

Book Review

Comrade and Commander: The Life and Times of Joe Modise

Ronnie Kasrils and Fidelis Hove (eds.)

Auckland Park: Jacana
2024, 382 pages
ISBN 978-1-4314-3451-0

Comrade and Commander: The Life and Times of Joe Modise comprises a collection of anecdotes about Joe Modise by some of his closest friends and colleagues. The book is a thorough attempt to shed light on the former Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) leader and defence minister, not only in terms of his professional accomplishments, but also in terms of what he was like as a parent, friend, partner, and colleague. A main objective of the book was to provide his daughters, who were still relatively young when Modise died in 2001, a ‘more rounded and accurate’¹ picture of him, particularly given ‘negative’² portrayals in the media.

It must be emphasised up front that this is not a critical biography; the commentary is provided by those who knew and – in most instances – clearly loved Modise. This is particularly the case for the first two thirds of the book, which cover Modise’s early life through to the end of the armed struggle in 1990. As a history of the armed struggle and the operations of the African National Congress (ANC) in exile, the stories – recounted by such ANC luminaries as Ronnie Kasrils (easily the largest individual contributor to the book), Pallo Jordan, Essop Pahad, and Jackie Sedibe (eventually Modise’s wife) – are remarkably illuminating, and add a great deal to the historical record.

That said, Modise himself comes off as somewhat sphinx-like to even those who knew him as a friend and a comrade. There are several stories that humanise him, such as the account of Modise watching Tom & Jerry cartoons with his children showing he was clearly a man who loved his family and was loved deeply by them in return. Most descriptions by his ANC colleagues – “tough but fair”, “respected”, “disciplined”, and so on – however come off as broad and banal. The reader therefore does not walk away with a great feeling of what Modise was really like on an interpersonal level. That is hard to do; not everyone lends themselves to expository rhetoric about their character from friends and family, and several contributors make the point that Modise was a quiet man who was hard to get to know. One does, however, walk away feeling there is a richness to Modise’s character that does not necessarily shine through.

The first part of the book also tends to gloss over some of the less pleasant facets of Modise’s character related to his professional responsibilities. While ANC decision-making was ostensibly collective, Modise was a man who had operational command of

MK for 25 years, with the power to order (or at least influence) the execution of perceived traitors, not to mention abuses at ANC camps in Tanzania and Angola. Jordan, always more forthcoming than his colleagues, notes that, during the internecine struggles in the 1970s and 1980s, Modise ‘unfortunately seemed to surrender to the dominant paranoiac mood of the security department’.³ It is worth asking why Modise was unwilling or unable to avoid this. MK operative, Ribbon Mosholi, is even more direct in recounting that ‘Some said he was brutal’.⁴ Raising these views is not a denigration of Modise or a criticism of his actions, but rather assistance to help the reader understand the problems and moral dilemmas he would have faced on a daily basis. More such views would have been welcomed.

The last third of the book, covering the transition and Modise’s tenure as defence minister under Mandela, provides some of the best insights into Modise’s character and decision-making, primarily because of the shift in narrators. At this point, we are introduced to characters such as Major General Ian Deetlefs, a veteran Citizen Force officer who worked closely with Modise on the creation of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) Reserves (of which he became the first chief in 1997); Brigadier General Roelf Beukes, his chief of staff; and Lieutenant General Pierre Steyn, who served as Secretary for Defence. They provide up-close insights on how Modise was able to manage, by way of carrot-and-stick, the drastic transformation of the South African military during his tenure. This comprised the inclusion of former combatants, the establishment of the civil Defence Secretariat, promotion of women officers, and creation of the Service Corps. One tends to forget today the radical changes Modise undertook during his five years, and having interviewees without a vested interest in protecting Modise’s legacy (although all were clearly fond of him individually) recount them, provides the book with added value.

Of course, one topic looms large over Modise’s ministerial tenure, namely the Strategic Defence Package (“Arms Deal”) – approved in 1998 – that saw the purchase of billions of dollars’ worth of aircraft, corvettes, and submarines. Modise’s role in the approval has long been the subject of accusations that he benefited personally from the deal. This latter point is one that multiple interviewees strongly deny, noting that Modise and his family lived in relatively modest circumstances. Those defences are well established. Steyn’s words should therefore not be taken lightly:

I experienced the interference of the Minister of Defence in the arms acquisition process first-hand. His manipulation of recommendations was often inconsistent with statutory prescripts for major equipment acquisitions ... Mr Modise engaged the military top management with an air of heavyhanded authority. This became evident in his decisions to prefer certain major acquisitions in contrast to the recommendations made by the chiefs of the armed services.⁵

Steyn and others are quick to point out that the decisions regarding procurement were the prerogative of the President and Cabinet, not those of Modise alone. His words alone however raise questions about how Modise may have shaped the process alongside his disgraced advisor, Chippy Shaik, something a more critical biography may yet bring to life.

Ultimately, assessing a book such as *Comrade and Commander* raises an interesting philosophical question: do the memories of friends and loved ones paint a truly comprehensive picture of any person? The people who love you may know and understand your flaws and weaknesses, but they may also be loath to air them to the wider world. In a nutshell, this paradox reflects the greatest weakness of the book, namely that, in seeking to protect Modise's legacy, his loved ones' stories deprived him of nuance and depth. These stories however also remind the reader of the important role Modise played in the armed struggle as well as in shaping the modern South African military.

All things considered, *Comrade and Commander: The Life and Times of Joe Modise* is a valuable read for anyone interested in the struggle, both from the standpoint of military operations and day-to-day functions of the ANC in exile, as well as the transition period. I trust that it is not the last book on Joe Modise; he deserves a closer, more critical look. The introduction of *Comrade and Commander* notes that MK veteran, Nat Serache, is working on a proper biography of Modise, which will be well received as another valuable contribution to South African history.

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Endnotes

¹ R Kasrils & F Hove (eds.), *Comrade and Commander: The Life and Times of Joe Modise* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2024), xxix.

² Kasrils & Hove (eds.), *Comrade and Commander*, 189.

³ Kasrils & Hove (eds.), *Comrade and Commander*, 149.

⁴ Kasrils & Hove (eds.), *Comrade and Commander*, 118.

⁵ Kasrils & Hove (eds.), *Comrade and Commander*, 252.