

Conscription symposium: The Politics of the Armed Struggle

(excerpted and adapted from the thesis, *Empowering Alternatives: a history of the Conscientious Objector Support Group's challenge to military service in South Africa*)

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My thesis, completed in 2007, explored the history of and the methods used by the Conscientious Objector Support Group (hereafter “the COSG”), and the impact of these nonviolent strategies on the South African government’s stance on conscription and objection. This paper focuses on the latter, the interplay of power between the COSG and the Apartheid government of that time. Two broad sources were used in my dissertation to assess the effect of this nonviolent movement for change; a study of significant changes in military legislation and documents drawn from the SANDF military archives indicating the perceived threat that conscientious objection posed to the state. The second is a more reliable source than the first as it draws on actual correspondence on these issues; often internal correspondence between various military officials, namely the Chief of the SADF (General Magnus Malan), the Chief of Staff Personnel (Lt Gen. R.A. Holtzhausen who was responsible for securing sufficient conscripts in the SADF), the two Chairmen of the Board for Religious Objectors (Justice M.T. Steyn and Justice J.W. Edeling), and the Heads of the Van Loggerenberg and the Gleeson Committees. Since these archives were only starting to be declassified at the time I was writing this dissertation, I would like to take the opportunity at this conference to share some of these documents with you, as you may not have had the chance yet to hear, in their own words, what the government was saying and writing about the anti-conscription movement. These communiqués and correspondences were written with honesty and passion, and without the veneer of political correctness that was demanded of documents destined for the general public. In this dissertation, however, only limited research of this nature has been conducted and a further, much deeper study of the military archives (as well as possible interviews with military decision-makers of the time) would yield rich results.

Given the context within which conscription was introduced there can be no question that the ruling political and military authorities exercised their power with respect to objection in the pursuit of two main aims: to ensure the continual flow of sufficient numbers of conscripts into the military; and to prevent political embarrassment in the face of the white electorate, the churches and the western world. To these two ends, the movement seems to have elicited what may be distinguished as “softer” and “harder” expressions of state power. Softer responses included meetings with churches and other organisations involved in these issues, offering concessions to objectors, the placing of informers in meetings and gatherings, press statements issuing warnings,

court orders and prolific correspondence with individuals and organisations, both local and international, often justifying the role of the military. Harder responses included predominantly legislative changes, smear campaigns (against individual objectors and against the ECC), attacks on property and bannings and detentions; for example, the banning of the ECC and the detention of some ECC members. Why, one might ask, did the government regard this movement in such a serious light?

To answer this question, let us hear from a personal communiqué written by the Chief of Staff to Chief SADF in 1981:

3. It is, however, important to inform you that this particular group is inclined towards a liberal approach, as regards the recognition of conscientious objectors, which is in principle irreconcilable with the basic viewpoint adopted by the Committee on Conscientious Objection. According to the proposals presented by Rev Robertson, the group is, inter alia, in favour of the recognition of political conscientious objection in South Africa. This category of objectors bases their resistance against military service on the doctrine that the South Africa society is fundamentally unjust and therefore morally indefensible.

4. It is consequently recommended that the SADF should not in any way compromise its position towards this group and that The Honourable The Prime Minister should, at this point in time, avoid extensive dialogue with Rev Robertson as regards the proposals involved.¹

The government's inherent fear of the anti-conscription movement was compounded when it considered with great anxiety how the movement's use of the media could contribute to the growth of a subversive, coordinated movement that had the potential, in their perception, to seriously undermine the commitment of white youth towards conscription:

It must be remembered that the entire existence of this organisation, which consists of an insignificant group of exiles, stems from the fact that there are media which publish their subversion. Consciousness of this must be created, but no unnecessary and undeserved publicity may be given to this organisation. Wide publicity has already been given to this and even on occasion a platform was given in the Dutch Reformed Church theological journal to Dr James

¹ *Hoof Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag Collection*, SANDF Documentation Centre, File HSAW/107/7/5 8.2.80, "Letter from Chief of Staff Intelligence to the Chief of the SA Defence Force entitled 'Ministerial Enquiry 16/80: Recognition of Conscientious Objectors', 14 January 1981", p 1.

Moulder to put his conscientious objection question. This has to be guarded against.²

It is interesting that similar caution had to be exercised, even with respect to the request of a peer, Judge M. T. Steyn, who in 1984 requested permission from Magnus Malan to visit some SADF institutions at the commencement of his duties as the first Chairman of the Board for Religious Objectors. General Malan's response is as follows:

Cognisance has been taken of your desire to visit a few SA Defence Force institutions to acquaint yourself with the state of mind of the religious objector, but also that such visits will rather be the exception than the rule and that your activities will normally be centred in Bloemfontein. Visits to the operational area were not at all under discussion and are also not seen as necessary for the purposes of the activities of your Board.³

In fact, all the correspondence in the military archives points to the fact that the government was severely distressed by the anti-conscription movement. In January 1981 a secret briefing was held by the Chairman of the Committee for Conscientious Objectors, and attended by twelve high-level Defence Force people (one General, three Lieutenant-Generals, two Major-Generals, one Vice-Admiral, two Rear-Admirals, one Colonel and two Commandants). At this meeting the following was proposed:⁴

- a. Separation must be made between bona fide religious objectors and politically motivated objectors.*
- b. The term "conscientious objector" must be replaced with "religious objector".*
- c. Objections must be primarily religious objections.*
- d. Selective conscientious objectors who are primarily politically motivated must be handled more firmly than in the past.*
- e. Objectors must be handled on an individual basis and not according to church affiliation...]*

² *Hoof Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag Collection*, SANDF Documentation Centre, File HSAW/107/7/5 8.2.80, "Report from Chief of SADF to the Adjunk-Minister, entitled 'DIE VERSKERPTE AANSLAG OP DIE NASIONALE DIENSPILIGSTELSEL OOR DIE BOEG VAN MORELE EN GODSDIENSTIGE OORWEGINGS' (THE INTENSIFIED ONSLAUGHT ON THE NATIONAL SYSTEM OF COMPULSORY SERVICE UNDER THE PRETEXT OF MORAL AND RELIGIOUS CONSIDERATIONS), 4 February 1980", p 5ff.

³ *Hoof Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag Collection*, SANDF Documentation Centre, File MV 61/14, Period 30.3.71 - 29.8.83, "Letter from Magnus Malan to Judge Steyn, 9 April 1984", p 1.

⁴ *Hoof Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag Collection*, SANDF Documentation Centre, File HSAW 107/7/5 Gewetensbesware 8.2.80 - 12.07.82, "Top Secret document entitled 'DEFENCE COMMAND COUNCIL: MINUTES OF THE 1/81 MEETING HELD AT 16H00 ON 15 JAN 81 IN THE CONFERENCE ROOM, COMMAND AND CONTROL CENTRE, OPS DIV, DHQ', 22 January 1981", p 12ff.

The meeting then went on to discuss the sentence that religious objectors should be given:

In this case an alternative sentence can be imposed which should, however, always serve as a deterrent... The period of non-military national compulsory service that is imposed on bona fide religious objectors must be of such a nature that it compensates for hardship and risk to life attached to military service so that abuse is discouraged. The minimum period must be at least twice as long as military service.

The Assistant Chaplain-General expressed his uneasiness at this sentence, as if he was pre-empting the dissatisfaction that was to be voiced by the objector movement. This was the response given to him:

Asst Chaplain General pointed out that the objection of the committee to the proposal of Chief SADF rested on the fact that the SADF could be accused of religious persecution. Chief SADF explained that the person is not prosecuted on the grounds of his religion, but because he is breaking the law of the land.

As conscientious objection gained momentum, the government found it increasingly irksome that objection was being led by the Churches. In a document written in 1982, it is stated that:⁵

1. The authorities are at present increasingly confronted by the churches with amongst others the question of so-called conscientious objection to national conscription. This resistance is not a unique phenomenon in the world. An alarming aspect is however that the question of conscientious objection is transformed into an instrument of political resistance to authority and that the drive behind these attempts to identify and change a so-called unjust society comes from the SA churches, the member churches of the SA Council of Churches.

Shortly after this, the Defence Amendment Act of 1983 came into effect, which distinguished between religious and other objectors and set up the Board for Religious Objection.

⁵ *Hoof Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag Collection*, SANDF Documentation Centre, File Opleiding - Gewetensbesware 2.12.80 - 22.10.80, "Secret document entitled 'DIENSPLIGWEIERING AGV GEWETENSBESWARE, VERWYSING: KD/103/1/6', 9 Feb 1982", p 1.

Let us jump seven years forward now when the climate in South Africa and in the military had shifted significantly. In 1990 a military report labelled “Secret” was sent to Lt Gen J.P.B. van Loggerenberg by Gen Major P.D. Steyn detailing the following recommendations:⁶

In the short term it is recommended that:

- a. Alternative compulsory service (in the form of community service) is expanded to accommodate all conscientious objection and not only certain categories of religious objectors.*
- b. The Department of Manpower takes full responsibility to control and administer alternative compulsory service.*
- c. The length of alternative service as well as the punishment for total refusal of conscription is brought into direct relationship with the real length of military conscription. In this respect the law must leave discretionary action to the judge, in contrast with what is the case today. A minimum period of time of two years could however be introduced...*

In the medium /long term it is recommended that:

- a. Military conscription for Whites is phased out.*
- b. A full time professional Defence Force forms the nucleus of the country's defence force and that a flexible short service system is operated as supplementary source of manpower both for part-time and full-time manpower.*

Note how these were all the recommendations for which the COSG and the ECC had campaigned over the years. It is not known what the immediate effect of this report was,

⁶ *Hoof Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag Collection*, SANDF Documentation Centre, File 374 - Gleeson Committee, “Report from Generaal Majoor P.D. Steyn (Voorsitter: Sub-Komitee oor Dienspligaangeleenthede), 30 March 1990 to Lt Gen J.P.B. van Loggerenberg, SA Lugmaghoofkwartier (Major General P.D. Steyn (Chairman: Subcommittee on Conscription Affairs) 30 March 1999 to Lt Gen J.P. van Loggerenberg, S.A. Air Force Headquarters)”, p 17.

but what is known is that the Gleeson Committee presented a progressive and hard-hitting report shortly afterwards in 1991:⁷

There was general agreement that at the least universal conscientious objection should be introduced and that some form of accommodation for selective objectors should be considered. Opinions also included the following:

- a. The SADF manpower requirements in the short term will not decrease, which act could negate the value of any solution perceived to be too lenient.*
- b. Notwithstanding the manpower requirements, forcing someone to serve against his genuine conscience, makes him more of a liability than an asset.*
- c. Limiting the discretion of the courts is not acceptable.*
- d. To be in line with the present democratic processes, the SADF should act pro-actively.*
- e. Conscientious objectors create more problems than their numbers justify. Their release, for the performance of community service outside the SADF, would be more beneficial...*

As already stated the success of legalizing conscientious objection and amending the penal provisions is dependent on ongoing actions that address the most urgent problems and perceptions relating to National Service. This programme should commence as soon as possible and the following are some of the subjects that should be included:

- a. Clarity wrt the extension of conscription to other races.*
- b. Details iro the multi-racial nature of the SADF, the expansion of the volunteer component and future plans in this regard.*
- c. A true perspective of the role of the SADF in the black townships.*

In the light of the present discussion on the shift of power and the government's last desperate attempts to cling to what remained of their authority, it is extremely interesting

⁷ *Hoof Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag Collection*, SANDF Documentation Centre, File 101/9/B, "Memorandum from Lt Gen I.R. Gleeson (Chairman Committee of Investigation) to Chief of the SA Defence Force, 30 July 1991", p 8ff.

to note that the report of the Gleeson Committee was a significant example of how the resistance and dialogue efforts of the COSG and the ECC informed State policy. This Gleeson report was never published.⁸

I hope this little taste of documents from the military archives has whetted your appetite for more research of this aspect of our history. For me, working in the field of nonviolent conflict transformation and direct action, I do believe there is a lot we can learn from how the objector movement evolved that has relevance to many challenging issues in present-day South Africa, which we see people addressing with destructive anger and violence. I sometimes also ponder with fascination on how the notion of choice, particularly providing alternative choices to conscription would have impacted our society if the movement could have been spread with all the modern technology we have today. One channel through which choice was offered was through the Conscription Advice Service (CAS), offered by volunteers who rotated turns sitting in a little office in the major cities waiting for people to drop in. Sometimes for weeks on end no one stepped through the door. It is intriguing to think what would have happened if news of this service had gone viral.

In conclusion, and at the risk of once again drawing too many causal links between the objector movement and the end of conscription, I would like to read to you a piece from Peter Moll's submission to the TRC, which Dot Cleminshaw presented in Peter's absence:

My action and that of a small group in the 1970s spawned further military resistance in the 1980s. Many churches were conscientized into adopting positions on the subject. The government was forced to respond, which it did by amending the law in 1983 to permit religious objectors to do non-military service, while raising the maximum sentence for other objectors from a repeatable two to a single period of six years. These elements of resistance to conscription in time led to the formation of the End Conscription Campaign. I believe that the war

⁸ "Representations to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Security Services re: Defence Amendment Bill, B 112-02 (GA), June 7 1992", in Andrew Warmback personal archives.

resistance movement played an important part in accelerating the collapse of apartheid.

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