

Gary Baines. 2014. South Africa's 'Border War': Contested narratives and conflicting memories. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 274 pp.

South Africa's 'Border War': Contested narratives and conflicting memories discusses the Border War's enduring legacy and its impact on South African culture and society. The author uses a case study of the heterogeneous and conflicted South African Defence Forces (SADF) veterans (mnemonic community) with special reference to the apartheid era and after. The so called 'Border War' was a war waged by the SADF in support of a proxy force, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) against South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) and the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) backed by the armed forces of Angola and those of their collaborator, Cuba between 1975 and 1988. Ultimately, there was no victor in the battlefield between the fighting forces. The minority whites later lost out in 1990 and 1994 when Namibia and South Africa attained their independence respectively.

The book evaluates the 'victim-perpetrator' scenario presented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that informed public discussion about the apartheid era. In addition, the book asserts that wars have a legacy or afterlife because they affect veterans and society long after fighting is halted. By and large, the book examines the struggle over the meaning and memory of the South African 'Border War', analyzing disputations in its historiography, discourse and representational approaches

Baines' book is presented in ten chapters, plus a conclusion. The first chapter asserts that the 'Border War' is reclaimed through the publication of memoirs by common soldier-authors (who make truth claims in their accounts of the war) that undermine military histories authored by senior SADF officers whose works defend apartheid. On the whole, the chapter provides the official view, thereby validating the memories of SADF and justifying its conduct (during the war). In the second chapter, Baines contends that the cultural memory of past wars, especially the Vietnam conflict, presents a narrative template that shaped and influenced the perceptions about the 'Border War' experiences to a significant extent.

The third chapter examines the stories of SADF soldiers captured and imprisoned by the Cubans in Angola during the abortive Operation Savannah in December 1975. The chapter deconstructs the captivity story of an 18 year old Robert Wilson, focusing on the code of conduct expected of Prisoners of War. More so, it shows how war transforms and traumatizes, using the experiences of Clive Holt a 19 year old conscript who participated at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale (1987-88) under the 61 Mechanized Infantry Battalion. It concludes that, for Holt, writing about the war's past, unsettled present and probable future was a therapeutic process.

In the fourth chapter, the author demonstrates how Holt, along with other SADF veterans, used the concept of post-traumatic stress disorder to explicate their unexpected and self-ruinous conduct after demobilization and integration. It argues that the SADF embraced victimhood instead of considering themselves guilty for defending apartheid, which was castigated as a crime against humanity.

Chapter five exposes the functioning of the politics of memory in South Africa and Namibia by interrogating the contesting narratives offered by the SADF and SWAPO concerning the attack in 1978 on the Angolan town of Cassinga. SWAPO asserted that Cassinga was a refugee camp where innocent civilian women and children were killed whilst the SADF argued that the targeted area was a nerve centre of 'terrorist' military operations in Angola.

In chapter six, Baines affirms that it is not easy to distinguish winners and losers in the conflicts that took place in Southern Africa. Added to this, he evaluates the conclusions that were tabled by the fighting forces regarding the debates about who won at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale. The battle of Cuito Cuanavale is significant because it determined the course of the transition in South Africa, although it did not guarantee victory in the fight for memory. Accordingly, the battle culminated in the dismantling of South Africa's system of white supremacy and privilege.

Chapter seven contends that both SWAPO and South African leadership should be blamed for the 1989 collapse of the ceasefire, the mass killings and the several mass graves containing about 200 skeletal remains. The graves were discovered in northern Namibia in the vicinity of the former South African military base of Eenhana in 2005. SWAPO was allegedly guilty of flouting the terms of the ceasefire and the security forces were responsible for the killings and the denial

of justice in the Namibian courts. So far, neither has challenged the culture of impunity that existed in colonial Namibia and apartheid South Africa during the 'Border War'.

In the eighth chapter, Baines explains the lessons and legacies of the 'Border War' including how it can be contrasted with American military practice in Vietnam for the benefit of politicians, historians and military officials. In addition, it reveals that during the transfer of political power in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) erected memorials in the *Freedom Park* located in the country's capital Pretoria (Tshwane) to pay homage to its heroes and martyrs and this ignited tension because it left out the deceased SADF members on the walls of the heritage site.

The ninth chapter illustrates how memory politics can function through the production of memorial sites. This was evident when a SADF monument was built in the precincts of the *Voortrekker* memorial in response to the construction of the *Freedom Park* which is itself viewed as a rebuke to the SADF monument built in the late 1970s on the *Klapperkop* hill.

The last chapter (10) argues that veterans from liberation movements and SADF embraced victimhood as a form of political capital, but the SADF veterans felt left out following the promulgation of the Military Veterans Act (No. 18 of 2011) and thereafter ANC ignored the concerns of the white veterans. In response, the SADF veterans established a virtual community, which interacts and shares common militarized identities, histories and/or experiences of the 'Border War'. It also stores digital memories in cyber space that articulate the SADF veterans' discontent with the country's political change. Baines concludes that the history of the 'Border War' remains contested and a terrain for divergent views hence the "contested narratives and conflicting memories".

One of the book's strengths is that it engages a large amount of sources. It borrows from the study of history, literature, visual culture, memory, politics and international relations. In addition, South Africa's 'Border War' is a significant volume for all those involved in the study of war and memory or the recent history of South Africa. The book presents an appropriate study of the 'war of words' fought by retired SADF generals and other veterans against detractors and critics. The author should be applauded for engaging a huge number of sources including secondary literature, archival research, interviews, articles, newspaper reports, reviews and blogs

during data collection. The book is of significance to a number of disciplines that include, but are not limited to, war and strategic studies, peace studies, history, international relations, psychology, politics, human rights and post-conflict nation building studies, memory and borderlands studies.¹ I invite all members of the academic fraternity to read the book and join me in congratulating Gary Baines.

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¹ However, on page 2 the author refers to UNITA as the Movement for the Total Independence of Angola instead of National Union for the Total Independence of Angola.