

Few people can have avoided wondering who was holding the government by its legislative extremities as it recently rammed the general amnesty on to the statute book, in the face of a remarkable alliance of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opposition. Part of the answer is to be found in Jacques Pauw's history of death squads, *In the Heart Of The Whore*. The book offers a catalogue of brutality, and a roll-call of the murderers, liars and psychopaths whom the National Party government paid to help combat the 'total onslaught'.

These are the same men who have now 'stolen' the files which record their barbarity, which they are holding on to until the government offers them a better pension! Their boss, Joe Verster, arrogantly ignored the Webster inquest where he was due to take the witness stand, in order to leave the country and wrap up Civil Co-operation Bureau operations overseas (he has subsequently testified). FW de Klerk, of course, had promised an end to all secret operations nearly two years ago.

The amnesty is strongly rumoured to form part of a package deal being negotiated between the government and these, its former employees. There is a clear need for the scandal-battered National Party government to staunch what is currently a near-flood of damaging publicity. Revelations of on-going dirty tricks by the security forces, against the ANC, fill the newspapers, and are reinforced by the antics and evidence of former hit squad members at the Webster inquest and elsewhere.

The government is not merely saddled with the ghosts of the past: the onset of negotiations were allegedly the signal for millions of rands to be spent on acquiring a Botswana-based newspaper to further the battle against the ANC. In addition, Ferdi Barnard, convicted murderer and former Civil Co-operation Bureau member, was apparently hired to take the battle to Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) via a network of prostitutes and drug-dealers. In short, the government's local and international credibility, won by the reforms that flowed from the famous speech of 2 February 1990, has been steadily wittled away.

How much easier if the ghosts of the past would remain spectral, rather than the flesh-and-blood confessors of both past and present government misdeemeanours. Pik Botha justified the amnesty by calling for the past to be laid to rest. As Pauw illustrates, however, bygones, in South Africa, do not willingly become bygones: they have a nasty habit of biting back.

2

In The Heart Of The Whore provides a detailed history of the death squads — including the 'Hammer' unit, the Civil Co-operation Bureau and others — their activities, and the continuing cover-up of their operations by senior state and security personnel. Jacques Pauw was centrally involved in uncovering their bloody trail as a journalist on *Vrye Weekblad*; he continues to pro-

Death Squads

DAVID EVERATT writes about death squads in South Africa and the many voices demanding that the killers be brought to justice



David Everatt

vide a 'weekly litany of their activities through *The Star*.

At the heart of Pauw's book lies the story of Dirk Coetzee, the former police captain and death squad commander. Coetzee's description of his job gives the book its title:

I was the commander of the South African Police death squad. I was in the heart of the whore. My men and I had to murder political and security opponents of the police and the government.

3

Coetzee was born in 1945 to a working class Afrikaner family. He had, we are told, 'a happy childhood in a very traditional, loving and caring Afrikaner family'. At school, Coetzee was a sports fanatic, captaining the athletics and swimming teams, and selected for final trials for the Northern Transvaal school rugby team. Coetzee failed standard nine, and initially only passed four matriculation subjects.

Coetzee joined the police in 1970, graduating as the top student from the Police College in Pretoria. Within six months he had been promoted to sergeant, and warrant officer three years later, getting first-class matriculation passes on the way. Stationed in Rhodesia in 1974, Coetzee had 'his first lesson in how to dispose of a body', and in massacres of whole villages. He sent photographs of mutilated bodies to people at home to show them 'what was really going on in the Rhodesian bush'. What was going on, Pauw tells us, was a tremendous adventure to Coetzee, and it created in him the desire to serve in the security branch of his own country.

What is perhaps impossible to reconstruct, or too unpleasant to attempt, is the way in which an intelligent, headstrong individual (Coetzee refused to allow himself to be caned in his last two years at school), from a stable and loving family background, was inspired by the sight of mutilated black bodies to wish to do the same in his own country. The psychic mutilation which underlies much of the physical barbarity recounted in Pauw's book, although it remains a predominantly silent sub-text, is frequently the more grotesque.

Thereafter, as a successful and ambitious policeman, Coetzee was taken through the required anti-ANC training

(at which he was good enough to become a lecturer at the Police College) and field experience as station commander at Volksrust. By 1977 he was sufficiently skilled for his 'dream (to) come true', and was recruited into the security police.

In his first security branch position at the Oshoek border post between South Africa and Swaziland, Coetzee participated in game poaching, embezzlement, smuggling people across the border, issuing inflammatory pamphlets which saw Dr A Zwane (leader of the pro-ANC opposition party in Swaziland)

In the Heart of the Whore: the Story of Apartheid's Death Squads

by Jacques Pauw

Southern Book Publishers,
Halfway House,
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detained, theft of ANC and UN vehicles, breaking into the offices of the UNHCR, planting bombs aimed (not always successfully) at ANC members, one of which killed a four year-old boy. On and on the list goes, recording an absolute disregard for law, human rights, or even basic human decency. These were the routine tasks of a security policeman — Coetzee was not yet a hit-squad member.

After a brief stint as second in command of the Security Branch at Middelburg, Coetzee was installed as commander of Vlakplaas, the 44-hectare farm outside Pretoria which housed the hit squads. Coetzee reorganised Vlakplaas into four units of askaris and policemen, each under the charge (naturally) of a white senior security branch officer. Initially aimed at surveillance and detention of ANC and PAC 'infiltrators':

it was inevitable ... that Vlakplaas would become involved in the secret and unconventional war against the enemy ... some of the askaris were highly effective soldiers who were simply also employed to perform hit operations.

Coetzee notes that in the eighteen months he commanded Vlakplaas, no ANC or PAC infiltrators were apprehended.

As Vlakplaas commander, Coetzee seems to have slid naturally into poisoning, stabbing, shooting and poisoning opponents of apartheid, both personally and in his capacity as commanding officer. Equally easily, he became involved in diamond smuggling and other 'criminal' activities. The heart of the whore was rotten indeed. By the mid-1980s, however, following a series of diplomatic incidents and embarrassing exposures, Coetzee had been demoted to the point at which his police career had begun. He was then suspended, and spent some four years unable to work and at war with his former employers.

Coetzee's drift to extreme barbarity is unexplained (by Coetzee or Pauw) beyond the truism that the death squads were distinguished from common thugs by their belief that they were 'fighting a secret twilight war against an evil enemy'. The utter cynicism which seems to have pervaded the police, and especially the Special Branch, and the apparent widespread involvement in criminal acts such as theft and embezzlement, makes this claimed 'principle' impossible to swallow. Coetzee's defection to the ANC, in contrast, is explained by Pauw in the following terms:

I think the fact that he was needed again played an important role in Coetzee's decision to leave South Africa. After years of leading a useless existence, people needed his help — the ANC needed him, *Vrye Weekblad* needed him, and human rights lawyers needed him to prove the death squad allegations. There was suddenly a renewed purpose and meaning to his life.

By the 1990s, as an exiled ANC member, Coetzee had moved from the heart of the whore to being an ulcer in the belly of the beast. His status as a witness to death squad activities was rehabilitated by Judge Kriegler's judgement in the trial of the police forensics expert, Lothar Neethling (alleged by Coetzee to have provided poison to death squad operatives; Neethling has now retired, with an extremely handsome pension). Any future evidence from Coetzee has apparently been deemed undesirable. A Walkman loaded with explosives was sent to Coetzee, who did not take possession of it; instead, it killed Bheki Mlangeni. Earlier this year, two members of the South African Defence Force were sent to London, allegedly to arrange Coetzee's assassination with the assistance of northern Ireland's paramilitary groups.



Security police examine the body of Goniwe

In the confused and violent mess of current South African politics, hit squad activities continue unabated. The main witness in the investigation of the 'Hammer' death squad's involvement in the assassination of Matthew Goniwe and three other eastern Cape activists, Andre de Villiers, was recently assassinated. Investigations into the Goniwe assassinations have implicated five Cabinet Ministers, via Security Council committees on which they served.

As the finger of blame began to point at senior political figures, government ministers began to talk of the need for a general amnesty: an amnesty, moreover, which would wipe the slate clean without any need for state operatives to record their illegal actions, unlike the written 'admissions' which ANC exiles had to complete before being allowed to return to South Africa.

De Villiers' last words, as he lay dying, are an appropriate response to those who support the government awarding itself and its agents an amnesty; they also serve as a summary of Jacques Pauw's history of the death squads, and his attempt to uncover the truth about the 87 activists killed inside South Africa, and the 138 killed outside the country, during the 1980s. De Villiers's last words to his son were: 'It is political and there is a cover-up'.

3

Analyses of contemporary political developments in South Africa commonly begin with the truism: 'In the changed conditions after 2 February 1990 ...'. The 'changed conditions' are normally taken to include opening up the political terrain and the onset of negotiations between the major players towards a free South Africa, initiated by President de Klerk's watershed speech.

The changed conditions, however,

are rather more sinister than this suggests. South African diplomacy has always been underlined by the armed fist of the South African Defence Force, Koevoet and other forces of violence and destabilisation. Pauw reminds us that in the 1980s, South Africa:

invaded three southern African capitals — Maseru, Gaborone and Maputo — and four other countries in the region — Angola, Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Zambia; sent death squads to attempt the assassination of two prime ministers — Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Leabua Jonathan of Lesotho; supported dissident groups that have brought chaos to two countries — Unita in Angola and Renamo in Mozambique — and less serious disorder in two others ...; disrupted oil supplies in six countries ... attacked railway ... lines in seven countries ...

Since February 1990 the terrain and the tactics have altered, not the objectives. The war that raged in southern Africa for more than a decade has merely shifted its locus to South Africa itself (punctuated by spurts of gunboat diplomacy in countries such as Angola).

In all, ten thousand people have died in recent political violence: six thousand in Natal since 1987, four thousand in the PWV region since July 1990. That is, ten thousand families that have lost a mother or father, son or daughter. Tens of thousands have been injured, many disabled for life; hundreds of thousands of refugees have been created as hostels, squatter camps and sections of townships have been 'ethnically cleansed' by Inkatha supporters, allegedly assisted by both SAP members and whites from the 'dirty tricks' department of the security forces.

Two years of Reef violence have seen two years of remarkably consistent allegations of direct police com-

plicity in the violence: of leading Inkatha supporters to and from attacks, participating in attacks, disarming defence units but not Inkatha members. Eye-witnesses consistently allege that large-scale attacks by Inkatha supporters, such as occurred at Phola Park, Swanieville and Boipatong, are led by whites, wearing balaclavas and boot-polish. On and on the list goes. In response, police spokesperson Captain Eugene Opperman declared himself 'bored' by such allegations.

Judges have been forced to acquit those Inkatha supporters who have been arrested for acts of violence — including the Sebokeng vigil massacre, and train attackers who were overcome by the commuters they were attacking and handed to the police — and have noted in their judgements that the police have showed no real commitment to uncovering incriminating evidence, while police officers 'very probably' deliberately sought to deceive the court. Only one conviction has been handed down, a seven-year sentence for participation in a train attack.

Within the violent conflagration which dominates township life on the Reef and in Natal, hit squads continue to target ANC, SACP and COSATU figures. In the first two years of Reef violence, the Human Rights Commission recorded 124 assassinations. Of those, 87 were members of the ANC, while 6 were assassinated while waiting to give evidence on the violence to Peace Accord structures. ('Checkmate for Apartheid: Special report on two years of destabilisation', Johannesburg 1992, pp. 11-12.) De Villiers must now be added to that list. No death squad member has been prosecuted for the acts of murder or abduction they committed, for the poisoning, stabbing, shooting or burning of the opponents of apartheid (the amnesty seeks to guarantee that none ever will be). On and on it goes.

The security forces appear to lie deep in the heart of much of the current violence which holds townships in thrall, as they were previously central to regional destabilisation and terror tactics.

4

South Africa is currently living through a low-intensity war. The techniques of violent destabilisation which South Africa previously exported to southern Africa were first used in Natal in the 1980s, and then brought to the Reef in 1990. Those techniques are now being used against the ANC and its allies, which represent the most popularly supported black political bloc.

Points of tension in the social fabric have been politicised, and injected with political violence. Members of criminal gangs have testified to the Goldstone Commission that they were recruited by Inkatha and trained and armed by the security forces before being unleashed against ANC and civic targets. Disputes over taxi routes have been laced with pro- and anti-ANC sentiment, and are nodes of violent conflict across the country.

Existing tensions between township residents and hostel inmates have been concretised around the blurred ethnic-cum-political divisions which are

Inkatha's means of mobilisation. Having cleansed hostels of non-Inkatha supporters (including Zulu members of the ANC, and others who simply could not stomach violence), hostels have served as territorial strongholds from which attacks have been launched against the surrounding communities for over two years. These range from sniper fire to mass attacks, such as the 1,000 Tokoza hostel dwellers who attacked Swanieville, and whom the police escorted back to their hostel after the massacre of 29 people. Attacks launched by Inkatha-controlled hostels have resulted in a total of 1,172 deaths on the Reef from July 1990 to June 1992. (CASE Research statistics, 1992)

4

In classic Renamo style, blind terror has been unleashed against the black population of the country's economic, demographic and political heartland, the PWV region. Six people a day are murdered as they travel to or from work, as they drink in taverns or beer halls, as they walk down a street or as they sleep in their beds. And the killers walk free.

The overall aim of the current violence which racks the Reef in particular, is the destabilisation of black civil, and thus political, life. The results are clear. First, the perception is created — locally and internationally — that the ANC and Inkatha are equally responsible for violence. Second, the ANC is unable to even attempt the organisation of its support base while the norms of political life are replaced by the abnormalities of violence. Third, a clear gulf exists between ANC involvement in negotiations and the violence which afflicts its members. Furthermore, the ANC, having signed the Pretoria Minute and suspended the armed struggle, cannot respond to widespread calls for the armed defence of its members and supporters. Finally, all ANC campaigns are matched with a dramatic increase in violence — the victims of which are overwhelmingly ANC members or supporters. The price of ANC membership, or participation in ANC campaigns, has been raised to unacceptable levels.

In contrast, the 'positive' benefits of the violence for the National Party government are apparent. The government presents itself in a magisterial role, struggling to keep apart two warring black factions which, we are told, are also ethnically divided between Xhosa and Zulu. The violence is switched on — and off — at key moments; its waxing and waning parallels the fortunes of the National Party government in the negotiation process. As such, the violence has peaked at points where it most damaged the ANC (such as during the recent mass action campaign), and dropped dramatically at points where the government has been vulnerable, such as during the Inkathagate revelations. This apparent manipulation of the violence allows the government to intervene and play the role of peacemaker, such as its sudden decision —

after 20 months of train violence and over 200 deaths — to search commuters before they entered carriages. The party that can promise peace, in the forthcoming general election, will sway many voters; those parties seen as sources of violence, will lose votes.

5

As the overall nature of the conflict has altered, so has the apparent role of the 'dirty tricks' personnel. Pauw details the way in which death squads operated within the state's response to the 'total onslaught' during the 1980s. Their functions were to abduct and/or assassinate ANC personnel in ANC missions in Africa and Europe, and to 'remove from society' suspected ANC members inside South Africa. Pauw chillingly notes that the death squads:

were especially effective where South African security legislation, harsh as it was, had failed the authorities. Griffiths Mxenge had to die because there was a lack of evidence to charge and convict him. Had the police discovered incriminating evidence, Mxenge would still have been alive today.

Assassinations continue to take place, mainly of members of the triple alliance. However, the externally-based enemy of the 1980s has truly become 'the enemy within' — and all around, as political polls reveal an average of 75% black support for the ANC.

The thrust of hit-squad activity in contemporary South Africa seems four-fold: to maintain a watching brief over revelations of their previous activities, and ensure that no further evidence is uncovered on which Civil Co-operation Bureau members could be brought to trial; to continue 'removing' key ANC/SACP/COSATU members; to arm hostel 'impis' with 'long firearms' — a CASE report on the Reef violence in 1991 revealed that only Inkatha supporters had access to South African-made R1 and R4 automatic rifles — and then lead them in initial attacks on township or squatter communities, with the aim of destabilising those areas; and finally, their most sinister action appears to be the assassination of ANC or Inkatha people who genuinely seek to bring peace to violent areas, such as Skubuza and Radebe (ANC) in Pietermaritzburg, Nxumalo (IFP) in Alexandra, and others.

At the same time, however, the sudden incapacity of the SAP is remarkable. From the 1960s until the late 1980s, despite their use of less than savoury methods, the police were remarkably effective in apprehending underground members of the exiled liberation movements. They arrested and interrogated operatives, extracted confessions and located evidence, uncovered arms caches and saw the process through to prosecution and conviction. Their effectiveness was one of the reasons for the ANC committing itself to a negotiated settlement in 1987, rather than seeking a military or insurrectionary victory. As we have seen, where these conventional police methods failed, the hit squads were available for extra-judicial liquidations.

It seems beyond coincidence, however, that the onset of the Pietermaritzburg War in late 1987 ran in tandem

with the ANC National Executive Committee endorsing a negotiated settlement (in October 1987) and a sudden inability on the part of the police to interrogate or find evidence or disarm people, or to locate or arrest or prosecute those involved in political violence. As Pauw illustrates, their ineffectiveness in locating or prosecuting the murderers of Griffiths and Victoria Mxenge, David Webster or Anton Lubowski, Surendra Naidu or Clement Msome, stems from the fact that the murderers were former security force members, organised in hit-squads. It would appear that benefits accrue to the state from the massive carnage of political violence, and the SAP use little or none of the zeal they demonstrated in acting against ANC members.

In this context, we are reminded by Pauw (who repeats an observation made earlier by Patrick Laurence), that death squads were and are not an aberration, but the logical and inevitable product of the apartheid order seeking

of the reader for some 300 pages. Despite Pauw's detailed research and controlled writing, this contradiction ultimately proved too great a strain for this reader. While the book is well-written, in content it is a compendium of barbarity, of bare-faced denials of that barbarity by state officials (most frequently by Pik Botha), and of an ongoing protection of murderers by the state.

5

Dirk Coetzee is the only death squad member to be detailed in anything which might allow a sympathetic response from readers. We learn of his childhood, his career and his personal life. He was, we are told, a long-standing and active member of a society



Security police examine the body of Calata

to retain power (*Death Squads: Apartheid's Secret Weapon*, CASE/Penguin Forum series, 1990). Evidence of prevailing conditions since February 1990 suggest that little has changed.

6

Pauw's tersely-written book occupies a difficult terrain. *In The Heart Of The Whore* deals with inhuman people, who carry out barbaric acts of violence, and who inhabit a fantasy world which mixes 'snuff' movie grotesquerie with elements of Le Carre's 'great game' espionage. At the same time, however, the book details the gory deaths of real South Africans, well-known and unknown, and has to hold the attention

opposing corporal punishment in schools, in support of which he wrote letters to government ministers and berated headmasters. Yet this is the same man who ordered the death of Durban lawyer Griffiths Mxenge, who died of forty-five stab wounds and a crushed skull. The contrast between the two sides of the man are too great: the 'normal' Coetzee serves only to highlight the inhuman side of a man who wants to return to South Africa and lead investigations in a Nuremberg-style war trial.

Pauw describes the death squad operatives who people his book as 'men of moral straw', and the language of Coetzee and his colleagues mixes the horror of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

and Eliot's 'Hollow Men'. Coetzee himself has moved beyond asking for forgiveness. While his language has a Kurtzian intensity, of one who has looked into the abyss, he has walked away from that vision. 'What do you expect from me?', Coetzee asks. 'To start weeping and snivelling every time I talk about the killings and the burnings? There would be nothing left of me'. What is left of him?

Pauw's book details an amoral landscape populated by people who cremated murdered activists in one pit, while drinking brandy and swapping stories around a second pit which they used for their *braaivleis*. These people have no centre to hold them together: they are all falling apart, torn between the extremes of brutality and banality. As such, to read *In The Heart Of The Whore* from start to finish — as with so many books on South Africa's past — is, finally, an act of penance. The danger of the book is to leave the reader feeling alienated and impotent, as the supra-legal nature of security force activity is hammered home time and again.

The repression of the 1980s was undercut by the widely-held vision of a triumphant, peace-loving ANC government ruling the non-racial, democratic South Africa of UDF slogans. The present, of course, is muddled and confused. Pauw ends *In The Heart Of The Whore* by quoting Andre du Toit, who has warned against an amnesty that would allow both ANC and government off the hook. Du Toit asks:

Should we be prepared to let the killers go free, if that is the price for ending the violence and ensuring the prospects for a just and democratic South Africa? There are historical accounts which have to be settled if our society is to come to terms with itself at all.

Pauw calls for national healing which can only flow from the settling of accounts. However grudgingly, the ANC has finally allowed the Red Cross into its camps, and has published the report of an inquiry (but not the names of the perpetrators) into allegations of torture and murder in ANC camps in exile. This is at least a start, and follows Mandela's open admission of ANC responsibility.

In complete contrast, the National Party government continues to present apartheid as a noble idea which was maladministered, and see no reason to request forgiveness from the millions of people whose lives were brutalised and foreshortened by vicious social engineering.

Similarly, the government continues to protect its security forces, where involvement in acts of brutality is rewarded with promotion; where it is not, the government sits down with murderers to hammer out an acceptable pension deal. Four thousand dead in two years, and one conviction. Ten thousand dead in six years. Ten thousand voices demanding that their killers be brought to book, not that the book of the past be simply closed and put away. □

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