

Stellenbosch Conscription Symposium: Overview Paper

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Introduction

This symposium on conscription into the South African Defence Force (SADF) is an exciting, unique and important gathering. Thanks for coming and being part of it.

The history of this event is that Christo Thesnaar and Wilhelm Verwoerd invited me to participate in a Beyers Naude Centre-hosted event last year which reflected on the responses of faith-based communities in South Africa to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). At the centre of discussions was the transcript of a re-enactment of the TRC's Faith-Based Special Hearing held in 2014, during which Pieter Bezuidenhout (who is here today) gave key input. At last year's event I met Estian Metz, who is also here today and will be presenting his research later. The issues he and I discussed resonated with my own and my students' experience of research in this field being lonely work. And so the idea was born of bringing together researchers from various parts of the country and different disciplines to share what we are working on, offer each other support and begin to get a sense of what this growing field of research looks like at the moment. In the last few weeks the boundaries of that focus area have blurred a bit, as a number of people from different backgrounds have expressed a desire to come and be part of this process. When an idea develops a life of its own like that, it needs to be respected and embraced. So here we are, embarking on something that has gathered so much energy and momentum in just a few months.

Right from the start, I would like to acknowledge the pioneering leadership and role-modelling work of both Christo and Wilhelm – in facilitating this event, in their own lives and in the broader work that they do.

I first met Christo in the very early stages of the Healing of Memories workshops in the mid-1990s. His compassionate, principled and transcendent leadership at the time and in the years since then have always moved and impressed me, and it is a privilege to be working with him again.

Wilhelm's courageous stand regarding his family history and his work in the TRC meant I heard about him long before I met him. I have been privileged to get to know him in recent years, and witness the remarkable and ground-breaking work that he and Alistair Little have developed through Beyond Walls in Northern Ireland and internationally. He brings a breadth of vision, deep insight and a level of integrity to any process, and we are privileged by his leadership and presence in this symposium.

The Beyers Naude Centre also needs to be thanked and acknowledged for their willingness to host this event – and fund the catering.

I am grateful to Christo and Wilhelm for asking me to present this introductory paper. It is both gratifying and a bit daunting. But it does seem fitting that the process should start with someone who has been primarily a witness to the history that we are focusing on, but whose witnessing role has been a long one – from involvement in the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) in Pietermaritzburg and Cape Town, to witnessing the effects of conscription on friends and family members, to focusing on conscription for my recently completed PhD in history and psychology, in the course of which I founded the Legacies of Apartheid Wars Project at Rhodes University. I am also grateful for this space as a woman, because I embody a dimension to war that is often hidden, but whose presence is needed in the work of meaning-making and healing. Finally, I am grateful to be given this space as an English-speaking South African. My family history is a rather complex one, in that my Scottish great-grandmother worked with Emily Hobhouse in supporting Boer women and children in the Brandfort concentration camp. But she married an English soldier who fought in the South African / Anglo-Boer War (and later died in the Battle of Delville Wood). Meaning I sit here today as a descendant of people caught up in systems that oppressed both Afrikaner and black people in this beautiful land, but who also knew deep suffering themselves. And so, like every other South African, my healing journey is inextricably woven through with threads that reflect the effects of generations of warfare, power struggles and violence.

But I am also a South African who witnessed Nelson Mandela become the first black President of South Africa, and who has experienced first-hand the power and significance of the 1994 elections, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the courageous leadership of thousands of people who have contributed to healing, restoration and human rights in this country.

And so, in presenting this “overview paper” I embody and seek to address not only the subject of my doctoral research. I seek also for this to be a small act of historical reparation and witness. An act of

solidarity and validation with others who are working to make sense of our history as a means to build new possibilities and more whole approaches to meaning-making.¹

As you will have gathered, this is not going to be a particularly academic opening presentation, but rather a weaving of personal and scholarly threads that are hopefully both thoughtful and rigorous. Which takes me to outlining the aims and purpose of this event.

Thinking About Purpose

As I mentioned earlier, this event has been organic and emergent rather than predetermined. But there are some key issues that need to be mentioned at the outset by way of creating a framework of intention for these two days.

The first aim of this symposium is to provide a safe space for research journeys and other ways of working with this history to be shared, supported, enriched and encouraged.

The second is to begin to get a sense of who is working in this field and in what ways. Just as conscripts' memoirs have become a whole new genre of South African literature, so too is this research a new and emerging multidisciplinary field of scholarship. It is our hope that through this event we will be able to help grow and develop each other's work. As well as to begin exploring ways in which we can expand how this work is done and what is researched.

Thirdly, this event is about embracing different parts of a story. The people in this room bring a range of perspectives, beliefs and opinions about conscription and its legacies. We represent very different parts of what I believe is a shared history. I believe our stories been told in discursive laagers and socially determined memory fields for far too long. It is time to shift these laagers and memory fields and see what bringing together different parts of a greater whole can achieve.

I personally struggle with the idea of reconciliation, because I think it has lost its meaning through vagueness and overuse, but I do like the Afrikaans word "versoening" because it contains suggestions of vulnerability and intimacy in a process of finding peace that brings me much closer to an understanding of reconciliation than the English word provides. It reminds me of theologian Miroslav Volf's definition

¹ See Weingarten, K. "Witnessing, Wonder and Hope" *Family Process* Vol.39 No.4 Winter 2000

of societies of peace being ones of “embrace” while societies of violence are ones of “exclusion”.² A key element in this event is the desire to embrace the different stories, ideas and views that are present here, as a way of broadening our understanding, insight and ability to take this field of work forward in a more reconciled way.

Another aim of this process is to make sense of the different interpretations different generations bring to this history. Some of us in this room lived through this history ourselves. We form part of a generation of Southern Africans who experienced intense violence and warfare; whichever side we fought on, whatever our political beliefs and skin colours, and whatever our views are on violence and war.

Others of us in this room are the next generation. Those who recognise the unfinished business of our past, who might in some way be trying to make meaning of their own fathers and family, and many of whom recognise the ways in which the next generation always carries many burdens after a war.

Acknowledging Pain and Silences

It is important to acknowledge that we all come to this process with our own histories and sense of woundedness. We represent many things for ourselves and each other. As Alexander Fuller says in her memoir about the conflicts in Zimbabwe:

Those of us who grow in war are like clay pots fired in an oven that is over-hot. Confusingly shaped like the rest of humanity, we nevertheless contain fatal cracks that we spend the rest of our lives itching to fill.³

Some of what each of us represent or say or believe could quite possibly be really hard to take for others in the room. It is going to require a commitment from each of us to keep breathing and listening if a raw nerve is touched or a view that is painful or uncomfortable to us is expressed. But I believe that is part of the purpose of this event. There might be assumptions about white homogeneity in public discourses in South Africa at the moment, but we are here to work with the reality that there remain deep fissures, many unresolved hurts and any number of differences of opinion amongst white South Africans. And many of them revolve around the contentious and contested issue of conscription into the army. There

² Volf, M. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996)

³ Fuller, A. *Scribbling the Cat: Travels with an African Soldier* (New York: Picador, 2004) p.250

might be differences but we are all part of a whole. It is only as we piece together these different perspectives that we grow in understanding and insight as to what that whole looks like.

If we are talking about who is in the room, we also need to talk about the silences and absences. Because the fact that people are not here physically does not mean they are completely absent. They reside in the shadows.

These include black soldiers who fought in and with the SADF in South Africa, Namibia and Angola (whose stories have been told by very few), those involved in anti-apartheid activities and military structures, the many South African citizens who were marginalised by the very history we will be discussing and reflecting on – and continue to live on the margins to this day. They also include the hundreds of thousands of white South African families whose loved ones left home to obey the government's call to military service or to fight against the apartheid system, some never to return home.

Silence is an important theme in this work. I look forward to these presentations lifting silences on some issues, and I hope we can remain conscious of the inevitable shadows and silences that this process invokes.

Why the Focus on Conscription into the SADF Now?

As mentioned earlier, documenting, researching and making meaning of the history and legacies of conscription is a growing field – on our country's bookshelves, in academia, amongst veterans and in cyberspace.

It seems to me this is a result of a few factors – and is important for several key reasons.

During the time that the compulsory military call-up was in place, conscription was always veiled in secrecy and state-enforced silences. I don't need to explain how the system worked to the people in this room. And, as has been widely acknowledged, little attention was paid to conscripts' experiences post-1994. In the minds of the majority of the public there was no difference between conscripts and those who chose to serve in the apartheid military, the police and security forces. It was only about 15 years ago that the complexities of conscripts' experiences began to emerge in the public domain, thanks to a small and disparate group of researchers, writers and publishers.

Many have reflected on the reasons for this sudden emergence of stories and issues, and I think there are two primary ones. The first is the shifts in socio-political dynamics in South Africa, with the idealism and simplistic contextual readings of the 1990s falling away and being replaced by a mixture of a more considered analysis of issues, outright disappointment for some and a growing recognition that the history of apartheid was far more nuanced than politicians had led society to believe. The second reason seems to be the fact that conscripts are aging, meaning they reaching a stage in their lives where they want to make meaning of their youth and assess the choices that they made. It is also a time when the these men's children are old enough to ask questions, and conscripts have needed to find ways to respond and explain themselves to the younger generation.

We need more and more of the untold dimensions and stories of conscription to be told. Because the multiple truths of our complex history need to be acknowledged and recorded for the future. And because there is much healing work to be done- in conscripts' own lives, in their families, in their communities and in our society

The timing of this symposium is also rather telling. Last year's events on our campuses and in the political sphere have shaken our society deeply. The role and identity of white people in South Africa is being challenged like never before. I personally think this is an exciting time to be alive in this country. Of course there is much to fear, but there is even more to hope for and reach towards – a lot like the mid-1980s when we had a president who was losing his grip and making increasingly irrational decisions. Those of us who remember those times will know that we had no concept of what the country would be like ten years later. I think the same applies to us sitting in this room now. But the future is made possible by what we do today, and I think we as white people need to do our own work in deconstructing historical understandings of race, power and identity more urgently than ever before. My hope is that this symposium will make a small contribution in that regard.

Initiating a Thematic Framework

I see part of the role of this paper as being to develop the beginnings of a thematic framework for the symposium. I am very aware that these themes relate to my particular interests and areas of work. So they are a foundation rather than being definitive. I look forward to colleagues here and elsewhere adding to them, challenging and questioning them and (above all) stretching the boundaries of this field of work.

The Issue of Choice – Then and Now

One of the most frequently repeated phrases by those who responded to their call-up is “we had no choice”. Obeying their call-up was costly for many men and their families, but in retrospect it becomes harder and harder to make sense of the intense social, political and religious pressures that were acting on this generation of men. Because, by the late 1980s hundreds, if not thousands, of conscripts were demonstrating that they did have a choice to disobey their call-up by objecting, avoiding the military or leaving the country. The price was high, and it potentially involved imprisonment or exile from one’s family and possibly one’s country.

What can we learn from this history in our current context? What are the areas of our lives and societies where South Africans in general, and white people in particular, feel they do not have a choice other than to conform? Can we draw on the history of conscription to help us look at the way social norms blind us to issues that will leave future generations shaking their heads? I would be interested to see how this group reflects on and works with this question.

The Relationship between Military Service and Manhood

The conflation of manhood with hierarchical identities, physical prowess and a propensity for violence is not unique to SADF conscripts. But these issues do play out in particular ways for conscripts in their post-army life. Sometimes due to socialisation, but (I suspect) also because of unrecognised and unresolved traumatic stress. Whatever the reason, these identity constructs are currently playing out in potentially hurtful ways in homes, workplaces and social discourse. I am aware of the valuable work that people attending this symposium have been doing in unpacking this, and look forward to learning from them about this issue.

Whiteness and Colonialism

As I have mentioned earlier, “whiteness” is a hot topic in South Africa right now. And for good reason. As is the issue of the ongoing imposition of historical colonial power. Many of us in this room have lived through a period in which we fell under British colonial rule, but have we thought enough about the

colonial nature of apartheid, and how that affects Southern Africa to this day? Can we build on the foundations of work already done on conscription to help us unpack this issue, and explore ways in which this process of unpacking can contribute to healing and a process of that which has been de-humanised in our society?

Perceptions of Threat

In my doctoral research, I highlighted masculinity, whiteness and perceptions of threat as the three discursive resources that every conscript had to negotiate in one way or another. This idea of perceptions of threat needs more unpacking than I was able to do at the time – and my hope is that our discussions here can go some way in doing that.

The perceived threats of communism and African nationalism that lay at the heart of the SADF's strategy of conscripting young men into the military led to intense indoctrination of young recruits. The ideas inculcated in white South African society continue to play out to this day in terms of how the current governing party and its leadership are perceived, relationships between white people and black people, and the way many conscripts continue to regard women and children. My sense is that we need to look more deeply at how these temporal continuities play out, and how they can be addressed.

Trauma and Resilience

Several people in this symposium will be touching on the issue of trauma and violence, which is good to see. There is no question that the violence and suffering caused by conscription has resulted in trauma for the men in uniform, as well as their families – then and now.

I have some questions and feelings of unease about how this work has been undertaken so far – including in my own work.

The first is the issue of being a victim of trauma. As has been highlighted in literature about trauma and warfare, this victimhood is paradoxical when an army trains men to be perpetrators as well. I have a lot of questions about the way in which victim-perpetrator binaries are used in current discourses, because I think they create false dichotomies and because their over-use in so many different contexts has

resulted in them losing meaning to a large extent. My hope is that we can think this through together and find some clearer ways of articulating the complexities of traumatic stress for apartheid era soldiers.

The second is how research has tended to focus on the damage that trauma has caused. I am not denying that the damage and trauma symptoms are real. But I wonder whether we have paid enough attention to the ways in which potentially traumatising experiences (whether in the army, in prison or while doing alternative service) have made conscripts stronger, more compassionate and more proactive about socio-political issues than they might otherwise have been? I have a sense there is a lot more to be said about this.

My final area of concern about current work around trauma and conscription is whether we have looked enough at the trauma that militarised, wounded and traumatised men caused at home, outside of the military space? There is plenty of anecdotal evidence from social workers, clinical psychologists and chaplains about what they have witnessed and heard in the course of their work. And I suspect that the 61 Mech Veterans Association and other who have done work around PTSD awareness-raising have some wisdom to offer on this issue. But it seems to me to be an issue that is often glossed over in ways that are not helpful. I hope we can address that here.

Narrative Reinforcement and Narrative Repair

This wording also emerges from my doctoral research. It hints at the contrasting ways in which many conscripts interpret and make meaning of their experiences. I would describe narrative reinforcement as applying to those who generally follow the argument that fighting communism was the right thing to do, and that the apartheid state's strategies at the time are justified by the current South African situation. In other words, a largely uninterrogated reinforcement of the ideologies and doctrines of the period that conscription was in place which, in its most extreme form, manifests in divisive, insulting and oppressive language and behaviour.

Narrative repair describes the kinds of shifts of which this room of people provides an indication. It is an attempt to explain the ways in which many conscripts and other white South Africans have deconstructed old ideologies, beliefs and interpretations of their context, and sought in various ways to build new narratives more consistent with the values and principles of social transformation and

healing. My sense is that the work of narrative repair is not given enough attention in South African society, and that there is important work to do in this regard.

Looking Beyond Ourselves

The final theme I would like to highlight as we move forward into others' presentations is around the question of how we can grow research and other work relating to conscription so that it avoids being "self-referential"⁴ to the exclusion of contexts and experiences other than our own.

For this reason I am particularly delighted that Marius Cornelissen is with us, because he brings wisdom and experience of having worked in other African contexts.

But I also want to highlight the work that is being done – and the ongoing need – to bring Southern Africans of all backgrounds together in making sense of this history. This includes participating in dialogues between people who would have been enemies to each other during the apartheid era, encouraging and supporting silenced stories about the struggle for liberation, and supporting work that shifts silences about the effects of apartheid era violence on communities in Namibia, Angola, Mozambique and South Africa.

This work needs to be respectful of each person involved in it, but also constantly seek to stretch boundaries in striving for inclusivity, healing and a dismantling of oppressions of all kinds.

Concluding Remarks

[Maybe talk through the programme?]

Thank you for giving me space to outline these thoughts and ideas. I look forward to hearing Wilhelm and others' reflections as we move forward into the rest of the programme.

⁴ Liebenberg J. and Hayes P. *Bush of Ghosts: Life and War in Namibia 1986-90* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2010) p.12