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Book Review

Die Geskiedenis van die Kommando's, 1715–2003

Gerhard Kamffer

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The recent publication of *Die Geskiedenis van die Kommando's, 1715–2003*[1] by Gerhard Kamffer, brings renewed scholarly attention to a pivotal, yet often underexplored dimension of South African military history. Central to the work is a strategic inquiry into the contemporary role and relevance of the reserve forces of the country, set against the backdrop of the systematic dismantling of a military capability that served as the cornerstone of national defence for almost three centuries. The book underscores the necessity of situating the origins and evolution of the commando system within its appropriate historical context, tracing its structural and operational development over time.

South Africa is home to the idea of a commando to the extent that, when the United Kingdom Royal Marine Commando unit was formed, Churchill suggested the idea of a commando as part of the name and nature of the unit based on his experience of the Boer commandos in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902).[2] The term "commando" has since been adopted globally, and it is associated around the world with the idea of special forces.[3] In South Africa, the commandos were a key element of rural security since the first commando expedition in 1659, and their disbandment as territorial forces by the African National Congress (ANC) government between 2003 and 2009 remains a controversial and debated topic in South African (SA) politics.[4]

In various countries, territorial reserve structures – also known as "territorial forces", "home guards", or "militias" – are composed primarily of part-time area-based reserve soldiers 'who serve within their geographic area for defence and emergency duties'.[5] These soldiers are recruited locally and trained specifically because of their intimate knowledge of the area and their connection to the local population. From a strategic perspective, territorial forces are critical for civil–military relations and for bridging the civil–military divide by fostering a culture of preparedness and patriotism. The 1998 South African Defence Review, for example, was very explicit about the need for 'area protection forces' and their role in the defence of 'interior assets', the 'maintenance of law and order tasks', and 'to ensure better blanket coverage and geographical support to the rapid deployment force'.[6]

As a military man, Gerhard Kamffer served as senior officer in both the commandos and

army reserves. He had a distinguished military career spanning five decades from 1973 to 2023. Promoted to brigadier general in 2005, he served as Director: Army Reserves and later led Project Koba-Tlala, a strategic initiative aimed at rural development and upskilling reserve force members. He will also be remembered in the SA Army for his leadership role in the extensive and historically sensitive project to rename 52 SA Army "reserve force units".

As an academic, Dr Gerhard Kamffer studied at Potchefstroom University where he obtained a BA (Hons) and PhD. His PhD dissertation, titled 'Om een scherpe oog in't zeil te houden: Die geheime diens in die Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek'[7] is based on an exploration of the origins, development, and operations of the secret service of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) in the late nineteenth century, and specifically during the Second Anglo-Boer War.

Already in the introductory chapters, the close relationship between Kamffer and the Heidelberg Commando is noticeable. The author and his father both served as commanders of the Heidelberg Commando at some stage. This not only gave Kamffer a deep inside-out historical affection for and understanding of the commando system, but it also allowed him to use the Heidelberg Commando as a case study and example throughout his research.

Die Geskiedenis van die Kommando's, 1715–2003 specifically addresses the history of the development, role, and contribution of the commando system in South Africa since the formation of the Union Defence Force (UDF) in 1912, the formation of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in 1994, and disbandment of the commandos in 2009.[8] The focus is explicitly on the more modern version of the commando system that was introduced through the *Union Defence Act (No. 13 of 1912)*, which led to the formation of the UDF. This brings to the fore the integration of the irregular commando forces that have been central to the military power of the Boer Republics that fought the British in South Africa ten years earlier.

Although the title of the book emphasises the period 1715 to 2003, Kamffer only aims at providing a comprehensive history of the commando system between the formation of the UDF in 1912 and the commencement of the disbandment of the commando system in 2003. He is very explicit in stating that there has not been any scientific publication to date that covered the history of the commando system in its totality.[9] Kamffer should indeed be given due recognition for providing a broad outline of the history and development of the commando system in South Africa in the first three chapters of the book.

Chapter 1 highlights the origins and development of the commando system at the Cape from 1715 to the 1830s. Chapter 2 explains the establishment of the commandos as the core of the military systems of the ZAR and the Oranje-Vrijstaat, while Chapter 3 addresses the commando system during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902).

In Chapter 4, Kamffer describes the structural development of the commando forces in the period 1912–1937, before discussing their employment during the 1914 strike and rebellion, the German Southwest-Africa Campaign (1914–1915) in Chapter 5, and the 1922 strike in Chapter 6. In all of this, both the structural nature of the commando system and its employment were profoundly influenced by SA involvement in the two world wars.[10]

In Chapter 7, it is shown that the period 1937–1948 is of particular interest from both a structural and a strategic perspective. With the appointment of Lt Gen. AJE Brink in 1937 as Chief Commandant of the Commandos, a deliberate effort was made to improve the logistics, equipment, and training of the commandos; particularly that of the officers.[11] Chapter 8 discusses important changes in the system, structure, and strength of the commandos in 1948, as well as regulations, culture, and badges to align the commandos with the Afrikaner history and culture.[12] The emphasis in the commandos had shifted from training in marksmanship to more general military preparedness and operational readiness.[13] These changes were underpinned by and should be seen within the context of the National Party election success in 1948, and the resultant changes in the security situation in the country in the 1950s.[14] Chapter 9 explains how the *Defence Act (No. 44 of 1957)* had a defining influence on the professional military structure and development of the commandos as units of the South African Army.[15] Chapter 10 covers the implications of *Defence Amendment Act (No. 85 of 1967)* for the commandos, as well as their role and employment in area defence until 1994. Chapter 11 deals with awards and ceremonies, while Chapter 12 covers the role of the commandos after 1994, and the closing of the commandos in 2009.

From a historical perspective, since the late seventeenth century, commandos have always been part of the security and defence of rural South Africa.[16] The argument that the commandos served the interests of the white minority disregards the importance of a territorial defence system for South Africa.[17] The commandos were much more than a defence establishment for mainly rural white South Africa. Since the creation of a unitary state, the commandos were an important strategic reserve and system of territorial defence for the SA military. Furthermore, it is probably not common knowledge that, following the 1975 White Paper on Defence, women were integrated and accepted as members of the commandos; and from 1978, personnel from the non-white communities were also integrated into the commando system. By 1994, black and non-white personnel, including coloured and Indian members, made up an estimated 40 per cent of the defence establishment.[18] Since 1996, black representation in the commandos grew steeply, and by 2005, between 12 000 and 15 000 people from rural communities were earning an income serving in the commandos.[19]

Missing from the book is, perhaps, a deep reflection on the closure of the commando system and the strategic consequences for the SA society. From a historical perspective, the commandos were closely associated with apartheid-era domestic deployment of the SA military and the involvement in the 1980s of the SA military in law and order. Unlike the rest of the military establishment, the commandos were politically and socially unacceptable for the political elite in post-1994 South Africa.

From a bureaucratic-professional perspective, the book raises serious questions about the disbandment of a military capability with a deep-rooted collective memory that was highly trained, well equipped, and professional, and which had demonstrated a historical capacity to re-adjust and align itself with the strategic realities facing the country. The SA government lost not only a military capability but also a tool of good governance, especially in rural and local communities. From a security, defence and military perspective, the disbandment of the commandoes left South Africa vulnerable and without an area-defence establishment, and without much of a reserve force. It had left a security vacuum in many communities, especially in the rural areas where the South African Police Service (SAPS) often lacks the capacity to act. This was evident during the July 2021 civil unrest in KwaZulu-Natal, where communities had to organise themselves for self-protection.[20]

Neither government nor the military has come up with a replacement of the commandos as an area and territorial defence establishment. Area defence is a role that cannot be fulfilled by the police. The commandos had the manpower, training, and local knowledge to respond to emergencies. It is precisely the type of capabilities that cannot be replicated by the small professional and centralised forces of the so-called "post-modern militaries". This is clearly demonstrated currently with the SA military seeing itself as unprepared for domestic deployments, and domestic deployments as 'a misuse of their expertise'.[21]

One must question the writing of the book in Afrikaans, mainly due to the limitation it places on the work in terms of access and reading. At the same time, though, it is important to understand that the history of the commandos unfolded in Afrikaans and within the Afrikaner community. To write it in English might have taken away some of the nuances that are required in reflecting the history of an institution that is culturally interwoven with a particular cultural and language society. From a critical perspective, the book might have benefitted from professional language editing. Words, such as *groothoofkwartier* and the spelling of words, such as *staande maglede,* somewhat undermine the outstanding quality and flow of the narrative. In addition, readers who are familiar with the history of specific commando units and groups may be able to identify small mistakes in the history, names and structures of the different commands, groups, and units. This, however, does not detract from the general narrative and story of the history of the commandos in general.

Die Geskiedenis van die Kommando's, 1715–2003 makes a critical contribution to preserve the history of a military institution that has been the foundational element of South African defence for almost 300 years. Although much work in this field must still be done, especially in writing the histories of the various commando units, the research into the history of the commandos by Gerhard Kamffer will serve as a primary work of reference

Abel Esterhuyse
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Endnotes

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11 Kamffer, *Die Geskiedenis van die Kommando's*, 156–158.

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