

Forgotten “young lions”: Stories of political activists in the struggle against apartheid

[B O O K R E V I E W]

Reynolds, Pamela (2014) **War in Worcester: Youth and the Apartheid state.** Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press. ISBN 978 1 86914 276 6 pbk. Pages 239.

War in Worcester provides insight into youths' involvement in the struggle against the apartheid regime in Zwelethemba, Worcester, in the Western Cape. The book highlights ways in which the apartheid regime impacted negatively on South African communities through forced removals and the implementation of racial policies that promoted separate development for black and white people in this country. The youth in many of these communities, including in Zwelethemba, were left with no choice but to be actively involved in struggle politics from a very young age. Jacklyn Cock (1991) and Monique Marks (2002) refer to this process as the politicisation or militarisation of the youth. For the youths involved, being political activists defined their identities at that time. It appears through narratives shared in the book that some of these struggle and political identities were rendered compulsory for the youth, indicating the extent to which the apartheid regime robbed young people of the opportunity to be children. Many were exposed at a young age to multiple and atrocious forms of violence perpetrated against relatives, parents, teachers and other community members who were assaulted, tortured and killed by the police and secret security agents working for the apartheid government. As Gill Straker argues in **Faces in the revolution** (1992), the innocence of childhood

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was lost as a result of the direct and indirect trauma that young people endured. In **War in Worcester**, Pamela Reynolds documents the psychological consequences of this trauma, including how it continues to negatively affect some of the former young activists who are now adults in the “new” South Africa.

The book is enriched by its methodological innovation and the creative data-collection process. The youth involved as informants (14 in total) were encouraged to be leading experts in constructing and reconstructing their lived experiences of life under apartheid. The author met with each of the 14 participants individually, as well as in groups, over a period of more than 10 years (1996 to 2011). Although the traditional interview methods yielded rich material, the study was also ethnographic in nature: Reynolds and the youths walked around the community of Zwelethemba to map out key places where significant events had taken place. This novel approach of literally mapping out the battleground to recreate the past helped the youths to reconstruct their stories of life under apartheid in a memorable and intimate manner. Through mapping the community of Zwelethemba, the youths made “Lists of the leaders of the youth, people who had collaborated with government forces, sympathetic policemen, and those who had been necklaced and in the process discussed the name of each person and the merits or demerits of the part he or she had played” (p 35).

A narrative approach (although not described as such in the book) was undertaken in which each participant was given the opportunity to narrate his¹ story, including how he was drawn into the struggle against apartheid, networks with other youths in the community and violent encounters with members of the security forces and the police. The youths share detailed narratives with graphic details of torture at the hands of law enforcement officials, which was something that the youth involved in the anti-apartheid struggle expected. Making sense of the past was not easy for the key informants, ten of whom had been tortured and two shot, resulting in paralysis for one and the loss of a leg for the other. The data were collected with sensitivity in order not to retraumatise the informants. It appears that sharing traumatic memories of torture and pain with the author served as a form of catharsis.

The book exposes the failure of our nation-building project after 1994 to offer counselling and healing to those affected by the violence of the past. It is evident that there is a need for healing services to help people deal with the psychological effects of apartheid. For the former young activists, lack of emotional and/or material support has left many feeling betrayed by the current black-led government that has failed to deliver on its promises.

¹ All participants were males

Lack of job opportunities was mentioned as a major frustration for many young activists who dropped out of school at the height of apartheid, thereby forfeiting the opportunity to complete their educational studies. Given their lack of qualifications and relevant market-related skills, many former young activists are unable to secure jobs in the current (very competitive) labour market and feel politically marginalised and betrayed by the African National Congress (ANC) led government. Their narratives mirror those of other studies with similar groups in other parts of South Africa (Gear, 2002; Marks, 2002; Mashike & Mokalobe, 2003). Many former activists feel betrayed by their former comrades, who now seem to be benefitting from political power and access to Black Economic Empowerment opportunities. For example, Smuts Ngonyama – then head of communications in the South African Presidency, official spokesperson for the ANC and former anti-apartheid activist – was quoted as saying that he “didn’t join the struggle to be poor”. This comment may be perceived as an insult by former young comrades who are now feeling economically marginalised despite their active involvement and sacrifices in the struggle against apartheid. It appears that the “politics of consumption” has taken over the lives of many former activists, in contrast to the living and economic conditions of the former activists as discussed in **War in Worcester**.

The book also provides fascinating material about the complexities of being an anti-apartheid activist and the issues that youths had to negotiate and navigate daily, including the risk of being labelled an informer or spy (*impipi*) if one did not comply with certain expectations. In a similar vein, Jacob Dlamini’s **Askari** (2015) provides insights into the complexities associated with being an informer. Reynolds’ book shares stories of friendship and the spirit of comradeship, but also stories of how comrades betrayed each other. The stories show that life during apartheid was extremely precarious for many youths, a fact that is often not acknowledged.

Despite their stories of torture and harassment by the security forces and the police, the youth in the book do not see themselves as victims, but rather as agents of change and liberation in the struggle against apartheid. Their political activities included organising community meetings, making public speeches, breaking curfews, holding secret meetings, and establishing security networks for others to safely leave the country in order to join military organisations such as *uMkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) and others in exile. Details provided around some of the political practices reveal information which has hitherto not been publicly available on how the youth organised their anti-apartheid activities.

The book also reveals the limitations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, especially in engaging with the experiences of youth. Their stories represent some of the many unheard stories of the struggle against the violent apartheid regime.

A shortcoming of the book is the lack of detailed analysis of gender dynamics in terms of the participants and the narratives shared. All 14 participants were males, but the author did not engage at all with their social construction of masculine identities. It appears that males were expected to be brave and fearless in the struggle against apartheid. Involvement in politics was seen as a key marker of a being a “real” man, which links with Xaba’s (2001) notion of struggle masculinities. The voices of women who interacted with the key informants are totally absent.

Despite these limitations, the book is well written and easy to read. It offers valuable information about how young people fought for the freedom of this country and how the state retaliated.

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