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REVIEW

J. Dlamini, *Dying for Freedom: Political Martyrdom in South Africa,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024), 152pp., ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-6107-0

How to begin. On 15 July 2019, former South African president Jacob Zuma appeared before a judicial commission of inquiry set up to investigate allegations of widespread graft in the public sector during his tenure in office. Although implicated in acts of malfeasance by several witnesses, the former president told the commission's chairperson, the then Deputy Chief Justice, Raymond Zondo, and the journalists assembled in the Braampark Forum building in Johannesburg, that he was the victim of a smear campaign dating back to the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1990. As the party's intelligence chief in 1990, Zuma said he had caught wind of a plan to oust him involving enemy agents operating on home soil in league with intelligence agencies 'from big countries.'[1] They wanted to get rid of him because he had obtained a list with the names of apartheid-era double agents who had infiltrated the ANC. Zuma proceeded to allege that Ngoako Ramatlhodi, a comrade in the liberation movement who served as a cabinet minister in his administration, was one of those spies. Ramatlhodi, Zuma alleged, 'was recruited when he was a student in Lesotho to be a spy', and that he had 'known for years what he [was]'.[2] Ramatlhodi denied the accusation and dared the former president to take a public lie-detector test.

The intention here is not to give credence to Zuma's testimony but its contents circle a concern that has long troubled historian Jacob Dlamini. This is that 'South Africans know as little today about collaboration under apartheid as they did when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC] held South Africans spellbound with its tales of murder and mayhem.'[3] The TRC may have 'narrow[ed] the range of permissible lies'[4] in circulation, but in no way did it put an end to them. The identities of all those who collaborated with the regime, or the extent to which South Africa's politics is poisoned by it, for instance, is still unknown. Three of the five books

1 J. Burke, 'Zuma tells South Africa Corruption Inquiry he is Victim of Foreign Plot', *The Guardian* (UK), 15 July 2019.
2 R. Rabkin and S. Smit, 'Zuma Tells Zondo Commission: 'Ramatlhodi Was a Spy'', *Mail & Guardian*, 15 July 2019.
3 J. Dlamini, 'Apartheid Confessions', *Interventions*, 18, 6, (2016), 774.
4 M. G. Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*, (New York, Metropolitan Books).

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Dlamini has authored to date, *Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-apartheid Struggle* (2014), *The Terrorist Album: Apartheid's Insurgents, Collaborators, and the Security Police* (2020), and *Dying for Freedom: Political Martyrdom in South Africa* (2024), explore this terrain between things known and unknown. Speaking more concretely, Dlamini delves into the surviving apartheid security archive to ask compelling questions about ethics and historical practice, 'the unfinished business of South Africa's transition to justice',[1] and the 'heroic story of a unified struggle'[2] against apartheid.

Another former cabinet minister and high-ranking ANC member, General Siphiwe Nyanda, who was accused by Zuma to have been recruited by the apartheid security forces,[3] briefly appears in *Dying for Freedom,* the book at the centre of this short reflection. The year is 1984. Justice Mafa Ngidi, a highly trained military operative and 'an important cog in ANC's underground machine in Swaziland',[4] is arrested in Soweto while on a covert mission inside the country. Thirty-four days later, on June 28 1984, Ngidi escapes from police custody and returns to the operational front in Swaziland, but the homecoming is not a happy one. The movement is rife with informants and double agents and levels of distrust are dangerously high. 'Led by local MK commander, Siphiwe Nyanda, Ngidi's colleagues assaulted him, saying he was lying.'[5] Ngidi survives being shot at, and is arrested again in Soweto in August 1984. This time Ngidi is shipped to Robben Island to serve out a four-year sentence.

Two things about this story are worth drawing out. The first is a question of craft. 'What does it mean to rely', Dlamini asks, 'on sources such as apartheid police and informer reports for the telling of such a messy tale?'[6] This is a question Dlamini has wrestled with since the writing of *Askari*, his investigation into the life of Glory Lefoshie Sedibe, a senior uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) commander recruited into the undercover counterinsurgency division of the apartheid police in the mid 1980s. Ngidi, Dlamini informs us, is the only living person among the subjects of *Dying for Freedom,* but declined to be interviewed for the purposes of the book. Thus, everything we know about Ngidi 's life, from his departure to join the ANC in Swaziland in the wake of the '76 Uprisings, to the military training he received in Mozambique, Tanzania and the Soviet Union, and his time in jail, is pieced together from his security file. 'In the process', Dlamini writes, 'it raises questions about the ethics of working with this archive'.[7] What does it mean, for instance, to rely on the testimony of informants and double agents, people for whom lying is a requirement of the job? Tainted as these materials are, Dlamini concludes, 'we cannot ignore this source'.[8]

Ngidi had genuinely escaped from police custody but his comrades believed that his escape had been staged. 'They were so convinced of the omnipotence of the South

1 J. Dlamini, *Dying for Freedom: Political Martyrdom in South Africa,* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2024), 112.
2 Ibid. 5.
3 General Siphiwe Nyanda strongly denied the allegations and sued Zuma for defamation.
4 J. Dlamini, *Dying for Freedom*, 65.
5 Ibid, 70.
6 Ibid, 65-66.
7 Ibid, 65.
8 Ibid, 66.

African police that they refused to accept the fact that their enemies were fallible.'[9] This leads us to the second point, and to the main subject of Dlamini's book: the 'political investment' in death in the protracted struggle against apartheid in South Africa.[10] Ngidi's comrades, Dlamini tells us, would not have questioned his loyalty or commitment to the struggle if he had perished in his encounter with the apartheid police. 'This use of death to measure loyalty created a world in which contingency did not exist, where no one got lucky.'[11]

Dying for Freedom grew out of three addresses Dlamini delivered at Cambridge University in 2022. As suggested by the title, the book considers 'the political uses of death in the fight for freedom in South Africa.'[12] Painted in broad strokes, Dlamini's main argument here is that the political investment in death during the anti-apartheid struggle 'generated a notion of sacrifice so absolute that anything less than death was rendered suspect'.[13] Moreover, 'this investment in death encouraged a masculinist style of politics in which activists understood fighting for emancipation as a struggle for manhood'.[14] Dlamini expands on these ideas throughout five main chapters, each focusing on a particular individual: Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, Bantu Stephen Biko, Justice Mafa Ngidi, Jacob Dlamini, and Portia Phila Ndwandwe.

Although an in-depth exploration of each chapter would exceed the limits set for this review, there are a few key interventions that are worth highlighting. The first is Dlamini's return to the original Greek meaning of the word 'martyr' with its emphasis on the act of witnessing. Drawing on the work of religious studies scholars like Elizabeth Castelli and Margo Kitts, Dlamini tells us that martyrdom 'not only referred to the act of witnessing but emphasized the juridical dimension of that act.'[15] In Chapter 1 and 2, Dlamini argues that 'Biko and Mandela were at their most effective when they served as witnesses testifying against apartheid'[16]. To underline his point, Dlamini reflects on the impact of Mandela's courtroom appearances and Biko's work as a newspaper columnist. Paying close attention to Biko and Mandela's roles as witnesses, Dlamini further argues, 'shifts the focus away from the spectacular violence that dominates accounts of South Africa's fight for freedom to the less-celebrated acts of martyrdom that arguably did more than violence to bring about the moral defeat and political collapse of apartheid'.[17]

Justice Mafa Ngidi's story forms the bedrock of Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, Dlamini explores the unmournable death of his namesake, a corrupt deputy mayor, killed by residents in the Vaal Triangle at the start of the uprising in September 1984. Dlamini asks us to consider, not only the 'differential allocation of grievability'[18] in public commemorations of South Africa's liberation struggle, but the 'ethical and political

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9 Ibid, 72.
10 Ibid, 4.
11 Ibid, 5
12 Ibid, 3.
13 Ibid, 4.
14 Ibid, 4.
15 Ibid, 21.
16 Ibid, 21
17 Ibid. 21.
18 J. Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of War and Mourning* (Verso: London & New York, 2004), xiv.

implications of living in a society in which some could be killed but not sacrificed, murdered but not monumentalised?'[19]

In Chapter 5, Dlamini revisits the story of Portia Phila Ndwandwe, an MK commander whose remains were exhumed from an unmarked grave in KwaZulu-Natal in 1997, nearly a decade after she was tortured and shot in the head by the security police. The way in which Ndwandwe's killing was handled by the TRC's amnesty committee,[20] and how it has been memorialised by Judith Mason's iconic artwork, *The Man Who Sang and the Woman Who Kept Silent,* Dlamini argues, has 'made it difficult for South Africans to reckon fully with one of the truth commission's signal failures, namely its inability to deal with black collaboration'.[21] While we know the names of the eight white policeman from the Port Natal and Natal Security Branches, the identities of the MK informants who lured Ndwandwe into their clutches remains a closely guarded secret. And secrets, as demonstrated by Zuma's testimony at the Zondo Commission, are fertile ground for politicians 'when they're questioned about grave crimes' to spin what novelist Imraan Coovadia calls 'corrupting stories, which are meant to confuse and divide people'.[22]

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19 J. Dlamini, *Dying for Freedom*, 118.
20 In short, the Amnesty Committee agreed with the lawyer representing Ndwandwe's killers that they did not have to disclose the identities of MK informants who lured Ndwandwe into the clutches of the security police in order to be granted amnesty.
21 Ibid.111.
22 Imraan Coovadia, 'A Speech to Displease All Parties', Mafika Gwala Annual Lecture (unpublished), 11 October 2021.