between 1984 and 1993. As the civil conflict deepened, resistance movements were often able to create zones free of state control. But, aside from some examples of well-organised civic associations, they were rarely able to provide effective alternative structures. Comrades, familiar with the streets and neighbourhoods, without jobs or domestic responsibilities, came to dominate these state-free spaces with few restraints. The state security forces might from time-to-time saturate certain areas and restore a measure of control, but it was almost impossible to maintain a permanent presence in all the 'trouble-spots'. Similarly, political groups like the UDF or ANC occasionally succeeded in establishing political discipline among its followers, but their leadership was spread thin. They could issue statements condemning intra-community violence, but they were largely incapable of preventing it.

While South Africa may not have experienced sustained military conflict with young armies detached from their communities, thousands of youths and children, however we define them, were directly exposed to extreme violence. It is important not to under-estimate or trivialise the extent of conflict; in most respects South Africa experienced a war, albeit localised.[49] There were three broad spheres of conflict in South Africa. First, township and village-level anti-apartheid struggles throughout the country from 1984 until 1993, but most intensely between 1984 and about 1989. Second, the conflict (probably best described as a low intensity civil war) in KwaZulu/Natal between Inkatha and ANC/UDF-aligned forces continued from the mid-980s until the mid-1990s. Third, linked to the second sphere, scattered but intense urban conflict broke out in the 1990-1994 transition period between the ANC/UDF-aligned township residents and urban-based, ethnically Zulu IFP supporters backed by elements of the state. The worst of this fighting took place in what became Gauteng. Children from as young as 10 years of age were drawn heavily into these zones of conflict.

The first sphere involved mass demonstrations, school and consumer boycotts, work stay-aways and, crucially, the dismantling of local state structures. The security forces were deployed on a large scale to enter these areas and attempt to restore control. During the Vaal uprising in the spring of 1984 the state deployed

47. Langa and Eagle, 'Intractability'; Campbell, 'Learning to Kill?'; Bridger, *Young Women against Apartheid*.
48. Mokwena, Living on the Wrong Side', 35-36.
49. Kentridge, *Unofficial War*, 14-18.

the military systematically to suppress internal resistance. This became standard practice until 1989, especially during the two states of emergency between 1985 and 1987. Clandestine sections of the security forces conducted targeted assassinations and simultaneously encouraged (and gave logistical support) to an assortment of local elements (traditionalists, squatter leaders, former councillors), often referred to as 'vigilantes', disaffected by the disrespect and bullying of comrades.[50]

Youths and children were routinely subjected to state violence and vigilante violence. During the states of emergency, the state scooped up much of the adult leadership of the UDF, but it also targeted the young. Between 1984 and 1986 alone, 300 children (defined as under 18 in this context) were killed, 1 000 wounded and as many as 11 000 detained without charge. Under emergency laws detainees could be deprived of legal representation for several months. A further 18 000 were arrested on protest-related charges.[51] Torture in detention was common. Many thousands more were beaten during protests, chased by dogs, inhaled teargas. In the confrontations between security forces and comrades, security forces often used live ammunition. Youths and children saw dead bodies, beaten bodies, they watched comrades being dragged into police vehicles and disappearing for months. They knew about political leaders in their neighbourhoods who were assassinated, detained and sometimes tortured for long stretches. Violence was a normal part of life.[52]

In this context, comrades also became the perpetrators of extreme violence. They justified their own violence as a necessary response to state violence. Many of their victims came from within their own communities. The revolution required that those elements from within who undermined the struggle needed to be rooted out.[53] Much of the violence was directed against the Black Local Authorities, especially if they were seen to be enriching themselves at the expense of their communities. Comrades often burnt their houses down, killed them, hounded them out of town. Any offices or infrastructure associated with the state became potential targets. Black policemen who lived in the township were vulnerable to attack. Sometimes, even schools and teachers, as state employees, were targeted. Comrades, as I noted earlier, were also known for their strict, even brutal, enforcement of stay-aways and consumer boycotts. These could lead to serious violence, especially when members

50. Campbell, 'Learning to Kill?', 620-622.
51. G. Straker (with F. Moosa, R. Becker and M. Nkwale), *Faces in the Revolution: The Psychological Effects of Violence on Township Youth in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1992), 6, quoting L. Swartz and A Levett, 'Political Repression and Children in South Africa: The Social Construction of Damaging Effects', *Social Science and Medicine,* 28 (1989), 741-750. See also Reynolds, *War in Worcester*.
52. Straker, *Faces*.
53. See I. van Kessel, *Beyond Our Wildest Dreams: The United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa* (London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 118; Marks, 'We Are Fighting'.

of the community were not consulted about comrade-driven actions. Boycott breakers could be severely beaten, humiliated, even killed.

Necklace killings were at the most extreme end of this violence. According to the TRC, about 450 people were killed by necklacing between 1984 and 1989. Families of necklace murders had to bear both the misery of a loved one suffering so unspeakably and the shame and stigma of collaboration. Few even risked going to their funerals.[54] 'In most necklace cases there were dozens of bystanders, sometimes watching grimly but passively, sometimes actively singing and clapping.'[55] Comrades were driven by rage: necklacing generally followed some murderous act by the state or vigilantes in which local individuals were fingered, often based on limited evidence or rumour, as collaborators or informers, *impimpi*. Invariably they were preceded by a process of dehumanising the victim. The crowd would lose all sense of empathy. Gobodo-Madikizela argues that sustained exposure to violence leads to a 'breakdown in empathy.'[56]

Lebowa was hit by a wave of witch-burnings in 1986. Politics in these parts of the countryside were driven primarily by student and youth congresses. The UDF, civic associations and trade unions were weak. Amidst familiar problems of youth unemployment, poverty and blunted mobility, youth groups rejected elder authority and directed their anger against local chiefs and headmen. As in urban areas, comrades tried to eject collaborationist elements.[57] They conducted a reign of terror, seeing themselves as 'purging society of the forces of evil in order to construct a new moral community.'[58] The youth themselves, however, were often tainted by criminal elements. Political ideas flowed easily between town and country and the necklace method fused with traditional witchcraft beliefs. Comrades in some districts decided that witches were responsible for local 'misfortune'. In Apel and GaNkoane comrades conducted people's courts to root out witches in 1986. This was a departure from traditional witchcraft management in which elders conducted investigations, and punishments tended to be much milder, usually restorative rather than vengeful. Eventually the comrades' reign was brought to an end by massive state intervention. The terror of the comrades in the Apel district had been so extreme and so unpopular that the state intervention was largely welcomed. There were similar anti-witchcraft movements in the Mapulaneng district. In all, dozens of alleged witches were

54. Gobodo-Madikizela, 'The Rupture', 256-257.
55. Gobodo-Madikizela, The Rupture', 257-258.
56. P. Gobodo-Madikizela, 'Legacies of Violence: An In-depth Analysis of Two Case Studies Based on Interviews with Perpetrators of a "Necklace" Murder and with Eugene De Kock', PhD thesis, University of Cape Town (1999), 182. See also N.C. Manganyi, *Apartheid and the Making of a Black Psychologist: A Memoir* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2016), 127-158.
57. Delius, *Lion*, chapter 6.
58. Van Kessel, *Beyond*, 118.

necklaced.[59] Former youth leaders from the area claim that these events were driven by children under 18, as the youth movements became swamped by zealous, newly initiated boys. It was dangerous, they claim, to get in their way.[60] Victims' families, perpetrators and witnesses were all left with the psychological damage of necklacing.

The conflict between Inkatha and ANC-aligned forces in Kwa Zulu/Natal involved intense localised turf-wars in villages, peri-urban areas and urban townships. UDF and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) influence spread in the 1980s, threatening Inkatha hegemony in KwaZulu. Inkatha under Mangosuthu Buthelezi, while rejecting more formal independence, controlled bantustan administrative structures. It was impossible to get civil service jobs without an Inkatha membership card. The Kwa-Zulu Police force, loyal to Inkatha, was used as a kind of party militia. Inkatha drew its support from a more traditionalist, generally older, section of society who fought back fiercely against uppity youths and organised labour with socialist ideas. They killed many youths suspected of ANC loyalties. There were powerful warlords on both sides who commanded local militias; they tried to spread their influence territorially and punish those who were internally 'disloyal'. The conflict intensified from 1990 when the ANC was unbanned; the ANC-aligned presence grew with greater confidence, while Inkatha felt increasingly threatened in its stronghold. From 1990 guns flooded into the area as the apartheid security forces, the TRC later confirmed, covertly supplied and trained Inkatha militias, while the ANC smuggled weapons to its own units. Thousands of families were displaced in attritional local wars. There were very rarely big set-piece battles (although there were some), but instead daily personalised violence spread over large areas. There were intra-community cycles of retaliation and revenge. As in other localised struggles, the ANC often lost control of its own comrade units. Although the warlords were older, the ANC-UDF fight against Inkatha was largely carried out by young men. On the ANC-aligned side, youths were hugely disproportionate among victims. Youth, expected to defend their communities, were exposed, both as perpetrators and victims, to regular assassinations, massacres, mass evictions, cattle rustling, house burning. Even schools were invaded by Inkatha militias to root out disloyal students. Atrocities against civilians, including rape, were routine.[61]

The third sphere might be described as the urban spill-over from the Inkatha-ANC conflict. In the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vaal (PWV) townships it took a rather different form. Whereas the conflict in KwaZulu/Natal was largely competition within

59. Van Kessel 118-133; Delius, *Lion*, 187-204; Ritchken, 'Leadership and Conflict'; Manganyi, *Apartheid*. See also I. Niehaus, 'The ANC's Dilemma: The Symbolic Politics of Three Witch-hunts in the South African Lowveld, 1990-1995', *African Studies Review,* 41, 3 (1998), 93-118.

60. Van Kessel, *Beyond*, 130.

61. De Haas, 'Violence in Natal; Kentridge, *Unofficial War*; Gibbs, 'Inkatha's Young Militants', Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, vols 2 and 3.

the Zulu ethnic group (though the small minority of isiXhosa speakers were generally branded as ANC-supporters), in the PWV there was a stronger inter-ethnic dimension. Zulu migrants loyal to Inkatha, mostly men based in hostels, were pitted against more settled residents (often including isiZulu-speakers) in surrounding neighbourhoods.

The most intense fighting took place in Kathlehong and Thokoza on the East Rand between early 1990 and early 1994. I do not have space to go into much detail here.[62] There were several large migrant hostel complexes in this area. Essentially Zulu migrants felt threatened by the political domination of ANC-aligned comrades. They were angered by, among other things, demands to stay away from work without consultation. They faced constant mugging and harassment from young criminal elements, *tsotsis*, and semi-political criminals, known colloquially as *comtsotsis*, as they ventured out of their hostels. They were squeezed out of potential business opportunities, particularly in the taxi industry. Traditionalist in outlook and loyal to Inkatha, they mounted a violent counter-offensive in the surrounding neighbourhoods and forced non-Zulu migrants out of the hostels. As in KZN, these were intensely local battles for political influence, control over housing and resources. Elements of the security forces covertly supported and armed Inkatha, while the ANC supplied arms and some training to the hastily formed neighbourhood SDUs, dominated by battle-hardened comrades. 'Parents felt powerless to prevent the militarisation of their children,' Kynoch observes, 'With their communities under attack and with no other force to depend on for protection, it was left to the local youth to serve as soldiers.'[63]

Four bloody years followed in cycles of attack and counter-attack, revenge and counter-revenge. Around 3 000 people died violently on the East Rand in the space of four years.[64] While negotiations between the ANC and National Party (NP) proceeded, neither side wanted to be seen to be directly involved in the conflict. The state lost all control in these areas. 'As their communities were consumed by armed conflicts that the police could not contain, and in which they were often implicated,' Kynoch notes, 'the state abdicated any vestiges of remaining authority and the rule of the gun prevailed.'[65] Violence monitors and peace monitors could at times reduce conflict, but mostly they simply counted bodies.

SDUs were usually made up of youths, almost all male, between 14 and 25 years old. 'Boys under the age of eighteen made up a significant portion of the SDUs', Kynoch reports, 'anecdotal evidence suggests more than half.'[66] Initially, there was a

62. See Kynoch, *Township Violence*, for an excellent account of the conflict.
63. Kynoch, *Township Violence,* 190.
64. Barolsky, 'Childhood', 176.
65. Kynoch, *Township Violence,* 14.
66. Kynoch, *Township Violence,* 155.

type of informal conscription in many neighbourhoods, but this gradually gave way to voluntary recruitment because SDUs preferred committed, focused activists. But they expected unwavering support from locals. Any hint of neutrality, or cooperation with the enemy could be extremely dangerous. 'The enemy' was systematically dehumanised. People regarded as internal enemies were regularly killed. In sections of Thokoza, SDUs, notorious for necklacing suspected *impimpis*, criminlas and witches, terrorised the community. The ANC admitted that they were completely out of their control.[67] Local SDUs, who saw themselves as warriors defending their communities, were often furious with the ANC for not providing greater support and more ammunition. In some areas, especially where the Inkatha presence was not strong, SDU factions fought each other for local control. In one major incident in 1993, for example, seven members of a rival SDU, six of them teenagers, were executed in revenge for an assassination.[68]

Although the conflict was most intense in the East Rand, SDUs sprung up in many townships around modern Gauteng, especially where there was a strong presence of migrant hostels adjacent to settled residential neighbourhoods.[69]

The ANC tried to insist that youths had to be a minimum of eighteen years old to use a gun. But this was largely ignored. SDUs usually entrusted AK47s to boys of fifteen or sixteen. The AK47 was symbolically very powerful. Barolsky argues that the gun 'was not only a harbinger of naked power, of the ability to kill, but was for many children a means to win affirmation, to make out of the anonymous child a hero, a defender, a soldier'.[70] Youths often abused drugs and alcohol and used muti to give them courage for battle. These are familiar themes in other African civil conflicts.

It is worth noting that much of the fighting of the IFP-aligned SPUs was conducted by youths, though not as young as in SDUs, newly arrived from KZN, where the regional conflict had been taking place for some time. While older IFP elders did sometimes complain that their own youth were becoming disrespectful and out of control, for the most part older leaders did maintain authority over SPUs.[71]

In the South African case, children were generally not coerced into membership of comrade groups or SDUs. Children, as I noted earlier, rarely found themselves displaced from their homes and communities for any length of time. They mostly joined out of ideological commitment or out of a desire to gain local prestige. There were, however, instances where youth and children had very limited choice. It

67. Kynoch, *Township Violence,* 49.
68. V. Barolsky, 'The Moleleki Execution: A Radical Problem of Understanding' (PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2010).
69. See, for example, Marks, 'We Are Fighting', on Diepkloof, Soweto.
70. Barolsky, 'Childhood', 182.
71. Gibbs, 'Inkatha's Young Militants'.

was difficult to remain neutral. They were forced to pick sides or face the dangers of being fingered as an internal enemy. There were some recorded incidents of coercive SDU recruitment on the East Rand and KZN.[72] Youth and children were also often caught up in war zones or raids or security force operations merely as by-standers. On the whole, though, they could usually avoid being recruited into direct violent conflict, as long as they adhered to boycotts and provided other kinds of material support to comrades when called upon.

Another familiar theme of children/youth in conflict is the slippage between political and criminal activity. On the one hand, comrades often took it upon themselves to rid their communities of criminal elements. They were seen as antithetical to the revolutionary struggle. On the other hand, many among their own ranks crossed over into criminality. The comrade movement fused school and street culture and, not surprisingly, drew in many youths who were involved in a gang sub-culture. Most discarded their gang ways, but many did not. The term *comtsotsi* emerged to describe this phenomenon: youths who, while simultaneously doing political work, used politics as cover to commit crimes and enrich themselves. They were often very violent both in their political work and in their criminality, and they were very divisive. Some comrade groups were successful in purging *comstotsis* from within because it became necessary to retain credibility with local communities. But the distinction between *comtsotsi* and comrade was not always clear-cut. For example, comrades/SDUs might demand 'levies' from local communities to support their activities and the funds were not always accounted for. They were known to steal cars 'for the struggle' which were not used only for political purposes. They looted shops and delivery trucks of enemies and boycott breakers. It could be justified politically, but often came with material benefits.[73] Gibbs discusses the role of young rural criminal networks from KwaZulu/Natal who were drawn into military conflicts by both Inkatha and the ANC. They were heavily involved in local turf competition, especially linked to the taxi industry.[74] Much of the worst criminality took place when there was a vacuum of organisational leadership and very young men were left with enormous power.

Throughout these conflicts girls and young women were vulnerable to sexual coercion. At the most extreme end, there were cases of rape being used as a weapon of war, as a punishment or a marking of territory, in battles between Inkatha and the ANC. More commonly, young women were often expected to provide sexual services to comrades and SDUs in areas where they wielded power.[75] The picture is very uneven. Comrades in many instances, while enforcing their moral code, rooted out

72. Kynoch, *Township Violence,* 37;144-45.
73. Kynoch, *Township Violence,* 64, 75, 188-9: De Haas, 'Violence in Natal', 891-92, 894-96; Langa and Eagle, 'Intractability', 165.
74. Gibbs, 'Inkatha's Young Militants'.
75. Kynoch, *Township Violence*, 189; De Haas, 'Violence in Natal', 893-4; Langa and Eagle, 'Intractability', 164.

this behaviour. They also attacked gangs or individuals known locally to be responsible for rape and sexual harassment. Young women who were themselves active in comrade structures were, according to former members, treated surprisingly equally.[76] Nevertheless, there were also disturbing accounts of comrades demanding sexual favours in areas under their control. They saw it as their right as soldiers defending communities. In some rural areas, comrades called upon, or even forced, women to produce 'babies for the struggle' to replace soldiers who had been lost in battle. Isak Niehaus describes 'Operation Production' in the Bushbuckridge area in the late 1980s in which comrades programmatically forced young women to have unprotected sex. They took a strong pro-natalist stand against contraception and abortion. The subordination of women represented an assertion of masculinity in the context of a perceived political and social 'emasculation'.[77]

Trauma and reintegration

Why does this comparative framework matter? First, it highlights the generational dimension of South Africa's revolution from 1976 until 1994. There is nothing particularly new about emphasising the role of youth, including children, in this phase of the anti-apartheid struggle. But the tensions *between* generations, the particular dilemmas and frustrations that youth faced (and continue to face) need to be drawn out more carefully. These issues are by no means distinctive to South Africa, and we can learn a great deal by plotting them against a bigger African canvass.

Second, we need to shift the focus more towards post-war adjustment and reintegration. A new set of problems arose, Barolsky notes, about 'how to engage as a citizen of peace, a "good" subject in the new democracy, in a world fundamentally redefined. How to replace the duty to kill with the duties of good citizenship?'[78] In the early years of the democratic era, South African social psychologists did important work in this field, but their studies are rarely drawn effectively into historical assessments of the comrade/SDU era.[79]

Reintegration of former comrades proved difficult on both a material and psychological level. Materially, they suffered from high levels of unemployment after 1994. They often lacked education or other skills that could be used in peace time. For example, in the early to mid-2000s, Langa and Eagle interviewed former SDU members on the East Rand, all of whom were between 10 and 16 years of age during the transition-era conflict. 'All the participants were unemployed, except one participant who was working as a health educator. In terms of their level of education,

76. See Bridger, *Young Women*.
77. Van Kessel, *Beyond*, 119-120; Delius, *Lion,* 189; Niehaus, 'Towards a Dubious Liberation', 398-400.
78. Barolsky, 'Childhood', 185.
79. Kynoch's, *Township Violence* is a notable exception.

all of the participants mentioned that due to their involvement in politics they had been unable to complete their high-school education.'[80] Because they were never recognised formally as soldiers they did not benefit from police and SADF integration programs. Those who managed to complete their education and those who had more formal positions in politically recognised ANC-aligned organisations fared much better. Many former SDU members who knew how to handle a gun but felt marginalised after the democratic transition drifted into criminal networks. Even those former comrades who fought without guns were easily drawn back into street gangs and criminality.[81]

Langa and Eagle argue that peace requires a very different kind of masculinity, or path to adulthood. In peacetime, youths are expected to get an education, skills, jobs in order to transition to adulthood. This allows youths to find a partner, get married, have a home and children. War offered an immediate path to respect and adulthood, and it was suddenly removed with demobilisation.[82]

Youth and children exposed to extreme violence, whether as victims, perpetrators or mere witnesses may be left with deep psychological scars. Psychologists identify clear signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). 'Many of those who have experienced and lived with violence,' argues Mokwena, 'are psychologically bruised and have come to accept violence as a way of life and an appropriate means of conflict resolution.'[83]

On the subject of necklacing, Gobodo-Madikizela comments: 'the burden of shame is also on the shoulders of those who perpetrated the murders, who, ironically, were heroes at the time they committed the gruesome murders.' Now, they are 'neither remembered nor treated as heroes'. They are 'in need of reparative intervention'.[84] They often fail to seek psychological help and repress their feelings. A former comrade involved in a necklacing, struggling with an alcohol problem, told Gobodo-Madikizela in 1997:

> … I can say that what happened those days – not just this thing [a necklacing in the Port Elizabeth area] –I've spent all this time trying to forget about it. We were wild and angry. But the things that we saw done to people … the things that we sometimes did … I don't want to talk about it anymore. No, I don't want to talk about it…[85]

80. Langa and Eagle, 'Intractability', 158.
81. Kynoch, *Township Violence*, 149, 193-4; see Langa and Eagle, 'Intractability', 162, 166; Mendelsohn and Straker, 'Child Soldiers; Mokwena, 'Living on the Wrong Side', 39-40.
82. Langa and Eagle, 'Intractability', 152-153; 159-166.
83. Mokwena, 'Living on the Wrong Side', 48.
84. Gobodo-Madikizela, 'The Rupture', 262-263.
85. Gobodo-Madikizela, 'Legacies of Violence', 150.

Langa and Eagle found a similar pattern with former male SDU members:

> Some have carried their militarised masculinities into the new democracy, continuing to be involved in violent activities and risk-taking behaviours. Although many of them appear to be suffering from symptoms of PTSD and other aspects of war trauma, attending counselling is seen as a sign of weakness and as an insult to their militarised masculinity.[86]

Straker and others have noted that some former traumatised children are far more resilient than others. Those who had (and have) strong, supportive relationships in family and community tend to cope far better. Those who had a strong sense of purpose in war, especially leaders in groups, who had a clear sense that what they were doing was right and necessary, tend to find peace more easily. Those who were merely followers, those who still felt moral ambiguity about what they saw and did, or experienced political purpose blurring with crime, usually find it harder. They emphasise, in other words, personal and social context in understanding how successfully individuals will adapt to a post-conflict world.[87]

Conclusion

For all its flaws, the concept of the child soldier forces us to look empathetically at the experience of youth in war. What pressures and frustrations did they face? What choices did they have in the midst of highly polarised conflict? As Reynolds and others remind us, we should not lose sight of the extreme violence of the state and the impact this had on the psychology of young people. Nor should we underplay the at times terrible retributive cruelty of the comrades.

On the ground, the civil conflict in South Africa from about 1984 until 1994 was fought out largely by young people. It is worth remembering that a substantial portion of the SADF soldiers patrolling townships were themselves 18- and 19-year-old white conscripts. But there is little evidence that the leadership (on either side) took the concerns of youth seriously; they were political tools in a broader conflict. Youth were largely excluded from peace negotiations, and comrades were never formally recognised as soldiers in the post-conflict settlement. They could be roused and activated when it was politically expedient, and then later discarded as serious political actors.

Comparative African literature also allows us to think about the distinctiveness of the South African youth conflict. Compared to many other African

86. Langa and Eagle, 'Intractability', 153.
87. Straker, *Faces*; Mendelsohn and Straker, 'Child Soldiers'; G. Straker, M. Mendelsohn, F. Moosa and P. Tudin, 'Violent Political Contexts and the Emotional Concerns of Township Youth', *Child Development* 67 (1996), 46-54.

conflicts, South Africa's war was relatively contained. For all the brutality and trauma, communities and families did largely hold together. The war damaged, but did not erase, solidarities. Whole villages and neighbourhoods were not destroyed. Ultimately, the ruling elite conceded political power without launching all-out conventional war against its internal opposition. This probably shielded our youth from even more intense trauma. A comparative approach takes the conversation away from the rather tired debate about whether comrades were heroes or villains. Thousands of individuals were damaged and left by the wayside of history. It allows us to emphasise the harm of war, rather than the heroism.

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