Remembering "Koevoet"
How South Africa Has Come To Understand Its Covert Military Operations In Namibia

Peter Vale
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map of namibia

Figure: Map of Namibia. Notice the Ovambo area in the northernmost part of the territory. The embedded map shows the South African Operational Areas in 1986.¹

introduction

When did post-apartheid South Africa begin? Was the inaugural moment in 1990, when the ruling National Party (NP) lifted its 1960 ban on the revolutionary anti-apartheid African National Congress (ANC)? Was it throughout the early 1990s (1990-1994) amidst a negotiated transition between the National Party, the party that had controlled South Africa since 1948, and the newly unbanned African National Congress?² Or was it the more formally recognized date in 1994 when Nelson Mandela won the first universal South African presidential election, becoming the first black person to do so?³ Perhaps it began several years later between 1996 and 1998 as parts of the South African public participated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), remembering the tragic history of segregation and apartheid.⁴ Unfortunately, even the TRC seems to be a fleeting memory in the minds of many South Africans with the construction of a monument⁵ to apartheid military units and the reluctance of many white officials to testify during the 1990s.

The atrocities of the National Party-led apartheid government have scarred the country's history. Security police, who sought to keep the divisions between races strictly defined, dominated apartheid-era South Africa. The police were willing to take any measures possible to ensure the submission of the black and Coloured (a racial designation that marked mixed-race people) masses in South Africa. Police presence is generally perceived as an urban phenomenon:

⁴ White National Party leaders were often the ones apologizing for crimes while the mostly black ANC led the proceedings.
⁵ The two images on the cover show the memorial to the Koevoet unit.
originating in, operating in, and patrolling the city space for crime, mischief, and upheaval. In the first years of National Party rule in South Africa, police presence played a vital role in maintaining the system of apartheid within the city-space as the nation doubled the force from 1945 to 1960. However, as the 1980s approached and the threats to apartheid began to surface in the rural areas of nearby countries, in order to maintain order, the police began to expand and migrate to these areas outside the borders of South Africa.6

Throughout the 1980s, South Africa escalated its war in the northern part of South West Africa (now Namibia), which South Africa considered its "fifth province," and the southern part of Angola against the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO).7 I will examine the intersecting causes of the South Africa-Namibia conflict, but put simply, the most explicit South African motivation to keep South West Africa and invade Angola was to maintain several buffer territories in order to prevent the spread of the perceived Communist threat. The government did not want any radical ideas at its doorstep because they would threaten the conservative political foundation of the apartheid government and encourage the ANC resistance movement.8

In the face of this dilemma in 1979, the State Security Council of the South African government developed a covert counterinsurgency unit, named Koevoet, which is Afrikaans for "crowbar." Koevoet was a paramilitary security police force that infiltrated and disrupted insurgent groups in neighboring countries. It was stationed and generally operated in Namibia.9

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No longer bound by the discipline, rules, and regulations of the city-based police forces, the white commanders and predominantly black soldiers of the security police became notorious for their violent and excessively brutal treatment of SWAPO insurgents. There was little military discipline in the rural areas of northern Namibia. At the same time, Namibian civilians often became collateral damage in this border conflict.

This thesis will contest the contemporary South African academic understanding of the Bush War in general and of the Koevoet unit in particular. This dominant narrative holds that the conflict was a result of geopolitical and ideological forces. Looking at the accounts and memories of the Bush War from mostly white South Africans uncovers an important and complicated case for historical analysis on how people in power remember and forget conflict. The South Africans were the aggressor in this conflict, attempting to claim the Namibian territory as theirs, yet they eventually lost the war. Their perspectives on the war have negotiated a tumultuous period in the country's history. South Africa lost the war in Namibia, transitioned to open elections, elected a black president, held a commission on truth and reconciliation about the atrocities of the past, and, most recently, built a monument to remember the soldiers that fought in the Border War. During the conflict in the 1980s, soldiers in the South African Defense Force (SADF) were both white and black; many of the black troops had to come to terms with fighting for a racist country that maintained a policy of apartheid separation. These dynamics create a historical problem that is ripe for investigation about how identity of white nationalists is formed in the face of past failure – both a military failure and a failure of a much-maligned racial policy. As I will argue in the final section, even after national upheaval and official reconciliation, much

10 Including the Namibian border war
11 Black soldiers composed at least 75% of the force for most of the unit's existence. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, 2/2/117. When citing the TRC report, I will first put the volume number (2), then the chapter number (2), and then the paragraph number (117). If a quote does not have a paragraph number I will just give the volume and chapter numbers and then the page number separated.
of the white South African public has forgotten the trauma of the Border War, which is why an investigation of the current historiography and memory of the conflict is necessary.

Furthermore, this thesis is about the development of a particular consciousness and historiography. Looking at mostly white South African soldiers' perspectives on the war since it ended provides a unique case for excavating the memory of an apartheid conflict in a post-apartheid era. This is not to privilege "Western" or white accounts of the war; Namibian perspectives on the conflict should not be discounted, especially since this was a conflict in which they were fighting for their independence. However, the fact that this was a fight for independence means that investigating Namibian perspectives alone, like researching Vietnamese accounts and memories of the Vietnam War, would demand its own project. Namibian accounts have had to deal with the problems of historical memory and its forgetful nature, but the narrative of liberation is often different from the one of defeat, guilt, and repentance. Utilizing predominantly South African accounts gives a sense of how this particular national identity has struggled to come to terms with a conflict that they fought during a period that is generally considered part of a stained past. A past which Archbishop Desmond Tutu referred to as "another country."12 Therefore, this text rarely takes on the perspective of Namibian soldiers. Namibian perspectives are assessed on two issues. The first set of accounts is from Namibians who were forced to fight for South Africa and are now estranged from their original home country. The second set of accounts comes from Namibian civilians who experienced the horrors of the war. These writings are used in order to provide a contrast to the way that white soldiers remember and describe the soldier-civilian interactions and atrocities.

For similar reasons, this text does not take on individual ANC accounts about the Border War or their camps in Angola. ANC officials have also sought to banish certain memories from

12 TRC Report 1/1/17
the past, but an investigation of these primary accounts would warrant its own comprehensive analysis.\textsuperscript{13} While ANC accounts on the Border War in general are substantial,\textsuperscript{14} the ANC and Koevoet did not have any substantial confrontations. Moreover, this thesis is less about the ANC's rise to power than it is about contesting a narrative, which originally said that the Bush War was fought in order to preserve South Africa's geopolitical interests, that the military and those in power sold to the white public. It then traces how that narrative has changed from a geopolitical narrative to a boosterist narrative among predominantly white South Africans. Black ANC members' present identities are not at stake in this conflict because they do not claim responsibility for the National Party's actions during apartheid, but for white soldiers and some black soldiers there was clearly a past in need of justification and explanation.

As such, the first chapter of the thesis will look at the dominant academic strains of South African literature on the Bush War.\textsuperscript{15} Both the traditional military historians and leftist scholars have argued that the causes of the conflict were rooted in the fear of communist ideology and the desire to preserve South Africa's geopolitical importance in Southern Africa. I will suggest that this preoccupation with ideological and geopolitical factors, while generally an accurate portrayal of National Party ideology and the motives of government elites, places the war room ahead of the battlefield, the soldiers, the civilians, and the victims. In so doing, it obscures the negative emotional aspects of conflict and absolves soldiers and commanders of responsibility for the gratuitous violence\textsuperscript{16} on the battlefield.

The second chapter takes up this preoccupation with geopolitics and ideology and presents personal accounts based on testimony about the violence, torture, and fear-tactics that

\textsuperscript{13} TRC Report 1/1/42

\textsuperscript{14} Particularly because the ANC maintained bases in Angola, which represented the other front in the border war

\textsuperscript{15} Generally includes both the South African-Angolan and South African-Namibia conflicts.

\textsuperscript{16} By "gratuitous violence" I mean both unnecessary and outside the realm of complete rational comprehension.
the Koevoet unit utilized in Namibia. This testimony humanizes a de-humanized conflict and that these narratives show the gruesome aspects of the Bush War. By "de-humanized," I mean that scholarly work on the conflict ignores human voices in favor of abstract ideas based on political ideology. This chapter also contests how Koevoet is generally portrayed in the current South African historiography on the Bush War. The aforementioned geopolitical narratives and leftist narratives, alike, portray Koevoet's actions as not consistent with the history of the rest of the South African Defense Force (SADF). Historians suggest that Koevoet's actions were isolated incidents and that the brutality of this counter-insurgency police-like unit was unique to the conflict in the Namibian bush.\footnote{In traditional accounts see: Cawthra, \textit{Brutal Force}, 210, Seegers 225. In the leftist literature see: Saunders, "South Africa in Namibia/Angola," 274-275.} I dispute this temporal isolation and argue that on the contrary Koevoet created a template for South African counter-insurgency and police operations even within South Africa.

The third chapter seeks an explanation for why Koevoet's violence and the brutality of later counterinsurgency-police units occurred in the ways that they did. I argue that the opacity of the border conflict created a culture and social environment that made gratuitous violence highly likely. We must be careful, however, because the social environment and political ideology are unable to explain all of Koevoet's actions in the bush. I contend that their methods and the extent of their violence shows that this conflict was not just based on ideology or even the social environment; it had a crucial individual dimension. Soldiers were either ostracized from South African society or they were local Namibians forced to fight against the SWAPO insurgents. I suggest that this isolation from their respective societies allowed soldiers to take out their aggression on the bodies of SWAPO soldiers in unnecessarily violent ways. I contend that the inability to fully explain these acts of aggression based on external conditions and factors, such
as the strategic benefits they offered or the monetary benefits that soldiers received, represents the soldiers' desire for and drug-like addiction to violence. Opacity and inexplicable aggression would follow in the unit's later manifestations.

Not until the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in the late 1990s, did the actions of the Koevoet unit and its soldiers become widely known. South Africa is distinct from many other countries marred by racism and conflict because it held a government-sponsored TRC, which allowed for collective public remembrance of and apology for apartheid violence. The apologies of officials were exchanged for amnesty in the democratic South Africa. Some scholars have written about this economy of remembrance in South Africa, but the covert operations of the Koevoet unit present an interesting case for analysis. While some members of Koevoet felt obliged to apologize for their destructive actions, documenting them in intensely remorseful TRC hearings, others defended their actions in separate forums. The TRC interviewed several white South Africans specifically about the Koevoet unit and its actions in Namibia. Notable and thorough accounts came from Eugene De Kock, a commander of the unit, Tony Weaver, a reporter for the Cape Times, Chappies Klopper, a Lieutenant in the SADF, and Sean Callaghan, a medic. Others mentioned Koevoet in passing and are occasionally cited.\(^1\) While there were black ANC soldiers interviewed throughout the TRC, the discussion of Koevoet and the Border War is minimal; relevant testimony is provided on later actions of Koevoet soldiers within the border of South Africa.\(^2\) It seems that no black Koevoet soldiers provided testimony on the unit's actions on the border at the TRC. The final TRC Report only devoted about 60 pages to South African measures in Namibia and Angola while acknowledging that the Border War

\(^{18}\) There were perhaps only twenty people that mentioned Koevoet and its operation in Namibia.

\(^{19}\) Actions that they committed during the early 1990s.
would have required a report of its own. The TRC surely fostered remorse, but it simultaneously served as a platform for many soldiers to cleanse themselves of their culpability in propping up apartheid and perpetuating this vicious conflict in Namibia.

The fourth chapter, which constitutes an epilogue of sorts, looks at the way the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, personal narratives, and memorials have remembered the Bush War and resolved this question of culpability. These venues for memory provide a glimpse of how contemporary South African society remembers the conflict on the border. I investigate the third strain of academic literature on the Bush War, boosterist personal narratives, which often draw on arguments from the traditional military historians. I argue that while the TRC forced an evaluation of the dark side of conflict, white South African society has generally banished those memories, which remain traumatic for both the victims and the perpetrators, in favor of discourse on Koevoet's effectiveness in the bush. As a synthesis, this section will analyze the intersection of memory, violence, and racial relations. I conclude by contending that this forgetting of Bush War trauma has dovetailed well with the ideological and geopolitical arguments presented in chapter one, which soldiers have used to defend their actions of the past and maintain the coherence of their identity. Excessive violence has been under-analyzed in scholarship on Koevoet and the Bush War to the extent that the SADF has not yet had to confront the agonizing reality of this history. Mournful self-reflection about experiences on the border (the TRC) is just a blip in the South African collective consciousness; other forms of self-reflection defended

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21 Memoirs, memorials, and statements
many of the actions of the past. Historians must dwell on the melancholic\textsuperscript{22} history of military violence in order to come to terms with the remnants of this cruel and racist state.

\textsuperscript{22} I use melancholic here and throughout in order to indicate the human, traumatic, sad, and violent aspects of conflict and war.
chapter one

on the border: the construction of the namibian and angolan conflicts

In 1996, the South African Defense Force (SADF) released a recruitment video for the post-apartheid South African Special Forces unit. The video began with: "Africa, a tough, largely untamed continent where only the fittest survive." Within this frame, the video emphasized the Special Forces’ ability to navigate warfare in all of Africa and in all of the continent's environments. The video displayed images of a mixed-race unit that was chosen "from thousands of applicants from all walks of life, regardless of race, creed, or political conviction." The message was that anyone could volunteer, and that because of this diverse recruiting strategy, the Special Forces were able to work and communicate with anybody in sub-Saharan Africa. It was not an unexpected message from a country and military that viewed itself as the geopolitical and military leader of sub-Saharan Africa, but the message reflected a repetition of a violent past. This chapter will explore the dominant South African historical accounts of the "Bush War" with particular reference to the Koevoet Special Forces unit in Namibia. Following the ideological and geopolitical arguments made by government and military officials during apartheid, these works often privilege the geopolitical roots of the conflict over the traumatic events and impacts of the conflict.

In general, there are three types of non-fiction scholarly works on the South Africa-Namibia conflict within the South African and Western historiography. The traditional

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24 I use "Western" here to reference the fact that there are accounts from U.S. journalists and academics on Koevoet and the border war. These works generally align with the preeminent South African literature  
25 As I explained in the introduction, I take on the South African historiography because it provides a distinct case for historical analysis. The arguments that the government used to justify the border war were later adopted in
military histories simply describe the linear progression of the conflict while situating it within geopolitical and nationalist concerns. The leftist academic accounts criticize the traditional accounts as creating false neutrality, arguing that racism, masculinity, and anti-communist ideology were all behind the "Bush War." Finally, the boosterist personal narrative-based accounts act more as memorials to the struggles of the South African soldiers than academic histories. Although the first two types take varying positions on the legitimacy and success of the conflict, they provide very similar explanations for the causes of the war. For the military historians, tactics were vital to success but intervention was about countering a political organization in SWAPO that endangered South Africa's control of its protectorate and posed an ideological threat to South Africa's racist white elite. Leftist academics overemphasize geopolitical circumstances; for them, the conflict revealed the unfortunate way in which anti-communism, which was a result of polarization during the Cold War, overdetermined politics, leading to a destructive intervention. The boosterist accounts, which are discussed in chapter four, vary substantially from the other two in that the causes of the conflict are only briefly

academic literature, so there is a sense of continuity in and progression of the South African narrative. The South African historiography is also distinct because those in power lost power and then had to cope with the memory of their clearly horrific actions; this flip in power relations made some of the soldiers reflect on both their actions and how their actions affected their victims. Such self-reflection provides an evident and historically distinct contrast with those who defend the past, yet are part of the same identity group.


acknowledged and then put at the feet of politicians; for these writers, the effectiveness and results of the unit and the Bush War are the main focus.

This chapter outlines the common arguments that the first two types of works have used to explain why South Africa intervened in Namibia, why they perpetuated the Bush War on the border of Namibia and Angola, and why they began to use the covert paramilitary unit, called Koevoet, in Ovamboland. Ovamboland was a 70-mile-wide strip of land in the most northern part of Namibia with 500,000 Namibians and was also called Ovambo or Owambo. These historical explanations of the roots of the conflict have often focused on geopolitics and how South Africa's military decisions in Southern Africa were part of the larger Cold War chessboard. This chapter then outlines the arguments that I will make in the following chapters against these geopolitical arguments. While I do not directly dispute all of the reasons that led the South African government to initiate the conflict, I do suggest that this focus on the why of conflict fundamentally lacks the human element of the South Africa-Namibia conflict. This human element is most obvious in the stories and testimonies about war's brutality and terror. While the description of brutal violence adds complexity to the South African historical narrative of the Bush War, it is often dismissed or elided into the second argument in the literature about the Bush War, which discusses how the war was carried out. This second argument suggests that the disturbing incidents during the conflict, specifically the Koevoet unit's actions, were isolated episodes of violence that occurred in a temporally specific moment in the history of the South African military. I seek to complicate this second narrative by suggesting that the Bush War was not a singular event in the South African military tradition, but instead, it inaugurated a more ruthless set of tactics, which were then integrated into common South African military tactics after their utilization of Namibia. Although this chapter previews counter-arguments to the
dominant narrative, the following chapters will elaborate on specific historical examples that complicate these two academic narratives on the Bush War.

First is a note on terminology, I use "Border War," "Bush War," and the South Africa-Namibia conflict to refer to the same historical events that occurred in Northern Namibia during the late 1970s and the 1980s. All are widespread and used throughout the South African literature, but I do acknowledge that they encode specific understandings of the conflict. "Border War" reinforces the South African point of view, which argued that there was a threat on Namibia's border with Angola even though the International Court of Justice had ruled that Namibia was not a South African protectorate in 1971. 29 "Bush War" utilizes the common description of a rural savanna area as "the bush." The reliance on a descriptor of the environment implies a rurality, which I will explain in chapter three encouraged excessive violence because it meant that white soldiers felt alienated from their South African home. Namibian accounts often use the term "liberation war," but since this text does not rely heavily on Namibian sources, it uses this term sparsely. 30 No term is completely neutral as they are all historically constructed, but given the normalization of all of these phrases, I have used them all throughout. 31

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South Africa has historically maintained a distinctive relationship with the rest of Southern Africa. In 1652, the Dutch East India Company founded the Cape Colony, which acted initially as a refueling station and later as an urban hub that served as a launching off point for exploration into the interior of Southern Africa. As they sought out more land for food in the interior part of the Southern Africa, the colonists routinely entered into clashes with the

Khoikhoi and San people, native groups in South Africa. In 1713 smallpox decimated much of the Khoi because laundry from a passing fleet had been brought to land and given to the Khoi. The settlers continued to expand the land that they controlled. By the late 18th century, the Dutch, called *trekboers*, had reached the Sneeuwberg Mountains, where the San lived. The Dutch eradicated almost the entire adult population and then enslaved the children. The last San settlement was just south of the modern border between South Africa and Namibia, and in the 1850s the settlers ventured out to hunt and shoot the "Bushmen" in the area. During the late 19th century, the colonists expanded their presence throughout the region as they discovered gold and minerals in the interior areas. This conquest of the frontier by white settlers did not stop with the establishment of a unified South Africa in 1910. In 1915 South Africa took South West Africa from the Germans at the request of the British and keep it until 1989. Throughout the 20th century, South Africa acted with this same frontierist attitude, which had inspired the colonization of native groups during the previous centuries. This thesis explores one of those frontierist projects in Namibia in the 1980s.

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In the following section, I outline the background of South Africa's ideological and geopolitical concerns with regards to Namibia. South Africa's aggressive presence in Southern Africa during apartheid was often lauded by external Western powers and internal military voices alike. The key issue for these two parties was preventing the spread of Communism and Black Nationalism. Despite a vibrant South African Communist Party (SACP), which even had a

32 Pejorative term for the San people
34 Baines, "Introduction," 2
36 Peter C.J. Vale, "The Cold War and South Africa: Repetitions and Revisions on a Prolegomenon," *Beyond the Border War*, 22.
seat in the Parliament for a brief period, the consensus among South African military historians is that South Africa was anti-communist as early as 1930.\textsuperscript{37} The emergence of the Cold War only strengthened those anti-Communist feelings as South Africa aligned with United States.\textsuperscript{38}

For the United States, other Western powers, and the Soviet bloc, the Cold War was international by nature. For the United States and its Western allies, any country could fall under the curtain of Communism, and all actions had to be taken to stop its spread. Western leaders feared that the struggle for and against World Communism ran through the Third World. These were unstable countries that could easily fall under the Soviet Union's control.\textsuperscript{39}

In 1949, United States leaders met with South African leaders and encouraged them to align anti-Communist countries in Africa. South Africa's anti-communist stance was well known as the conservative white leaders, who had established the apartheid regime just a year earlier, had ridiculed the SACP and other proponents of Communism.\textsuperscript{40} Dr. D. F. Malan, South Africa's Prime Minister, then approached Britain, France, Belgium, and the United States,\textsuperscript{41} and he proposed cooperation between all of them. He called it the African Charter. The five stated aims were "to protect [Africa] from Asian domination; to preserve it for Africans; to ensure that its development was on Western Christian lines; to keep out communism; and to make it non-militarised." While the idea of a charter seemed to encourage African unification, the targets and the stated aims of this charter made clear that Prime Minister Malan was more concerned with keeping the Soviet Union's sphere of influence out of Africa. For Western colonial powers South Africa was the most viable anti-communist ally and an anchor in this potential African Charter.

In order to achieve the aims of the charter, the South African military attended several

\textsuperscript{37} Vale, "The Cold War," 27, Seegers, 73-74.
\textsuperscript{38} Vale, "The Cold War," 27.
\textsuperscript{39} Seegers, 133-134, Vale, "The Cold War," 22.
\textsuperscript{40} Seegers, 106.
\textsuperscript{41} Although the United States was less important and had less of an interest that the other European colonial powers
conferences with colonial powers to discuss "African Defense." In 1954, South Africa's Minister of Defense would travel to Dakar, Senegal in order to discuss South Africa's contribution to the defense of Africa against liberation groups, offering war supplies but only limited manpower. South Africa had clearly aligned itself with colonial powers against African independence as the concerns of black and communist revolutionaries resonated among white South Africans during apartheid.\(^\text{42}\)

However, South Africa was not simply a pawn of colonial powers. South Africa was still determined to prevent the spread of Communism by itself. The National Party, which was the political party of the white minority in South Africa, did not need the United States’ urging in order to recognize the threat Communism posed to their hyper-conservative, racist regime. In 1950, the National Party passed the Suppression of Communism Act, banning the South African Communist Party (SACP).\(^\text{43}\) In the 1960s, Lieutenant-General C.F. Fraser, one of the leading South African military thinkers, organized several lectures on Strategic Studies at South African Defense Force (SADF) Staff College. The lectures focused on how the South African state could provide security to the Third World in the face of World Communism and revolutionary subversion.\(^\text{44}\) Echoing the writings of French military theorist Gen. Andre Beaufre, the lectures emphasized the state's ability to use any method available, from military invasion to propaganda to trade policy, in order to defeat this Communist threat; the key was making the enemy "convinced that it [was] useless to start or alternatively to continue the struggle."\(^\text{45}\) The government followed these lectures with the establishment of the State Security Council, which

\(^{42}\) Vale, "The Cold War," p. 27-28

\(^{43}\) Vale, "The Cold War," 27.

\(^{44}\) Seegers 133-134

would study and produce reports on security in the context of Cold War vulnerabilities.\textsuperscript{46} The South African government and military leaders were ideologically committed to preventing the expansion of Communism in Southern Africa.

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Not only was the military concerned with Communism, but also the white South African public was taught to fear all proponents of Communism, as well. White children were inundated with propaganda that South African society had to prevent the spread of the "red threat." At the same time, communism and racism became intertwined as this "red threat" was conflated with the "black threat." This climate of anti-Communism and the fear of the ANC led to the racialization of South African security threats. The "red threat" was easily elided into the "black threat." People would say in 1982, "Communism was coming down" from black Africa and once "whites lost control nothing would stop 'Communism.'"\textsuperscript{47} The racialization of this threat within the broader culture, however, began earlier. During the late 1960s and the 1970s, many white South African children were brought up in households that preached of the \textit{swart gevaar} ("black threat") infecting the South African society. The doctrine suggested that blacks were the security threat to the nation as a whole and they could threaten the existence of the South African state either from within or from without. Other African states seemed to threaten apartheid South Africa's status because they could harbor Communist groups without the knowledge of the South African government.\textsuperscript{48} The "black threat" at home and abroad was blurred together as the fear of

\textsuperscript{46} Seegers 133-134
\textsuperscript{48} Sean Callaghan, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 7/31/00; Potgieter, \textit{Total Onslaught}, Loc. 540.
black liberation groups from other countries was combined with the fear of the ANC subverting the government from within.49

Perhaps the best example was the way that the government depicted the African National Congress (ANC), the main revolutionary opposition group in South Africa and the political party that took power in 1994 after apartheid ended. The ANC, which was banned from 1960 to 1990 in South Africa, was depicted as an organization full of Communists. All of the ANC's allies were framed as Communist sympathizers. White children were brainwashed at a young age to believe that the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were a danger to South Africa. From childhood, Afrikaner boys were told about the "black or red danger." Schools taught these children that revolutionary groups were the real threat to South Africa's existence. These schools taught military discipline to the boys while encouraging them to enter the military service or join the police in order to fight the ANC and PAC enemies.50 In addition, the South African Police would routinely declare states of emergency in order to detain and arrest black liberationists under the guise of maintaining public order and safety. They would promote the Government Education System and denigrate any "alternative education" as "building conspiracy upon fragmentary evidence."51 The fears of Communist sympathies were perhaps not completely misplaced as the ANC did incorporate a socialist phase into their revolutionary plan and they had utilized discourse of the Socialist International when describing their political objectives. However, official South African measures were clearly rooted in ideology rather than reality as many of the ANC leaders were not associated with communists, and even an Afrikaner soldier

50 Monica Popescu, "Mirrorings: Communists, Capitalists and Voortrekkers of the Cold War," Beyond the Border War, 42-43 Klopper 5/27/99; Seegers 176.
characterized the ideology-laden rhetorical construction of the "black and red threats" as "absolute nonsense."\(^{52}\)

The association between the mostly black ANC, World Communism, other Southern African countries, and the *swart gevaar* doctrine created a climate of total vulnerability in which white South Africa feared their collective existence; South African leaders saw hostile forces all around them.\(^{53}\) White South Africans feared that the black SWAPO leaders in Namibia would "undermine the government administration [in Namibia] and eventually destroy it."\(^{54}\)

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In the face of this perceived ubiquitous opposition, the South African military and police responded with several wars across Southern Africa, including in Namibia and Angola. Fighting an opponent like Communism, which could arise in any place and at any time, meant that the South African Division Military Intelligence (DMI) prioritized combatting any instance of Communist sympathies.\(^{55}\) Out of this strategy came the determination that South Africa's best defense would be preventive defense, which required the creation of buffer zones between South African territory and territory controlled by Communist governments.\(^{56}\) Because borders were relatively porous, South Africa wanted a substantial amount of territory between its own border and a potential Communist safe-haven.\(^{57}\) The key question was whether South Africa's borders began at the South African-Namibian border or the Namibian-Angolan border.\(^{58}\) If the former was the case then South Africa controlled an entire buffer territory and simply had to protect

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\(^{52}\) Quote from: Chappies Klopper, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 5/27/99; Seegers 176.


\(^{54}\) This quote comes from Peter Stiff writing long after the war, yet he is not criticizing the view. Clearly, this perception of SWAPO remained even long after the war among these Koevoet apologists. Stiff, *The Covert War*, 16.

\(^{55}\) Seegers, 215.

\(^{56}\) Seegers, 216; Joseph Lelyveld, "Inside Namibia," SM12.


\(^{58}\) Seegers 216
Namibia. However, in the face of disputes over the area, South Africa clearly felt that Namibia was a South African province and their border extended through Namibia's borders, so they needed to protect Angola from Communist groups as well. Ultimately, in the mid-1970s South Africa would send armed raids with a substantial number of troops and policemen into Angola while maintaining armed soldiers in Namibia. Their attempt to keep the Namibian mandate would become increasingly entangled with their desire to keep Communist groups out of Angola.

South African interest in Namibia began early in South Africa's existence as a unified country. While the history of Namibia's status as a territory is complicated, I will attempt to provide an overarching narrative for how it became a Cold War interest. In 1915, South African mounted police units, led by a man named Major Trew, invaded German South West Africa, which was Namibia's name until independence in 1989, and defeated the local resistance when the German troops quickly surrendered. After the First World War, the area was granted to South Africa by the League of Nations as a mandate and it was renamed South West Africa. South Africa governed South West Africa as a "fifth province" and allowed representatives in the South African Parliament. While it remained a mandate, South Africa treated South West Africa as a province. After World War II the UN tried to gain control of the area but South Africa strongly objected, igniting an ongoing conflict between South Africa and the international body. South Africa kept the area in the face of numerous disputes with the UN and in defiance of the UN's 1969 ruling that South African occupation was illegal and the International Court of Justice's 1971 holding that the UN's ruling had to be enforced.  

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59 Unification occurred in 1910.
60 After independence in 1989, it was named "Namibia"
61 Miettinen, On the Way, 104; Vale, Keeping a Sharp Eye, p. 3; Kamongo and Bezuidenhout, Shadows in the Sand, Loc. 327-330.
The northern area of Namibia, called Ovamboland, did not face colonial intervention immediately, but South Africa was able to establish colonial authority in this area where the Germans had never been able. With South African authority established, Ovamboland would provide an important supply of migrant labor for European-based industries in the central and southern parts of South West Africa. Ovamboland would play an important economic role for South Africa, but as apartheid tightened its grip in this territory, the Ovambo people faced increased South African military intervention. When the National Party won in 1948 in South Africa, cultural, social and physical separation was imposed on South West Africa because it was considered the "fifth province." South Africa even applied their "homeland" policies to South West Africa in 1968, dividing the territory into a European area and ten African "homelands."

The application of apartheid separation would spark activism and unrest among the migrant workers throughout the 1950s and 1960s. This resistance would organize into a political movement, the Ovamboland People's Organization, in 1959. It would be renamed the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) in 1960. South African military presence in northern Namibia would begin in 1966 in response to SWAPO's establishment of a base in the area. SWAPO would struggle for years to fight for Namibian independence, but it remained relatively unsuccessful until it began to receive assistance from revolutionary groups north of the Namibia-Angola border.

In 1972 the South African government declared a state of emergency in Ovamboland because clashes were increasing between locals and military personnel. The SADF began fully

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63 Miettinen, On the Way, 105-106.
64 Miettinen, 116-117.
policing the Ovamboland area in 1973. By the mid 1970s, the SADF had created a joint operation with the South African Police (SAP) in the "Operational Zone" of Namibia. This "Operational Zone" was the area where South African military presence was active in Ovambo.

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As the 1970s progressed, the situation in Southern Africa seemingly became dire for South Africa. In 1974 there was a military coup d’état in Portugal. Angola, which was a Portuguese colony, soon became a territory without its colonial government. There was no external power to assure brutal repression in the face of revolutionary groups. Given that South Africa's functional territory extended through Namibia and to the Angolan border, this situation worried South African leaders. The possibility of Angola succumbing to Communist control was relatively high. The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) had been gaining local support in the years prior to the coup d’état. The MPLA had made clear that they were an organization that supported Communist goals. If this was not enough, the fact that they had received assistance from the Soviet Union raised alert signals for both South African and American political leaders. This joint fear between the U.S. and South Africa of the development of SWAPO bases across the border led to South Africa's entanglement into Cold War geopolitics and an international conflict. The U.S. CIA Director William Colby would say in a December hearing before the House Select Committee on Intelligence that fighting the MPLA was most important because the Soviet Union had backed them. The U.S. and South Africa would initiate

66 Seegers 210
67 Seegers 213
68 TRC Report 2/2/13, Seegers 139
69 TRC Report 2/2/11, Seegers 136
cooperation over Angola, eventually leading to U.S. support of a South African invasion in 1975.\textsuperscript{70}

At home, many revolutionary leaders inside of South Africa, including Steve Biko, the leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, had celebrated the end of Portuguese rule in the neighbor country, so the government began to fear that the wave of liberation in Southern Africa could be coming home to roost. These South African revolutionary leaders and their groups represented imminent threats to the South African government, so the government immediately arrested them for disorder under the Terrorism Act.\textsuperscript{71}

In the face of South Africa's fear, Portugal had agreed with Angolan independence groups, including the MPLA, that they would withdraw all Portuguese troops by November 11, 1975. In August 1975, however, the SADF jumped the gun and launched an entire operation, called \textit{Operation Savannah}, into Angola. The United States secretly backed this invasion with aid because they feared the Soviet-backed MPLA.\textsuperscript{72} The stated objective of the invasion was to keep the MPLA, which was also receiving assistance from Communist Cuba, away from a dam that controlled some of the water supply for South Africans and had South African workers. It was clear, however, that the United States encouraged the invasion with covert assistance because they wanted to minimize the Soviet Union's sphere of influence across Southern Africa without becoming overtly involved.\textsuperscript{73}

The parents of SADF soldiers were quick to backlash through the media against the SADF involvement. They said that the invasion violated the Defense Act of 1957, which did not authorize the use of force outside of "South Africa." South Africa in this context included

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{70} Elaine Windrich, "Savimbi's War: Illusions and Realities," \textit{Beyond the Border War} (Cape Town: Unisa Press, 2008), 195-196; Seegers 210-211
\item\textsuperscript{71} Seegers 149
\item\textsuperscript{72} TRC \textit{Report} 2/2/13; Seegers 210-211; Battersby, "In Namibia, Bitter War in Decade 3," 16.
\item\textsuperscript{73} Vale, "The Cold War," 32-35, Seegers 219-220
\end{itemize}
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Namibia but stopped at the border between the two countries. While they would eventually draw down their forces, the South African Parliament was quick to amend the Defense Act in 1976 so that they could deploy troops whenever there was a threat to the Republic in the future.  

South Africa was not just protecting its water interests by fighting the MPLA; it was protecting its ideological interests. Rather than just protecting the dam, South Africa would support the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), another Angolan independence group, but one that did not represent the same Communist threat that the MPLA did. UNITA represented the lesser of two evils as South Africa saw a Soviet and Cuban-supported MPLA gaining support in the country that directly bordered their "fifth province."

In order to justify their anti-communist and anti-black liberation ideology, South African leaders developed a theory of revolutionary conflict, called "Total Onslaught" in order to manipulate domestic perceptions into fearing the mass rule of revolutionary groups. Dovetailing well with the rhetoric of the "black threat" and the "red threat," the theory behind Total Onslaught was that Communism would attack the West through Southern Africa with a specific target on South Africa, who had previously cooperated with the West on the issue of Communism. The Soviet Union was transferring arms and ammunition to Southern African pro-Communist governments. Those states, like Angola and Mozambique, would then allow the ANC to build camps in their countries. The late 1970s had seen the emergence of Umkhonto we Sizwe training camps in Angola, and this image was then universalized as a situation that
could happen anywhere.\textsuperscript{79} Total Onslaught, outlined as a theory of revolutionary conflict in a 1971 South African White Paper, brought horrific images of the country in the midst of a worldwide struggle against Communism and black revolutionary groups. These groups would supposedly take over the political, military, and economic aspects of society. The National Party elites wanted to create the perception that the country was at war with all surrounding countries in all spheres of life.\textsuperscript{80} The government felt that the ANC, whether inside the country or in the nearby countries, was always in total revolutionary onslaught against South Africa, so it was paramount to have SADF forces in all Southern African countries.

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While the MPLA would fight UNITA and South African forces for years, they would maintain a socialist government in Angola as the conflict waged on. The situation in Angola, however, was highly relevant to the circumstances in Namibia. Not only did the MPLA clearly oppose the South African-backed UNITA, but they also supported the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), who had clashed with the SADF and SAP in Namibia for several years.\textsuperscript{81}

1974 had inaugurated a new era in Namibian history in which it became important for the SADF and South Africa to keep SWAPO out of power. SWAPO had received a huge boost from the Angolan coup. Because the Portuguese colonists were no longer in power in Angola, SWAPO could establish bases in southern Angola. These bases, which were allowed by and aided by the MPLA government in Angola, made it easy for SWAPO insurgents to cross over into Namibia while having protection and support nearby across the border. With established

\textsuperscript{79} Seegers, 175.
\textsuperscript{80} Seegers, 186, Craig, "'Total Justification,'" 58-59.
\textsuperscript{81} Seegers 215
bases in southern Angola they were also able to recruit thousands of soldiers among the local northern Namibian and southern Angolan population.82

The objective for South Africa was now to keep SWAPO out of power in Namibia, especially since they had become aligned with the Soviet-backed MPLA. During the late 1970s, South Africa, Namibians, and the United Nations had negotiations about Namibian independence, but SWAPO's status remained a key sticking point for South Africa. They did not want this Communist revolutionary group in any position of power. At the same time, SWAPO was expanding because they were easily working and recruiting on both sides of the border.83

In the late 1970s, the SADF would end up launching several attacks against SWAPO groups in northern Namibia, killing hundreds of people. However, SWAPO's expansion meant they had so much support in the area that the SADF could not wipe them out. Preventive defense was becoming more important to the South African officials as the border area seemed more and more threatening. In 1978, the SADF committed to an "offensive defense strategy," which emphasized attacking SWAPO camps in Namibia and Angola before they had attacked or threatened SADF bases. The SADF wanted to preempt any further expansion of the Communist revolutionary group, so they attacked first.84

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Here we see that as the conflict grew, the geopolitical interests in Southern Africa became more important. Anti-black and anti-Communist sentiment had come together to construct a unified, imposing threat to South Africa in the minds of the white population; this threat could jeopardize the National Party's existence and control over the region.85 For the

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82 TRC Report, 2/2/81; Seegers 216; Battersby "In Namibia, Bitter War in Decade 3," 16.
83 Seegers 223-224; Craig, "Total Justification," 67-68
84 Seegers 223-224.
85 Popescu, "Mirrorings," 43-44.
United States and the Soviet Union these conflicts were part of the larger geopolitics of the Cold War. The United States perceived civil wars, which could lead to the expansion of Communism and the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. The Soviet Union saw in Angola an independent socialist government facing foreign aggression and in need of assistance.\textsuperscript{86} Based on Western and South African historical accounts of these conflicts, the two countries were simply part of the larger Cold War chessboard for both powers.

Despite the assistance from the United States, there was a big hole in the South African defense on the border. South Africa's Namibian defense was too weak throughout Ovamboland and northern Namibia. SWAPO was recruiting numerous soldiers who could easily navigate the terrain.\textsuperscript{87} The SADF and SAP had not had much experience in developing their own counter-insurgency operations, which was what this conflict required since SWAPO's guerrilla tactics resembled those of an insurgent group. The SAP had tried training units on three-month rotations, and the SADF had tried expanding its forces and training counter-insurgent units separately, but they were struggling to create a viable solution.\textsuperscript{88} In order to combat the SWAPO groups, the Security Branch of the South African government wanted to bring together the SADF and SAP soldiers into a single counter-insurgency unit. They were never able to create this group; so instead, the Security Branch launched a covert operation, which was named Operation K. The operation was supposed to provide intelligence to the SADF. They would track, capture, and interrogate their SWAPO opponents. The unit began on January 11, 1979, and the members named it \textit{Koevoet}, which means "crowbar" in Afrikaans.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{87} Seegers 225.
\textsuperscript{88} TRC Report, 2/2/74; Seegers 137-139.
\textsuperscript{89} Stiff, \textit{The Covert War}, 53-54; Seegers 225.
Historians have argued that Koevoet began determining all counter-insurgency efforts in northern Namibia. This was largely because of its demographic. The supervisors were often whites commanders who had been in the SAP or SADF. Among the soldiers, however, 90 percent of the troops were black and recruited in Namibia, and the others were SWAPO insurgents who had been tortured and forced to join Koevoet. These turned insurgents were vital to information gathering and navigation of the terrain.\(^{90}\)

However, Koevoet did not evolve into simply an information-gathering unit. Based on testimony and 1980s newspapers, Koevoet was characterized as brutal compared to other SADF units. This was an information-gathering unit that gathered significant sensitive information through arrests, interrogations, and patrols. Koevoet was incredibly violent towards their prisoners and enemies and hostile towards the local civilian population. They did not care how they obtained information or killed their enemies; all that mattered was that the task was completed.\(^{91}\)

The question then arises, how did this information-gathering unit turn so brutal, especially when Lieutenant-General Pop Fraser had been emphasizing lowering the amount of violent incidents since the 1960s in order to maintain the image of SADF units?\(^{92}\) While the SADF designated Koevoet as an intelligence unit, the lack of SADF communication with the soldiers and the geographical landscape of Ovamboland made transferring this information difficult. They were deep in the "bush" of northern Namibia, so getting sensitive information back to combat units in a timely matter was difficult. The group petitioned for and was granted

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\(^{90}\) Seegers 225; Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, 194-196.


\(^{92}\) Seegers 221.
combat capabilities, which allowed them to carry out search-and-destroy missions. If they began tracking SWAPO soldiers who they knew had information on SWAPO activities, they could follow them and capture them, rather than alerting the SADF to track the insurgents down. South Africa and Koevoet had also adopted the idea of "hot pursuit" from the United States. Hot pursuit allowed Koevoet to track insurgents across country borders, which violated terms of sovereignty.

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Koevoet seemed to fill the hole in the SADF's defense in northern Namibia as this force struck fear into the SWAPO insurgents and the local population. The unit accounted for less than 10 percent of the security forces in the "Operational Area" but for 70-80 percent of SWAPO deaths and captures. New mine resistant trucks with off-road capability, called Casspirs, were created specifically for Koevoet and then adopted more widely. Koevoet was quietly and efficiently achieving a lot of the goals that the SADF wanted, but at the same time this was a Vietnam-like guerrilla conflict in which the end game was perhaps endlessly elusive.

Both traditional and leftist arguments about the conflict have often framed it in the aforementioned geopolitical terms. They have provided the background here behind the Cold War interests in southern Africa, and they have explained that Koevoet was simply a pawn on this larger Cold War chessboard, which demanded global alliances between ideologically like-minded countries. With Soviet influence growing throughout Southern Africa, scholars suggest that South Africa was drawn into the Cold War based on their political ideology, and they say that their conflict in Namibia became integrated into the larger Cold War conflict. South African

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93 TRC Report, 2/2/118, Seegers 225.
94 Vale, Keeping a Sharp Eye, 58.
95 Seegers 225-226.
historiography has suggested that Operation K was one piece of the aforementioned Cold War puzzle to fight Communism.97

Annette Seegers is the most explicit traditional military historian on this issue of geopolitics and the Bush War. She suggests that the targeted operations of Operation K served an even larger geopolitical strategic purpose for South Africa. She says that the operation freed up the SADF so that most of the military could focus on the Angolan side of the conflict instead of tracking SWAPO insurgents throughout northern Namibia. The SADF and the United States were concerned with their seven military operations in southern Angola, especially because the MPLA was getting support from both Cuba and the Soviet Union. From 1978 to 1984, the seven SADF operations into Angola were Sceptic (June 1980); Protea (August 1981); Daisy (November 1981); Super (March 1982); Mebos (July-August 1982); Phoenix (February-April 1983); and Askari (December 1983). Seegers argues that Koevoet provided a stopgap measure for the conflict in Namibia, which allowed South Africa to pivot towards this more pressing geopolitical concern (at least in the context of its relationship with the United States) in Angola.98

The South African government itself made several similar arguments in defense of the Bush War during the conflict. These arguments focused on South Africa's importance to the global economy, especially given that Communist expansion was disrupting certain trade routes. They argued that the Suez Canal crisis in 1967 signaled the Communist desire to intercept the oil supply around the Cape if the country were to fall to revolutionary groups. South Africa

98 Seegers 226
suggested that the cape provided a crucial shipping lane between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. 99

Monica Popescu and Gary Baines are the most visible scholars on the left that express a similar obsession with the geopolitical factors and political ideology that caused the Border War. Although they are negative about the legitimacy of this conflict and Cold War ideology in general, they both agree that Cold War relations, ideology, and rhetoric played a vital role in motivating conflict in Southern Africa. For Baines, the myth of "Total Onslaught" justified the South African intervention, and for Popescu, the Cold War binary of East versus West structured the entire conflict. 100

These perspectives from both the traditionalists and the left are certainly not inaccurate, yet they analyze the conflict in strictly strategic terms, prioritizing the historical importance of the larger geopolitical goals and causes of the conflict over the material actions of the specific units that were involved in the conflict.

Scholars have provided these explanations for the emergence of Koevoet as a unit in geopolitical terms. The narrative often stops once scholars provide the geopolitical reasons for invading and mention Koevoet's "reputation as a most brutal unit." 101 If the narrative does continue, the group's efficiency and effectiveness is often placed alongside short anecdotes of Koevoet's brutality, as if the brutality was simply an unfortunate byproduct of the unit's unmatched efficiency. The discourse of efficiency and the emphasis on anti-communist military ideology are two sides of the same coin. Embracing the unit's effectiveness accepts that there was a unique strategic goal for this unit, which was to improve South Africa's situation on the

99 Seegers 203-204
100 Baines, "South Africa's Vietnam?"; Popescu, "Mirrorings."
border. At the same time, the traditional military histories frame this situation on the border and "South Africa's intelligence needs...within the global anti-Communist paradigm of the Cold War." Such an explanation seems misguided. This geopolitical explanation obscures what happened once Koevoet soldiers intervened in the conflict. Similar to the South African government during the 1980s, this account hides what happened on the ground in Namibia on a daily basis.

To assume that much of this conflict was driven by ideology and geopolitical interests conceals how the soldiers acted, how their superiors treated them, how they treated the enemy, how the media and government portrayed the conflict, and how the soldiers reacted to their experiences during the conflict. The specific dynamics of a conflict on the ground are rarely determined by ideology alone, and to suggest as much or to portray it as the main driver of conflict de-humanizes the conflict; it removes it from its very real setting; it abstracts it to a point that the brutality of war is erased and the negative emotional dimension is ignored. The following chapters of this thesis will attempt to reclaim the human element of such a conflict.

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Outside of geopolitical descriptions, in more elaborate accounts, the traditional military and the leftist historians portray Operation K as an anomaly. The events that led to and followed Operation K are first described, as above, and then, often in a separate section, it is suggested that Operation K was distinct from the rest of the conflict and that the brutality and torture of the conflict was unique to this one seemingly isolated unit. Although torture had often occurred previously and would occur in other units in South Africa, both types of Border War scholars

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102 O'Brien, *The South African Intelligence Services*, 8. For this narrative with discourse on Koevoet's efficiency based within the frame of the Cold War see: O'Brien, 104-107; Seegers, 73-76 and 224-226
routinely tie "atrocities," terror campaigns, and "rampant' police" only to the expansion of Koevoet.\textsuperscript{104} The backlash against these atrocities in Namibia and in South Africa is briefly mentioned, but then many scholars move on to discuss Namibian independence and the other theatres of conflict in the Bush War. As I will explain in the second chapter, this depiction is also misguided. Koevoet's ruthlessness established a template for counterinsurgency operations in South Africa. The description of a temporally isolated Koevoet disavows the violence that would follow in South Africa and other locations. It places temporal brackets on the gratuitous violence of Koevoet. However, the brutal tactics, which I will describe when I explain the human part of the conflict, were the norm and the SADF borrowed them regularly in other contexts.

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Much of this chapter has attempted to explain the arguments made by military and leftist historians and South African government officials about the conflict in Namibia and Operation K. I have demonstrated that many of these arguments placed the geopolitics of the Cold War front and center. We see the entire Namibian conflict justified and legitimized based on geopolitical concerns and the fears of the Soviet Union, Communism, and the "black threat." Scholars justify Operation K as an operation that served significant geopolitical interests. This has obfuscated the social environment and specific events of the conflict, particularly the actions of the Koevoet unit. In addition, we also see that Operation K is distinguished from other operations as uniquely brutal. As soldiers and officers began to testify during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the late 1990s, it became clear that this brutality had been the template for other counter-insurgency operations. The tactics became prevalent in conflict zones far away from Ovamboland. The following chapters will illustrate the human side of the Bush War while suggesting that the excessively violent counter-insurgency operations did not stop at

\textsuperscript{104} Cawthra, \textit{Brutal Force}, 210.
Koevoet but were carried over into South African policing operations, such as the Vlakplaas "death squads"; while Operation K ushered in an era of brutality in counter-insurgency, it did not encompass it.
chapter two

the excesses of violence

*If the victim were able to report on her painful and humiliating experience in a clear manner, with all the data arranged in a consistent order, this very quality would make us suspicious of its truth.*

- Slavoj Zizek, *Violence*, Picador Press, p. 4

The accounts of the Namibia-South Africa conflict provided in the following chapter are disparate and often fail to conform to a perfect chronology because, as Zizek's quote suggests, the retelling of any traumatic experience is naturally disjointed. For it to be otherwise would make us suspicious. While it lacks this single unified historical narrative that would make the history of Koevoet easy to digest, this chapter attempts to link the various testimonies of soldiers together under common experiences. It is composed of a set of diverse accounts pieced together in order to reclaim the violence of the Border War, yet it will also attempt to avoid the dispassionate recitation and analysis that marks many accounts of the Border War. The primary accounts of the Border War cited here provide a difficult dilemma for historians. Many of the personal accounts came long after the South Africa-Namibia conflict ended and Koevoet was disbanded. Some of these were given during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where soldiers were seeking amnesty in return for their testimony. Other accounts came from journalists who were under intense scrutiny from the South African Defense Force and government. In this chapter, I argue that the history of Koevoet and the Bush War must include an analysis of its violence, its tactics, and its culture. The stories presented here provide a history
of the human experience in conflict. They disrupt the ideology-based narratives as they look at
the individual rather than macro-political level of conflict.

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Beginning in 1982 and 1983, information and important details began to leak out of
Namibia to Western news sources about the ongoing guerrilla war occurring on the ground in
Namibia. South African presence in Namibia was an open secret, but the extent of their
occupation and the day-to-day life in the conflict was not as clear. Terry Waite, an assistant to
the archbishop of Canterbury, held a news conference in 1983 in which he stated that SADF
members had dressed up as SWAPO insurgents and terrorized the local populations,
characteristics that would soon become directly associated with Koevoet. As the Anglican
Church of Canterbury was on a ten-day mission in Namibia, members of the SADF had leaked
information that they would occasionally dress as SWAPO agents and then patrol and intimidate
local civilians; their tactics ranged from beating to killing the civilians. This leak had exposed
some of the tactics of Koevoet, but it would not stop the operation.

Dressing in SWAPO clothing was a common tactic of Koevoet, which they utilized to
wreak havoc on the civilian population. Koevoet soldiers would occasionally go into
Ovamboland towns in SWAPO uniforms, and then approach children and coerce them into
informing against their parents. Exploiting the naïveté of these children, they paid them money to
find out whether their parents were involved in SWAPO or if they were helping SWAPO with
supplies or housing.

In 1983, Jonas Paulus was one of the few men in Koevoet to receive a severe punishment
for his actions against civilians in Namibia. Paulus was a black soldier, who Koevoet had

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105 Callaghan 7/31/00
recruited in northern Namibia. On January 2, 1983, he and a fellow soldier had a night "on the rampage," in which they dressed in SWAPO uniforms, went into Ovamboland villages, and terrorized several civilians.\(^{108}\) Officially, the soldiers were off-duty but that did not prevent them from entering local villages and committing these horrible acts of violence against the civilians in order to both terrorize the people that assisted SWAPO soldiers and discredit their opponent by linking them to local terror (Paulus and his comrade were wearing SWAPO uniforms).\(^{109}\)

Following the incident, the Namibian court charged Paulus and the other soldier with eleven counts of murder, rape, attempted murder, and robbery. While his comrade was sentenced to 12 years of prison, Paulus was sentenced to death by the Windhoek Supreme Court on December 7, 1983 and later executed at the age of 23. In 1983, he was the first member of the SADF to receive the death penalty since the Bush War had begun in 1966.\(^{110}\) This seems to be an anomaly within the set of torture cases that were prosecuted in Namibian courts, but part of this severe punishment could have been that Paulus was black while other soldiers who were accused of similar civilian terror were white. The Koevoet commanders were perhaps more reluctant to protect Paulus.

For similar atrocities, punishment was often much less severe than in the case of Paulus. Courts conceded to the SADF forces in most cases involving Koevoet soldiers, giving them only minor punishments for their crimes while protecting the Defense Force's image. Two soldiers


were caught for roasting a man on a spit, but they were only fined R40\textsuperscript{111} because the court failed to find sufficient evidence to implicate the men any further.\textsuperscript{112} Civilian killing distinguished Koevoet from normal military units, and the information leaking out in the early 1980s about some of these civilian atrocities began to form Koevoet's negative image in Ovamboland and even occasionally in South Africa and the United States.\textsuperscript{113}

Civilian murders, like the ones by Paulus and of this man on a spit, were certainly a defining aspect of Koevoet operations, which made the unit so maligned by the media and the TRC after apartheid ended. However, Koevoet was supposed to carry out military operations, and some of their most disturbing acts came as they were interacting with their SWAPO enemies. While designated as an intelligence unit, Koevoet had quickly morphed into a unit that carried out missions to capture the SWAPO insurgents that they were tracking. Whenever they picked up a SWAPO insurgent, they would follow him for several miles and then try to capture or kill him.\textsuperscript{114}

In 1983, Koevoet was tracking a SWAPO soldier; they had followed this soldier into a \textit{kraal}, or "small hut" in Afrikaans, and the Koevoet Commander of the excursion, John Deegan, then ordered a Casspir, a large truck, to drive right through the hut. As the truck drove over the hut, the other Koevoet soldiers opened fire on the demolished hut. Deegan then approached the insurgent as the designated medic was attending to the man; because Koevoet was an information-gathering unit, they were supposed to be more interested in what information they could obtain than in the number of SWAPO deaths that they could accumulate. In the SWAPO soldier's waning moments of life, Deegan began harshly interrogating him about SWAPO

\textsuperscript{111} South African currency is the rand, which varied from being worth slightly more than the US dollar to only 0.5 of a dollar throughout the 1980s, see: https://www.resbank.co.za
\textsuperscript{112} Cowell, "On the Namibia Front," A2.
\textsuperscript{113} See New York Times and Globe and Mail articles cited throughout.
\textsuperscript{114} Callaghan 7/31/00
weapons stashes and other leads that might help in tracking other insurgents. He asked where the man's pistol had come from and where other SWAPO soldiers were located, yet the injured man never gave Deegan the answer he desired, so Deegan shot the man directly in the head with the medic still tending to him.\textsuperscript{115}

Testimony on this event came from the medic in this story, yet his comments on the medic's role in the area are perhaps revealing about the overall character of the unit. Clearly their job of tending to enemies was not highly valued by the soldiers around them. At the same time, medics were required to carry a weapon with the South African Police and the SADF units. Work in combat was surprisingly sparse as medics rarely had to use their medical equipment because there were not many victims that they had to take care of given that people like Deegan did not have much sympathy for enemy combatants.\textsuperscript{116}

Interactions like this one were not substantially different from many of the other search and destroy missions that Koevoet carried out. It was emblematic of the entire culture that Koevoet had developed in the Namibian environment. They operated with this unforgiving brutality in every interaction with SWAPO; there was no letting up, and the soldiers became numb to the gratuitous acts of violence, as these executions became "just another day on the job."\textsuperscript{117} In the first three years of Koevoet's existence, they had captured (not including people killed in conflict) eighty-six members of SWAPO Intelligence Services. The officials immediately burned the files and records that they had compiled on these SWAPO insurgents in order to destroy all footmarks of the Koevoet unit in Namibia. The information on these captured

\textsuperscript{115} Callaghan 7/31/00  
\textsuperscript{116} Callaghan 7/31/00  
\textsuperscript{117} Callaghan 7/31/00
insurgents only came out after apartheid ended during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission when Colonel Eugene De Kock testified about Koevoet.\textsuperscript{118}

None of the eighty-six captured SWAPO members appeared in court or received a hearing from officials. Once Koevoet captured SWAPO insurgents, some were initially reported as killed in action, even if they were not dead, like the man that Deegan interrogated. For a week or more, the Koevoet team would then interrogate most of these men, if they had not already killed them, about arms caches and the locations and plans of other SWAPO units. This information could lead to other search and destroy missions. At the end of the week, these captives were then murdered or "disappeared." Seventy-eight of the eighty-six soldiers disappeared, often one by one, and nothing was heard or discovered beyond the reports of "killed in action" if the media asked; there was no record of how they died.\textsuperscript{119} After killing a captive, Koevoet would then bury them in unmarked graves in the middle of Ovamboland.\textsuperscript{120} Some of the captives, after surrendering information, ended up working as askaris, which were local soldiers who fought for South Africa and were often turned as a result of torture.\textsuperscript{121} "Askari" had historically been the name for turned soldiers. Since the German occupation of South West Africa, askaris were locals who fought for the colonizing power against the other local groups.\textsuperscript{122} "Psychologically and socially divorced from their communities of origin," Stephen Ellis, a frequent writer on the Border War, states that askaris were "well-suited to the grisliest acts of war" because they had no place to return.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{118}De Kock 9/29/98
\textsuperscript{119}De Kock 9/29/98
\textsuperscript{121}De Kock 9/29/98
\textsuperscript{122}Eugene De Kock, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 7/29/98.
\textsuperscript{123}O'Brien, \textit{The South African Intelligence Services}, 106.
Much of the information on "disappeared" soldiers did not come out until the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s. The Commission confirmed the suspicion that most of the "disappeared" soldiers were brutally murdered. Eugene De Kock, one of the commanders of Koevoet, even admitted in his testimony that he shot four or five "disappeared" people. The intent was that these soldiers had to be eliminated so that no one could find their bodies in Ovamboland.124 Burying these bodies in unmarked graves was part of a collective forgetting, which I will discuss in chapters three and four, that would persist until the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

There was an odd disjuncture between this desire to keep murdered soldiers out of sight and the simultaneous desire to intimidate the local population, SWAPO sympathizers, and soldiers. One of the unit's most brutal tactics to use against SWAPO soldiers was to take the corpses of insurgents who were killed in action and tie them to the bumpers and mudguards of Casspirs. Casspirs were the heavy-duty, yet agile, vehicles that the SADF developed specifically for navigating in Ovamboland.125 The dead bodies were dragged through Ovamboland for the locals to see. Recorded accounts said that thirty SWAPO bodies had been tied to bumpers, and the driving ripped those bodies to pieces over a span of several days. Bodies remained attached for three to four days. The message was supposed to be that this could be you if you joined or even assisted SWAPO. Koevoet wanted to intimidate, but there was quite a perversion to ripping the bodies of these soldiers to pieces.126 As the next chapter will discuss, the grotesqueness of this practice perhaps suggests that individuals were using these bodies as more than simply tools for intimidation.

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124 De Kock 9/29/98
125 Kamongo, Shadows in the Sand, Loc. 1420, Stiff, The Covert War, 74-82.
126 Callaghan 7/31/00, Kamongo, Shadows in the Sand, Loc. 2175.
Clearly Koevoet was taking care of their opponents in various ways, from disposing of them in the middle of Ovambo to dragging their mangled bodies through the wilderness of Namibia. By 1982 and 1983, the sentiment among military officers was that the Koevoet unit had crippled the SWAPO forces, as some estimates suggested that they were killing 1,500 per year on average and that Koevoet was only losing troops in the low 100s in Namibia. In late 1983, media estimates said that Koevoet had killed up to 82 percent of the dead SWAPO soldiers in the Namibian war. Another estimate said that 700 insurgents were killed in 1983.

Despite the feeling among the government and some in the media that Koevoet had turned the tide of the conflict in the region, a U.S. journalist remarked that this was a struggle for SWAPO in which "survival and victory [were] virtually synonymous. And SWAPO had survived."

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The traumatic kernel for the Koevoet soldier of their tactics was not that they captured and murdered numerous soldiers and killed many civilians. These actions had been normalized to the point that the soldiers testified that they became numb to the violence, so the traumatic aspect of murder was accepted and then forgotten. However, soldiers regularly confronted the blistered bodies of their tortured prisoners while the murdered soldiers remained hidden in mass graves. Soldiers gave the most vivid accounts of the torture tactics because the prisoners' bodies were a constant visible reminder of the unit's brutality, which they could not force out of sight. When bodies initially "disappeared," they were not eliminated as "disappear" implies;

127 Lelyveld, "Inside Namibia: Journey through South Africa's Disputed Territory", SM12
130 Lelyveld, "Inside Namibia: Journey through South Africa's Disputed Territory," SM12
131 Callaghan 7/31/00
132 Explained in this subsection
insurgents faced cruel torture at the hands of the Koevoet soldiers. The events described in the previous section reveal a form of battlefield torture, but this torture became even more severe when the soldiers were not in conflict but were watching over their captives.

The base from which Koevoet operated was built far away from the rest of the SADF base. Within this separate base, they would hold their detainees, whom they would attempt to torture for information. Detainees, though, were not in police cells; they were in a wooden hut structure with a cement floor, and there was no sense of privacy for any individual prisoner. These prisoners would have to lie on the cement ground, chained together with the other prisoners. They often had their hands cuffed and bags over their heads, which would prevent an escape from this makeshift prison.133

Because many of the soldiers who were captured were not initially declared as killed in action, Koevoet soldiers brought these SWAPO men to their base as captives. Koevoet soldiers would either torture these captives until they revealed information and were willing to become a Koevoet turned soldier or until a commander gave the order to kill them. For those who they did initially report as killed in action, they intended to eventually kill them no matter what. However, they detained many of these men for five to six months. Soldier testimony described these long-term prisoners as blue in the face because they had to remain in the horrible conditions of the prison for so long.134

It was how they extracted information from these prisoners that provided the most human, and yet at the same time dehumanizing, picture of the Namibian conflict. Perhaps the most striking example of this dehumanizing treatment was that of a civilian man, who ended up having no SWAPO connection. This man was suspected of being a SWAPO collaborator, and

133 De Kock 9/29/98
134 De Kock 9/29/98, Callaghan 7/31/00
because Koevoet could not release information about their prisoners, they were unable to confirm his claims to innocence.\footnote{Callaghan 7/31/00}

While in prison, the South African soldiers subdued this man and then poured boiling water over him. The boiling water was targeted at his chest and genital area. The genitals were often the targets for torture, and this fact represented Koevoet's hyper-masculine perversion; the wounding of the genitals was seen as the way to dehumanize a man or a soldier, and eliminate his dignity and willingness to withhold information.\footnote{Callaghan 7/31/00} The boiling water would burn and blister the flesh, resulting in a lasting and horrible punishment in one of the most sensitive areas. Not only did the skin blister, but also it exposed raw flesh within the broken blisters. One of the white Koevoet members, who testified at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, remembered seeing the blistering of pink flesh on these prisoners' black bodies, which was a particularly gruesome image that stuck with him. The torture process was traumatic for even the observers.\footnote{Callaghan 7/31/00} If these images caused an observer such terrible internal pain, one can only imagine how traumatic this event was for the Namibian men.

Koevoet used a wide range of techniques to torture their prisoners. One SWAPO soldier was interrogated and then tortured with electric shocks, which the observers described as causing "grievous bodily harm." The soldiers ultimately shocked the man until he died. After the soldiers tortured the prisoners, they would order the medics to go to the prisoners and attend to them.\footnote{Callaghan 7/31/00}

Medical attention, though, was marginalized in the Koevoet unit. After the unit medics attended to the patients in the makeshift prison cells, the commanders ordered that all information and medical records were to remain secret within the unit. If the medics were unable
to attend to the wounds or conditions of the prisoners, the unit would consult doctors for help, but the prisoners were never registered at the local hospital.\textsuperscript{139} Area medical treatment failed to serve all of the needs of the conflict zone, yet medics were unable to receive any more external assistance. In 1983 the Red Cross referred an Angolan woman with breast cancer to a military paramedic station that was just 50 km north of the Namibian-Angolan border. They suggested that she receive transportation to South Africa so that she could receive treatment there. While the Koevoet medical staff had accepted the patient, the commander of the military unit swiftly stepped in and barred further treatment because such assistance would recognize the South African military presence in the region.\textsuperscript{140}

Despite the minor medical assistance, there was generally a disregard for the prisoners' health. They utilized all possible methods to extract information. Koevoet did not care whether their suspects died from the torture they faced.\textsuperscript{141} After enduring captivity within the makeshift Koevoet prison cells, prisoners still faced the prospect of death. The Commanders could eventually decide whether the prisoner "had to go," which was also referred to as having "to be taken for a drive." Both of these phrases were code for ordering the soldiers to execute the tortured prisoners, but in a manner that would go unnoticed.\textsuperscript{142}

It would be incorrect to suggest that torture tactics were completely unique to the Koevoet unit. The TRC found that in South Africa from 1976 to 1982, there was an increase in "illegal methods of policing, the unjustified use of deadly force, and the assault and torture of suspects and detainees, resulting in the deaths of and severe injuries to large numbers of people,"

\textsuperscript{139} Callaghan 7/31/00
\textsuperscript{140} Callaghan 7/31/00.
\textsuperscript{141} Belligan 11/17/97.
\textsuperscript{142} Eugene De Kock, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 6/7/99.
which included the murder of Steve Biko among other revolutionary leaders. These tactics occurred elsewhere, yet in the Koevoet reports above, there seemed to be a larger focus on creating grievous bodily harm to the prisoner. Perhaps this is because we have more testimony from the perpetrators about the events in Namibia because the police refused to admit the role that they played in the deaths of Biko and others during the TRC hearings. At the same time, Koevoet was still distinct from police units in South Africa, which existed at the same time, because Koevoet represented the merging of this urban police brutality with counter-insurgency operations. Based on Koevoet's role as an intelligence group, the soldiers were supposed to extract information. This desire for intelligence may have fueled the desire to create bodily harm to the prisoner without killing him. If Koevoet could keep their prisoners alive, they might have eventually extracted vital information from them. Policemen in South Africa seemed more concerned with eliminating revolutionary leaders.

Even the top commanders back in Pretoria had a hand in this cruelty. General Hans Dreyer would often give these orders to execute the prisoners. General Dreyer was a former security head in South Africa's Natal province, situated along the eastern coast of South Africa. In 1978, the SADF and SAP had begun to have secret conversation about creating a new intelligence branch in Namibia. The job of this group would be to hunt and kill SWAPO guerrillas in northern Namibia while gathering information about the enemy. Dreyer participated in these conversations and would move to the SADF base in Oshakati, a small village in Ovamboland. This "black-haired, thin-faced man with a small mustache" and sunglasses to block his eyes soon became the head of Koevoet. When giving an execution order, General Dreyer

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143 TRC Report 3/2 p. 66.
would approach Eugene De Kock, tell him which prisoner "had to go," and the soldiers would carry out the objective.\textsuperscript{145}

It is at this point that we observe the liminal space of Koevoet prisoners. Those who were not identified or immediately reported as killed in action existed in a space where the officers could torture them until a commander gave the order to execute them or until the soldier became an askari. For those that were reported as killed in action, the intention of Koevoet was to kill them at some point. Those who were not reported as killed in action perhaps faced a worse fate; they either died or decided to fight against their former partners in combat.

Turning was a crucial aspect of the unit. Namibian soldiers made up most of the Koevoet unit. These soldiers had been part of the SWAPO insurgency force, or they were locals who chose to defect, generally because the SADF coerced them. As a result, they were now fighting their former comrades or fellow Namibians.\textsuperscript{146} While this certainly provided an advantage to the Koevoet unit for navigating Ovamboland and finding collections of SWAPO forces, these soldiers expressed feelings of alienation because they were fighting for an officially racist country against their fellow Namibians. Sisingi Kamongo says that he and his fellow black soldiers in Koevoet were bitter towards South Africa, but at the same time they were ostracized from their home country. It was unsafe for many to stay in Namibia after the war because they were seen as traitors for succumbing to South African pressure.\textsuperscript{147} In addition, the soldiers in the Koevoet unit were lambasted for their blackness. In Western articles about the unit, writers associated the particularly rude and undisciplined force with the race of these Koevoet foot soldiers. They falsely contrasted this image of the black turned soldiers with the white commanders and soldiers despite the fact that white commanders, like Deegan, were committing

\textsuperscript{145} De Kock 9/29/98, Callaghan 7/31/00  
\textsuperscript{146} Eventually, at least 75% of Koevoet were turned soldiers. TRC Report, 2/2/103 and 2/2/117  
\textsuperscript{147} Kamongo, \textit{Shadows in the Sand}, Loc. 421.
the worst crimes. This narrative isolated out the fact that black soldiers were part of the Koevoet unit and then attacked those soldiers along the lines of their race.

Not only did the gaze of certain white Western media outlets subject black soldiers to increased scrutiny, but also SWAPO soldiers and many local Namibians branded them as cowards who had defected and were only personally motivated. This was in sharp contrast to soldiers who the SADF had abducted from Swaziland and could not realistically return all the way to their home area. Despite their willingness to turn to the other side, askaris were not there to fight in the same way that the other soldiers were; they had to negotiate both their status as a prisoner and their personal history as a Namibian. Askaris, thus, were doubly marginalized with regards to both their blackness and their position as a Namibian fighting against SWAPO. These men were forced into positions in which they were not fighting for South Africa or the attendant ideological reasons, but were attempting to negotiate their own identity in the face of South African military presence. The external branding, both on the part of western media and Namibians, of turned soldiers initiated a process of alienation, which isolated them from their home country and marginalized their identity. When a soldier, like Kamongo, realized after the war that he had no home, he expressed his feeling of alienation as an "utter betrayal perpetrated against people who had sacrificed their all, even their country."  

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It is important to note that there was more to this narrative than a fear imposed on these turned soldiers. Many of these men were acting on small personal incentives. Koevoet motivated these soldiers by offering them sums of money for the prisoners they captured and the heads of

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148 Lelyveld, "Inside Namibia," SM12
150 Kamongo, Shadows in the Sand, Loc. 427-428.
those they killed. When the men would go on their two excursions per month, a bounty was placed on SWAPO heads. The team would receive a total of R1000 to R2000 per head, which ultimately was not a big sum of money for each person. At the same time, the discovery of opposition weapons and machinery stashes also carried a small bounty. This head money all came out of a secret government fund.¹⁵¹

These turned soldiers and former policemen were killing for small amounts of money. The men were motivated by these monetary incentives and such incentives fostered a killing machine; they would intimidate the local population to extract information about SWAPO. They would use that information to track down more insurgents. After capturing or killing these insurgents, they could collect their bounty. Each SWAPO soldier with information on a new insurgent created more opportunities for the unit as they slowly compiled a comprehensive picture of the SWAPO organization. It was a crude economization of the conflict and of human life. For these men, the conflict was not about protecting South Africa from the red and black threats, or even protecting Namibia from such threats, it seemed to be about splitting money with the rest of the unit for the heads of SWAPO soldiers. However, the impact of monetary incentives should not be overstated. While they may have motivated many, the sums were not large enough to necessarily keep them constantly motivated. More importantly, the compensation was for the heads of soldiers, so it did not matter how they killed the insurgent, which means these incentives fail to explain why Koevoet's methods were so extreme.

White commanders certainly benefited more than the soldiers from this policy of compensation for military success. They would often go home from war with prizes or a personal

¹⁵¹ TRC Report 2/2/121, Belligan 11/17/97, Callaghan 7/31/00
weapon collection composed entirely of opponent weapons.\textsuperscript{152} Their role in this economized conflict was perhaps more perverse. They wanted to keep this bounty policy hushed up so that there would be no backlash against them, and, more importantly, so that they could create private collections of stolen weapons.\textsuperscript{153} Within this conflict that was so incredibly violent, it is perhaps not surprising that economic and weapon-based prizes corrupted many of the soldiers.

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By late 1988, Namibia was discussing peace with South Africa and the U.N. as South Africa was also attempting to resolve the conflict in Angola, which had drawn in Cuba and the U.S.\textsuperscript{154} Although the conflict seemed to be turning the corner towards peace, the brutal violence had not ceased. Just a year before, more information had surfaced in the media of the unit's torturous actions in Ovamboland.

In 1987 local civilians recounted how a Casspir, the armored vehicle that Koevoet used, had driven up to a wood-and grass-hut, and then ran through the civilian house. The resident's daughter died immediately and her mother, who was pregnant, was taken to the hospital with a broken pelvis. The SWAPO guerrilla, who was suspected to be hiding in the house, was also killed.\textsuperscript{155} While the two Koevoet members had accomplished their goal of taking out the guerrilla, they had again wreaked havoc on Namibian civilian life. This was not an anomaly; it had become normalized and a regular occurrence in Ovamboland. There were routine local reports of the burning of schools, the burning of homes, the shooting of civilians, and even the burning of civilians. Independent groups had estimated that from 1966 to 1987 the SADF had

\textsuperscript{152} Eugene De Kock, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 6/6/00

\textsuperscript{153} Callaghan 7/31/00


\textsuperscript{155} This was different than the Deegan incident mentioned earlier. Battersby, "In Namibia, Bitter War in Decade 3," 16.
killed over 20,000 local people in the Namibian conflict.\textsuperscript{156} Of this 20,000, the \textit{TRC Report} estimates that Koevoet killed 3,323 people.\textsuperscript{157}

Although white South African supporters who believed threats to their sovereignty were everywhere had lauded these soldiers, the local Namibians had wanted the unit to leave for a while because Namibia was moving towards independence. When United Nations Resolution 435 was implemented, ending the conflict officially and allowing elections that would lead to Namibian independence, Koevoet commanders began to return to South Africa while the black soldiers remained in Namibia. The SWAPO government came to power in March 1990.\textsuperscript{158} These black soldiers would face a difficult dilemma. Although they were originally Namibian, the government had abandoned them because the soldiers had fought to keep SWAPO out of power. The terror of South African control had forced them to turn against their government, and they now had no home. This natal alienation forced many of them to abandon their home country, eventually ending up in South Africa, where there was a history of racial violence but no SWAPO government to push them out.\textsuperscript{159}

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Scholars and historians have claimed that the secrecy, the brutality, and the attitude of Koevoet soldiers were unique to this situation in Namibia.\textsuperscript{160} While the conflict was certainly distinct from many of the operations that had come before, it inaugurated an attitude that became integral to South African military strategy even outside of the Namibian region over the later part of the 1980s. This is not to say that police brutality did not exist before. The murder of Biko in

\textsuperscript{156} Battersby, "In Namibia, Bitter War in Decade 3," 16.
\textsuperscript{157} \textit{TRC Report}, 2/2/125
\textsuperscript{158} Nowrojee and Manby, "Accountability," 65.
\textsuperscript{159} De Wet Potgieter, "Koevoet veterans: ‘We don’t give a damn for other people’s wars,’” \textit{Daily Maverick}, Apr. 8, 2013, http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2013-04-08-koevoet-veterans-we-dont-give-a-damn-for-other-peoples-wars/#.U03a6_0njnc; Stiff, 484-485.
\textsuperscript{160} Again, in traditional accounts see: Cawthra, \textit{Brutal Force}, 210, Seegers 225. In the leftist literature see: Saunders, "South Africa in Namibia/Angola," 274-275.
prison in 1977 and other acts of police violence between 1976 and 1982 were all examples of unnecessary forms of police brutality. However, the parameters of scholars' arguments about Koevoet's isolation seem to be focused on violence in military policy, specifically counter-insurgency missions. Within these parameters, Koevoet was a combination of brutal urban policing with counter-insurgency and counter-intelligence military operations, but the SADF would soon adopt this combination elsewhere because they perceived it as so effective at disrupting insurgent groups.

The operation in the bush did not become a one-time operation, never to repeat itself. It changed the mindset for how South African police and soldiers carried out counter-insurgency missions. As the 1980s progressed, the Koevoet unit faced greater scrutiny as evidenced by a few more news stories from South African and U.S. news sources despite its official secrecy, yet this counter-insurgency style of conflict, which often utilized gratuitous violence against the designated insurgents, was migrating back to South Africa and the South African city space.

Some Koevoet members exited the SADF after they left the Namibian conflict, but others would return to South Africa only to be moved to or recruited for Vlakplaas operations, which were the covert operations that the military and police were carrying out inside of South Africa. The "Vlakplaas death squads," as they were called, became notorious for incorporating leaders and soldiers from the paramilitary Koevoet police unit.\textsuperscript{161} These men had experience in counter-terrorism and the commanders at Vlakplaas saw them as good group leaders and "disciplined" soldiers despite their unsanctioned violence.\textsuperscript{162} The SADF had whitewashed the faults of Koevoet. The framing of the Koevoet soldiers as "disciplined" erased the way in which the commanders allowed for and encouraged gratuitous violence and torture. Within their TRC

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\textsuperscript{161} Saunders, "South Africa's Role in Namibia/Angola," 268, Potgieter, \textit{Total Onslaught}, Loc. 242.  \\
\textsuperscript{162} Belligan 11/17/97
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testimony, Koevoet commanders cemented their unit's legacy as an example of discipline rather than one of violence and corruption. This narrative of discipline has become a myth about the unit in the time since apartheid ended.\footnote{Belligan 11/17/97; Willem Helm Johannes Coetzee, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 8/24/00; Eugene De Kock, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 3/6/98; Willem Nortje, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 7/29/99; Adrian Rosslee, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 11/10/98; Kamongo, \textit{Shadows in the Sand}, Loc. 371.} Not only did members of the unit move to Vlakplas operations, but also they brought the Koevoet spirit and method into those domestic counter-insurgency operations. Eugene de Kock, one of the former Koevoet commanders, had migrated back to South Africa from Namibia in order to direct counter-terror units in South Africa. He insisted on using the same tactics that they had utilized in Namibia. One of the fundamental ideas that migrated was that "the person who shot first survived."\footnote{Belligan 11/17/97} This mentality had resulted in the murder of numerous civilians and soldiers in Namibia and was now migrating to the denser South African city-space. In 1986, the Vlakplas squad was in Cape Town targeting a group of revolutionaries, called the "Gugulethu 7." After waiting for four hours, the police surrounded a van and then opened fire on the seven people exiting the van when the police thought a grenade was thrown at them. After killing four, they pursued the other three, killing all seven "guerrillas."\footnote{South African Police Slay 7 Blacks, Charge They Were Guerrillas," \textit{Los Angeles Times}, Mar. 3, 1986, 2.} This outburst was a targeted operation at these specific ANC members. This targeting and execution of what they considered "guerrillas" resembled the same counter-insurgency tactics that Koevoet had utilized in Namibia. Urban policing had adopted the "shoot first" mentality and the operation structure of Koevoet, which targeted and then brutally eliminated specific insurgents.\footnote{Anthony Weaver, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 11/27/96.}
These soldiers and their methods had been taken to South Africa in order to fight the domestic liberation movements. The methods used in the Bush War were implemented to supposedly suppress revolutionary movements, and as the domestic liberation movement was gaining momentum, such experience became important in South Africa because, as one soldier put it, "the Border War had just moved to inside the country."\(^{167}\)

The Bush War had been a fringe war in which relatively few people inside of South Africa, in particular white civilians, knew about it, knew the tactics, or knew the specifics of the conflict. When those tactics moved into South African policing policy, it created a distinct shift by the early 1990s in how urban warfare was carried out in South Africa. In September 1990, the SANDF deployed the remnants of the Koevoet unit into the Thokoza Township in Johannesburg and attacked the residents for two days. An Umkhonto we Sizwe\(^{168}\) insurgent testified that Koevoet involvement in these urban clashes made them particularly demoralizing for the civilians as the normal civilians had to both defend themselves from counter-insurgency police while removing the bodies of dead soldiers from the streets. We see the psychological impact of the Koevoet unit operating in the city space as the slum communities had to arm themselves with AK-47s in response to this counter-insurgency presence.\(^{169}\) The unit had made the city slum a space of self-defense, militarizing the civilian space in the same way that they militarized civilian areas in Ovamboland. The unit had intentionally changed the residents’ way of life in order to create fear and manufacture the guise of order in these slums.

The secrecy about the unit had also migrated with the soldiers. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, disrupting weapons smuggling networks had been an important concern for the SADF in

\(^{167}\) Eugene De Kock, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 4/19/98
\(^{168}\) The armed wing of the African National Congress. Translates to "Spear of the Nation."
\(^{169}\) Machitje 11/24/98
South Africa. This infiltration often led to Koevoet policemen taking the weapons that they confiscated for themselves. The government was increasingly worried that any investigation into these operations, which were under Vlakplaas, would reveal the involvement of Koevoet soldiers, who already had a bad name because they had acted as mercenaries in the Border War. Their involvement would embarrass the Security Forces and the Vlakplaas operations as there was "general consensus among the members that the Koevoet members should be kept out of the public eye" because "it could have caused enormous embarrassment to the Security establishment and as a result of that, to the government of the day should the fact that ex-Koevoet members were involved in operations inside the borders of the Republic of South Africa."\textsuperscript{170} Soldiers in South Africa said after the fact that "there were many illegal weapons going around and they were used during incidents of violence."\textsuperscript{171} These transgressions were kept quiet, but a newfound violence and illegality had entered the Defense Force in general.

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Although Koevoet represented a distinct form of conflict, it did not remain geographically or temporally isolated. The Koevoet method provided an appealing model for Security Forces because of its effectiveness in Namibia, but its effectiveness obscured its brutal and illegal character. Members, the strategies, and the secrecy all migrated into South African cities in order to fight domestic insurgents. To isolate the unit historically erases its wide-reaching impact; it does violence to the civilians and tortured soldiers that were victims. This chapter has sought to reclaim that history by presenting the more revealing (and often more gruesome) stories about Koevoet conveyed through testimony. The testimonies of these soldiers provide a glimpse of the human elements of this conflict. I have suggested that many of the

\textsuperscript{170} Klopper 5/26/99
\textsuperscript{171} Klopper 5/26/99
soldiers were acting on a variety of motives. Koevoet had forced black soldiers into a position in which they had to participate or they would face torture while both white and black soldiers had small monetary incentives to kill SWAPO soldiers. I have argued that the use of gratuitous violence, the torture of SWAPO soldiers, and the personal monetary incentives offered to soldiers all show that this conflict was not strictly ideological; people, not military ideology, were the drivers of this conflict. I have also maintained that the geographical and temporal reach of this unit suggests that the unit played a critical role in the larger South African anti-liberation strategy.
The Koevoet unit changed the nature of conflict for South Africa in Namibia and even in South African cities. However, given that the geopolitical explanation does not explain Koevoet's gratuitous violence, why did this unit regularly violate the human rights of so many Namibians through its torture tactics, its manhunts and its bloodstained bumpers? While it is enticing to say that this was either a problem of specific individuals or of the social environment, I argue that it was a mixture of both elements.

I have already offered some initial answers to why the conflict became so violent, but this chapter will focus on the explanations given by soldiers for why they acted the way that they did. Because the testimony I cite often comes from white commanders or soldiers, the sources may be biased in particular ways. And yet these commanders were giving testimony in exchange for amnesty at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, so their descriptions of the conditions that they experienced are perhaps more genuine than the boosterist works of soldiers who wrote memoirs or other apologist pieces. Documents that did come from memoirs or statements outside of the TRC framework are examined here with a critical eye, and I assess these sources as reflections of ideology rather than as historical accounts or chronologies.

It is also important to note that there are very few accounts that actually come from black soldiers, who were the majority of the Koevoet unit. As Leopold Scholtz notes in the Preface to Shadows in the Sand, Sisingi Kamongo wrote the first account of the Bush War from the perspective of a black Koevoet soldier. This account was only published in 2012, so there has clearly been a lack of scholarship on the issue. Kamongo is cited throughout, but the paucity of
accounts suggests something broader about race and conflict. As I will discuss, black soldiers have had to deal with both bitterness towards the exploitation of the racist South African government and the feeling of abandonment in the face of a SWAPO government that criticized their decision to turn. These dual forces have perhaps forced them into repressing their own memories because of the alienation they feel from potential audiences in both their home country and in the country that forced them to fight.

This chapter will argue that the secrecy, which kept the Koevoet unit away from public scrutiny, created an environment that fostered the gratuitous violence described in the previous chapter and allowed the military to deny these acts of violence. The conflict remained a distant concern in the collective South African mind; as the government kept the conflict secret and it remained disconnected from the immediate issues for both white and black South Africans, the specifics and brutality of the conflict received far less sympathy or concern from the public than the massacres that occurred in South Africa, such as the Soweto uprising of 1976 or even the actions of the Vlakplaas "death squads," which were widely criticized in the 1990 Harms Commission. The blame, however, should not solely be placed on the social environment. Individual actions were shaped by of the social alienation and isolation that they felt in the war zone. Many of Koevoet's actions cannot be explained fully by external factors, such as monetary incentives or military culture. Whether it was a result of the fear of retribution, the feeling of exclusion, or the need to assert masculinity is unclear. What is clear based on the inexplicable outbursts of brutality is that we can perceive a desire for grotesque violence among the Koevoet soldiers, which they then externalized onto the bodies of SWAPO soldiers.

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172 Kamongo, Shadows in the Sand, Loc. 218.
173 Coetzee 8/24/00.
Located more than 450 miles from Windhoek, the main cosmopolitan area of Namibia, Ovamboland is a 70-mile-wide strip of land in the northern part of the country, bordering Angola. As a designated tribal territory, there were 500,000 Ovambos who lived within the area during the 1980s, which was a relatively large number of the roughly 1 million residents in Namibia. This region was the farthest part of Namibia from South Africa and was even farther from the major metropolitan regions of Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Cape Town. Given its remoteness, the spectacles of violence here remained outside of the public's view. Government oversight, intimidation and restrictions on the media would simply reinforce the distance between the conflict and the South African public.

It was not just distance that kept this conflict outside of the South African public's mind. The military officers and South African government ensured that the conflict and information about the Koevoet unit avoided all media scrutiny by punishing journalists and monitoring the coverage of the soldiers' day-to-day activities during the conflict. In fact, recall that in 1983 missionaries in Namibia would be the first to reveal information about the Koevoet unit and the South African military presence in Namibia.

After its creation, the unit remained a SADF secret for four years. Although a couple of stories began leaking out in 1983 and other stories would occasionally be published throughout the rest of the 1980s, the unit did not receive the same outcry as apartheid atrocities in South Africa or other instances of excessive violence. One *New York Times* article attempted to appeal to both sides of the conflict by suggesting that only Namibians found the unit reprehensible. The article said that many supporters of South Africa "express admiration for the...unit as a

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174 Battersby, "In Namibia, Bitter War in Decade 3," 16.
successful counterinsurgency force," but that it was unpopular among Ovamboland residents.\textsuperscript{176} Despite this media coverage it still remained an official secret within the South African government.\textsuperscript{177}

The military paramedic described in the previous chapter represented the official policy on interacting with the media or any other group outside of the conflict. When the medic attempted to help an Angolan woman get to a clinic and then get transportation to South Africa, the SADF commander barred the assistance because it would be an admission of South African military presence. In this situation, the paramedic was located at an Angolan base, but Callaghan, the medic, indicated that conditions were very similar in both of these countries, as treatment of both civilians and prisoners was kept under wraps.\textsuperscript{178} Fear of exposure was impacting even the seemingly benign aspects of South African military presence, like increased medical personnel. This event reveals something more unique about the workings of deception within the military. Despite the small but significant media revelations about the soldiers on the border in 1983, the military maintained opacity at the expense of an innocent civilian. The truth was already out about presence in Ovamboland, the Koevoet unit, and the Angolan conflict, but the military valued the appearance of secrecy. To amend Robert Solomon's quote in "Self, Deception, and Self-Deception in Philosophy," "we cannot imagine [the military] without opacity."\textsuperscript{179} The South African military had to act as if there were no conflict or at the very least as if their presence was insignificant.

\textsuperscript{176} Alan Cowell, "On the Namibian Front," A2.
\textsuperscript{177} Callaghan 7/31/00
\textsuperscript{178} Callaghan 7/31/00
This is perhaps what made writers of the TRC Report and TRC officials so appalled and angry with the Koevoet unit.\textsuperscript{180} There were two possible options when the government faced the gruesome media reports in 1983. First, the government could have admitted their presence and the attendant wrongs. This certainly would have led to riots, internal backlash, an international response, and possibly legal action because the intervention was illegal under the ICJ's 1971 ruling and because the soldiers had violated the human rights of many of the Namibian civilians.\textsuperscript{181} Second, they could have acted as if the intervention was perfectly legal and justified and as if nothing was different about violence or conflict in Namibia. The choice was clear for a military that had thrived on denial and secrecy. In a 1984 Parliament debate, Minister le Grange admitted that they had formed a counter terrorism group in Ovamboland but only insofar as that group would both gather information and pursue terrorists.\textsuperscript{182} The military officers refused to even talk to reporters, give them creditation, or speak at any briefings.\textsuperscript{183} The military had decided that they would not acknowledge the outbursts of violence and the extent of the intervention, for which the TRC Report ruthlessly criticized them.

This apparent secrecy and the appearance that they were hiding something was more offensive than responding to the original media reports or letting Namibians and Angolans receive treatment back in South Africa. Admitting extensive presence would have required some form of accountability, but the very nature of the South African regime could not allow such a response. With its truth through military force policy and minority rule, the SADF and South African government had to maintain total opacity. The South African military would not have been able to operate without this opacity; the backlash, which would come in the late 1980s,

\textsuperscript{180} The TRC was chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and contained both white and black committee members. \textit{TRC Report}, 2/2/116-2/2/125.
\textsuperscript{181} Vale, \textit{Keeping a Sharp Eye}, 7-8, Battersby, "In Namibia," 16.
\textsuperscript{182} \textit{TRC Report}, 2/2/118.
\textsuperscript{183} Weaver, 11/27/96.
would have forced the unit to abandon their Namibian mission initially. Opacity in the short term was traded for greater moral responsibility later on.

The success of this strategy of opacity is perhaps indisputable from the military's point of view; news of the Koevoet unit's methods only occasionally appeared in newspapers throughout the 1980s because there was not enough knowledge about the daily activities of the SADF or Koevoet. Strict censorship policies (based on the Publications Act of 1975, the Police Act, and the Defense Act\textsuperscript{184}) meant that even if South African reporters did have gruesome information on the conflict, the government officially barred them from publishing it.\textsuperscript{185} However, the attempts to maintain this opacity revealed how insidious this military unit was. Koevoet fed off of its secrecy and would go to any end in order to preserve it.

Even when the opacity began to break down, the military controlled how the conflict was portrayed. In 1984, Tony Weaver, who was a reporter for the Rand Daily Mail, was sent to the border to investigate the conflict in Namibia and in Angola. Based in Windhoek in central Namibia, Weaver began to hear "horrific stories" about the Koevoet operations. He traveled to Ovamboland in order to investigate the Koevoet activities, including their use of torture and rape as methods of interrogation.\textsuperscript{186} Given the military secrecy, the only way for him to receive reliable information was through his two sources in the military, who were defiant officers that were "sickened by what they were seeing with Koevoet and who were feeding [him] information about Koevoet massacres."\textsuperscript{187} As a result of these leads, Weaver would end up reporting on the aftermath of a bomb explosion, which killed two Americans, and several atrocities committed against Namibian civilians. Weaver revealed the specific tactics of brutalization that Koevoet


\textsuperscript{185} Some publications, which are cited throughout, were able to work around these policies.


\textsuperscript{187} Weaver 11/27/96
routinely used. In response, a white member of the Koevoet unit assaulted Weaver, a white man, in his hotel room, punishing him for the story.\(^{188}\)

Not only did the military try to remain closed off from and maintain strict legal regulations on the South African media, but also this incident shows that the media had become a target of the unit. The soldiers were willing to intimidate journalists in order to keep their actions secret. Violence bred more violence, as they used intimidation in order to prevent exposure of their tactics. Weaver's revelations threatened the salience of the Koevoet method, so in a random outburst of violence, this Koevoet soldier temporarily militarized the media space in an attempt to preserve the secrecy of their most vile actions. While soldiers could not go around brutalizing every reporter, Weaver's sources inside Koevoet seemed to represent a substantial threat to the unit's secrecy and, thus, the viability of its strategy.

This was not the only way in which Koevoet's violence fed off of its opacity. The imperative to keep everything secret meant that records were rarely kept and often burned. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the officers burned the files of the captured prisoners. Many of those labeled as "disappeared" were either killed or turned into Koevoet soldiers.\(^{189}\) Since these prisoners' records were nonexistent or were supposed to be burned, the Koevoet soldiers could do anything they wanted to the records with the knowledge that such actions would not come back to haunt them. The lack of any record for many of the captured SWAPO insurgents encouraged the unnecessary torture and frequent murder described in the previous chapter. The lack of records has certainly made it difficult to even reconstruct the history of these events because all accounts are based on testimony after the fact. These cruel interactions were common in an opaque environment, where they did not face much scrutiny or criticism. The secrecy

\(^{188}\) Weaver 11/27/96; "Correspondent is Beaten," New York Times, Apr 20, 1984, p. A7. This news story came from Reuters after the Rand Daily Mail had released a statement about their reporter, Weaver.

\(^{189}\) De Kock, 9/29/98.
allowed for a form of lawlessness where the soldiers could do almost anything they wanted with impunity.

Not only were the records of SWAPO soldiers often destroyed, but the bodies were also rarely found in Ovamboland because they were placed in mass unmarked graves.\footnote{De Kock 9/29/98} This conflict thrived on intimidation and the spectacle of murder, such as strapping dead insurgents to the mudguards of trucks, yet the removal of the corporeal evidence became particularly important with regard to the people that Koevoet captured and then killed. The Defense Force had to maintain the idea that many of the SWAPO soldiers truly just "disappeared." Koevoet was utilizing secrecy to accommodate their brutality and to prevent the retelling of their actions outside of Namibia. Secrecy about the mass unmarked graves of soldiers would make it difficult to confirm the extent of Koevoet-SWAPo clashes in Namibia. These hidden unmarked graves would keep the statistics on SWAPO deaths and the images of these dead bodies outside of the South African media.

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Military officials played an important part maintaining the secrecy of the day-to-day events of the conflict from the South African public. Although Koevoet had only intermittent contact with the main Pretoria office, Eugene De Kock, a commander of the group, stated in his TRC testimony that General Coetzee of the SADF was clearly aware of Koevoet's actions and violations in South West Africa. General Dreyer and Coetzee both knew that the prisoners had been bound and detained for several consecutive months, yet they never asked questions or ordered the end of this policy. While in the field, Koevoet would act without specific orders or strict instructions from Pretoria and rarely expected any, but the commanders in Pretoria still had extensive knowledge of what was occurring on the border:
You'd hear that there was a contact and then the commander would come through at say: "Three have been killed, I've caught two and they are wounded." Then three hours later you'd hear that these detainees had died as a result of their injuries, but these were not the injuries that they had sustained during the conflict, these were new injuries. So those who were detaining them had finished them off. It was that sort of war. No questions were asked on either side and ultimately it could have created that understanding among people, that this is how guerrilla warfare was to be conducted if you wanted to win.¹⁹¹

When the Koevoet soldiers violently beat up a SWAPO terrorist and received no backlash from above, they thought their behaviors were supported, entrenching this culture of cruelty. This permissive attitude did not stop with the Koevoet unit but began to spread throughout the Security Police Force, which meant that Koevoet-level brutality was acceptable in any context, even in South Africa.¹⁹²

Compounding the problem, for both the black soldiers and the white commanders, there was pressure to act the same as the other soldiers around them. While some of the people who committed egregious violations of human rights that could place South Africa at a strategic disadvantage were transferred to other branches, the unit generally put a premium on following and emulating the lead of others. This meant that if someone defied or questioned the tactics that they were using on prisoners or against SWAPO, they would be pushed out, as the unit would view them as unreliable in conflict.¹⁹³

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Distance, a lack of scrutiny, and fear of further isolation within the unit certainly created an environment in which violence could thrive, but the role that the individuals played in this violence should not be understated. The Koevoet unit lacked the same discipline and structure of

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¹⁹¹ De Kock 9/29/98
¹⁹² De Kock 9/29/98
¹⁹³ De Kock 7/29/98
other military units. The soldiers were required to go on two excursions every month, but the commanders clearly did not control them very strictly. Within this loosely structured unit, individual soldiers, who felt varying forms of social alienation from their home country or even their unit, were able to take out their aggression on the SWAPO soldiers. It could have been as a result of internal fear of how the other soldiers would treat them or a desire to show one's masculinity, but the violent transgressions, which are not easily explained through aforementioned factors, show that there was an internal desire for violence.

Based on statements and the conditions of the conflict, it is clear that many of the soldiers felt socially, and sometimes psychologically, alienated. Black soldiers had been taken from their local setting and made to fight for a state that had ruled their territory illegally since 1971, yet that state still remained far away. Some of these soldiers had been prisoners and then forced to fight their former comrades. The alienation was obvious as they were portrayed as cowards within the SWAPO and Namibian discourse, and, on top of that, they had to negotiate their black identity in the face of South African apartheid policy. Since German colonial occupation in South West Africa, black soldiers had been made to fight for colonial powers, but they were clearly not there to fight in the same way that the other South African soldiers were. Based on Sisingi Kamongo's account, there was a mix among the soldiers of people who feared for their lives, who were "forced to fight [their] brothers," and those that thought SWAPO did not belong in power in Namibia, who were "policemen enforcing the laws of the country." Even considering the position that the South Africans forced many of these askaris into, they were still ruthless soldiers for Koevoet because they were "battle-hardened, psychologically

194 De Kock, 7/29/98.
and socially divorced from their communities of origin." One soldier expressed that he had experienced one of the battles through a disembodied perspective:

Suddenly I was in another world—outside my body. I was looking down on the fight from above the helicopters and I was screaming over the radio, “Kokkie your two o’clock! They are sitting at your two o’clock behind the tree! Your two o’clock—shoot!” I saw the whole scene from above. But I was in my Casspir about 200–300 metres behind him. It was so weird.196

This disembodied experience seems to suggest a deep alienation in which the man's psyche tricked him into thinking he was not involved in the conflict at all, but was simply an observer directing the action. He felt as if he had full god-like control over the conflict. Perhaps he desired full control of the conflict, but the only way to maintain control amidst this chaos was to continue to fight and kill. Violence was supposed to ensure control; it was how Koevoet converted so many Namibians, how they kept massacres out of the media, and how they manipulated the local population.

White Commanders and soldiers experienced a slightly different alienation. These soldiers had often been sent to Namibia in order to escape the structure of the military and police forces elsewhere. Many of the former-Koevoet soldiers expressed the feeling that the distance from South African society provided them an escape from the strict rules and discipline of city policing, the military, and society in general. For these soldiers the border acted as an escape and a place where they could take out their frustration or aggression. John Deegan, the white commander who shot an insurgent at point blank range, expressed the enjoyment he got from this conflict: "We were basically automatons. We would just kill. That's how we got our kicks. We were adrenaline junkies."197 At the same time, white soldiers were 3000 km away from their

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197 TRC Report, 2/2 p. 74
home and isolated from the military structure that they knew well, fighting a war abroad when there was clearly a war going on back in South Africa. Those in command often asked, "Why are we fighting here when we should be there?" 

The white commanders are explicit about both their lost sense of purpose on the border and, on the flip side, their obsession with the violence of the conflict. Deegan's statement mirrors the statements of other white soldiers, who said that they "liked living on the edge...to see how close [they] could come to death and survive it - that became a drug." Among these white soldiers, freedom to fight however they wanted became like a narcotic despite occasional self-reflection on their purpose. They were addicted to the adrenaline rush of their violence because it satisfied an internal desire. It seems that there is this stated desire for violence among whites and perhaps a hidden desire to control the chaotic and alienating situation on the border among blacks.

The enjoyment and infatuation with violence among many whites and the feeling of disembodiment among some blacks were two sides of the same coin. Both situations were like drugs. White soldiers were like the addict who must continually consume in order to satisfy a never-ending desire for violence while black soldiers were comforted by the disorienting and disembodied high of conflict; the illusion of control that conflict offered them led to a similar enjoyment. However, the question remains, in what material ways did these desires play out? Certain acts of inexplicable brutality demonstrate that some subterranean desire for violence linked all the Koevoet soldiers.

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198 Eugene De Kock, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Pretoria, 9/28/98
As chapter two mentioned, the desire to place soldiers in unmarked graves seemed contradictory with the desire to use these mangled bodies as a spectacle of fear. Yet this latter tactic was still used to "disappear" the bodies of former soldiers. Within its grotesqueness, the dragging of bodies removed identifying features and created faceless corpses that were simply there to intimidate. The Casspirs did not need to drag along the corpses of dead SWAPO soldiers; rarely did identification of those bodies seem to matter for Koevoet. The bodies of SWAPO soldiers were not just dropped off at the Koevoet base, but were dragged for several days. Although they could have just disposed of them in the same unmarked graves for the other bodies, Koevoet erased their identities in the most grotesque way possible. As stated, intimidation was a factor, but Koevoet terrorized civilians often. There were many ways they intimidated civilians. From raping civilian women to roasting a man on a spit, their methods were both redundant and unrelenting. The techniques of intimidation resulted in their most gruesome manifestations. The message was not just "this is what could happen to you" but also "this is what we enjoy doing." They utilized this tactic of tying bodies to bumpers in order to play out a form of enjoyment on the black bodies of SWAPO insurgents. This gratuitous violence still eliminated the evidence of a particular person, but at the same time it seemed to satisfy the soldiers' desires for violence. In contrast to the secretive disposal of bodies in unmarked graves, the spectacular displays of violence acted out the soldiers' enjoyment of the conflict.

One of the ways that the unit came to trust and accept new Koevoet recruits was through a process of torture or murder. New recruits had to kill a SWAPO insurgent or they had to shoot a prisoner at point blank range after interrogation.\(^{200}\) Perhaps this routine can be explained away by the desire for soldiers to trust each other. The most perverse part of the ritual, though, was

\(^{200}\) Weaver 11/27/96
that these interrogations always took place in front of the other soldiers and the white officers.\textsuperscript{201} Every level of the unit was obsessed with these violent rituals and drew such pleasure from them that they would all watch these executions. Violence was a spectacle for them; they seemed to internally enjoy these violent outbursts. Moments like these point beyond the simple existence of monetary incentives. While such incentives created a perverse environment in which soldiers would try to slaughter more people, they did not incentivize the horrific ways in which soldiers carried out these executions. Extra money was not awarded for roasting a civilian or SWAPO soldier on a spit.

These rituals reveal that Koevoet committed numerous acts of violence, which cannot simply be explained by monetary incentives or social environment. Many black soldiers feared their position, which meant that culture determined their actions to an extent, yet there were clearly acts of gratuitous violence that required internal motivation or desire. Based on statements and established rituals, however, there seems to be an even stronger indication that white soldiers and commanders enjoyed and were addicted to the violence against Namibian civilians and soldiers.

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The question still remains as to why Koevoet did not let up or change their tactics even as stories came out and opacity began to break down. Given the lack of media reporting about the incidents in Namibia, the South African residents were not very invested in the conflict. Because of the government's opacity, the only information available was testimony from soldiers (many of whom ended up suffering PTSD) or the rare newspaper article. The lack of any affective connection to the Border War meant that both the commanders and the South African public did not hold the soldiers accountable. As late as 1986, the military remained very closed off to the

\textsuperscript{201} Weaver 11/27/96
press. However, after the revelation about Koevoet's counter-insurgency operation in 1983, the military began to manipulate how the media reported on the conflict. They promoted specific understandings of the Bush War and South African racial politics. The press that they did allow prevented the magnitude of this conflict from coming to the forefront of South African news.

In 1986, journalists who covered conflicts in Africa were barely aware of the Bush War and knew nothing beyond the few accusations of brutality. Foreign journalists were often prevented from covering the SADF in the Bush War, yet in 1986 Jim Hooper was approved by the Department of Foreign Affairs in Pretoria to cover the conflict. The break in policy was not as revolutionary as it seemed. The military still asked to look over all stories and requested that Hooper provide an account of the beneficial actions that the troops were providing to the local population during the war. The coverage was supposed to be balanced, but the military made sure that they supervised it. 202

The commanders told Hooper that they recognized that there was a "serious problems" in South African politics and military policy, but the military disavowed the importance of these problems and their responsibility in such crimes. The commander deemphasized the relative impact of apartheid and South African war policies, stating, "The international media haven't helped the situation. Instead of reporting the reforms that have been made, they've concentrated almost exclusively on apartheid and violence. And damned seldom have they made comparisons between human rights in South Africa and other countries in Africa." 203 The playing down of the magnitude and intensity of this violence is clear, yet what is perhaps more subtle is the way in which racism and white nationalism undergirded the military ideology. Until this point, the military had used secrecy in order to keep concerns about the violence they were committing in

202 Hooper, KOEVOET!, 31-32.
203 Hooper, KOEVOET!, 31-32.
Namibia out of the public's mind. Fear of growing media exposure of South African military presence had evolved into a confidence that they could manipulate or at least influence the narrative about the Bush War to reflect the most benign aspects while downplaying the violence. The implication of the officer's statement above was that the rest of Africa faced far more intense human rights violations. The grouping of other African countries and conflicts is colonial logic par excellence. Not only do the historical differences of those conflicts not matter within this South African ideology, but also each instance was utilized as a signifier for a more fundamental problem with the "other countries in Africa." The mentality was the white man's burden reimagined with the other countries of Africa deserving of more foreign scrutiny than the white countries of Africa. Within apartheid ideology, these other (black) countries deserved a heavy-handed lesson from the media in contrast to South Africa because, in their view, at least South Africa was conscious of its violence problems. It was in this way that the military commanders were able to reassure themselves that secrecy would always be necessary and that military coverage was unwarranted.

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Given the general disregard for and lack of knowledge about the Bush War and the Koevoet unit, the unit began to occupy an odd place in the South African conscience. As the 1980s progressed and the unit increased its presence within South African Security Police units, the reaction from the media and even the military became strong. In 1990, this reaction peaked, as there were "very few instances during the last part of 1989 and the first part of 1990 that made more headlines than the Harms Commission."\(^{204}\) Officials have critiqued the details of the 1990 Harms Commission, but it represented a peak in media attention on South African Special Forces

\(^{204}\) Coetzee 8/24/00.
as it resulted in an extensive investigation of and daily news on Vlakplaas, the chief command for Security Forces.²⁰⁵

For Vlakplaas Koevoet represented a group of "highly trained soldiers" with expertise in covert operations and cross-border operations, despite the violence issues of many of the participants. They were prepared to act illegally or pursue a combatant across borders. These skills were perceived as helpful for Vlakplaas, and because these people had proven they were committed to the National Party government and their policies, the commanders knew that they would not hesitate to fight terrorism with impunity.²⁰⁶

However, Koevoet was also a toxic name within South Africa. Commanders and field generals explicitly hushed up the involvement of these soldiers in Security Police Operations in the early 1990s. They were reluctant to talk about involvement of Namibian askaris and former white Koevoet soldiers who had joined Vlakplaas. They were concerned that the ex-Koevoet member involvement in operations inside the South African borders would have created an "enormous embarrassment" for the Security Forces and the government in the eyes of the public.²⁰⁷ The media termed them "murder or death squads," and even the former commanders would call them that after apartheid ended.²⁰⁸

When Ovambo askaris, former Koevoet members, began to infiltrate weapons smuggling networks to disrupt them, the officials became concerned that these soldiers, who were known for their recklessness, were a part of missions that allowed them to carry firearms. The weapons smuggling networks originated in Mozambique and were providing weapons to the unbanned

²⁰⁵ Coetzee 8/24/00.
²⁰⁷ Klopper 5/26/99
ANC. Vlakplaas feared that any investigation would reveal the Koevoet participation and the cover-up of such participation because it would signal the fact that a new brutal violence had entered the Vlakplaas ranks, which were operating much closer to home. "There were many illegal weapons going around and they were used during incidents of violence," which would be directly tied to the Koevoet participation.209

For the military there was a "general consensus among the members that the Koevoet members should be kept out of the public eye." There was a reluctance among the Security Police to talk about the askaris and ex-Koevoet involvement in Vlakplaas, and General Coetzee even stated that "it could have caused enormous embarrassment to the Security establishment and as a result of that, to the government of the day, should the fact that ex-Koevoet members were involved in operations inside the borders of the Republic of South Africa" be publicized.210 It was not that these operations were necessarily illegal; the commanders were more concerned with the involvement of the Namibian Koevoet soldiers. They did not want it to come to light that these former "mercenaries," as a commander called them, were still working for the South African government because it could have resulted in court appearances and wide publicity problems for the government over the issue of past monetary compensation for each head in Namibia.211 In this way, secrecy would continue to dominate the government's policy towards the Koevoet unit even after the Bush War ended.

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I have argued in this chapter that the Koevoet unit in the South Africa-Namibia conflict thrived on opacity. The soldiers did not face substantial retribution when they could act out their

210 One of the TRC officials, Mr. Booyens, is quoting Gen. Coetzee here: Klopper 5/26/99.
211 Tait 5/27/99.
aggression in the Namibian bush, but when they entered South African soil, their past illegal activities and transgressions represented an much larger media problem for the Special Forces. Vlakplaas tried to maintain the opacity of the Koevoet unit. Despite this secrecy, the media coverage of events, such as the Harms Commission, made these later activities fairly prominent within the South African conscience, but until the TRC the memory of Koevoet in Namibia remained relatively insignificant.

The Bush War generally and Koevoet in particular were escapes for these soldiers both from the structure of military units elsewhere and from society in general. It was agreed among soldiers that oftentimes "Koevoet Commanders were Special Branch policemen who had messed up so badly in South Africa that they had to be removed from this society to where they could do anything that they wouldn't have to give an account for."\textsuperscript{212} The perception that this war was an escape fueled carelessness and also enabled many soldiers' internal desire for violence. Why this desire existed is difficult to explain. It could be that the military and police somewhat\textsuperscript{213} repressed their internal desire for control, and only the Namibian bush offered an opportunity to play out that desire. Regardless, these removed soldiers had been alienated from South African society and were now in a place that did not put strict rules on them, so they could act however they wanted, leading to horrific violence and torture. It was treated as if no one would find out, and until TRC testimony, the knowledge of specific actions was relatively sparse in South Africa.

\textsuperscript{212} Callaghan 7/31/00
\textsuperscript{213} It should be noted that whites both had substantial control and committed acts of violence within South Africa - but Namibia perhaps offered an environment where they could take that control to the extreme.
chapter four

myth making, memory, and forgetting.

_The other reason amnesia simply will not do is that the past refuses to lie down quietly. It has an uncanny habit of returning to haunt one_

- Desmond Tutu, *TRC Report*, Vol. 1 Ch. 1 Par. 27

In 1989, Namibia became independent and South Africa signed UN Resolution 435 as its troops withdrew, including the Koevoet unit. However, before the withdrawal completed, a series of battles were fought in the Ovamboland area. According to testimony and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, many of the dead were SWAPO soldiers, civilians, and prisoners. Some speculated that, given the presence of single bullet wounds in the back of the heads of these victims and the unit's culture, Koevoet had assassinated their prisoners before withdrawing, eliminating any lingering memories their captives may have brought back to Namibian society in the post-Border War era.²¹⁴ Koevoet could not allow prisoners to bring their experiences to light in the public sphere, so in a final act of aggression, they eliminated memories the same way they had eliminated all of their previous prisoners.

Forgetting and remembering are endlessly entangled with each other such that there can be no memory without forgetting. There is no complete or untarnished memory. The perspectives in this thesis certainly do not claim to provide a fully coherent history or memory of the Bush War in Namibia. This thesis has focused on supplementing South African historiography on the Bush War through the inclusion of the memory of violence that South African soldiers committed. Unfortunately, few Namibian perspectives are provided, but I have

²¹⁴ *TRC Report* 2/2/128-2/2/130
attempted to investigate how South Africans, in contrast to Namibians, have come to understand and remember the atrocities that these soldiers committed during the Bush War.

Gary Baines has argued that histories of the Bush War often rely heavily on myths and that myth making of this kind is generally inevitable within the construction of memory about historical events.\textsuperscript{215} Roland Barthes has written that myths are historical discourses "that communicate the past in a pure, unambiguous and simple fashion."\textsuperscript{216} Myth making is not the creation of falsehood but the packaging of history in a particular way. Certain stories and ideas are always privileged over others. These stories are shaped into easily digestible accounts. The circulation of these myths often obsurses more complex histories.

For example, the National Party government created the myth of white persecution and equal, self-governed homelands. The National Party's Colour Policy of 1948 was premised on the idea that whites had to maintain power through the policy of separation. The document equated equality with "national suicide for the White race" and suggested that separation was the only policy to protect "the future of every race."\textsuperscript{217} This policy utilized historical myth making by appealing to extreme logic and then claiming the inevitability of white persecution. This process of myth making was self-serving and ahistorical: the white minority had always occupied a place of power in South African society. More important historically was that this myth became foundational to South African politics, and it created one of the most exclusive, racist regimes in the second half of the 20th century in apartheid South Africa.

The SADF also thrived on myth making. The South African government constructed the myth of the "red and black threat" in order to motivate whites to endorse and participate in the

\textsuperscript{215} Baines, "Introduction," p. 6.
\textsuperscript{216} Baines, "Introduction," p. 6.
apartheid security structure without questioning the actions that police were taking at home and abroad. The myth of the ubiquitous black and red threats justified the invasion of countries across Southern Africa, including Namibia and Angola. Distinct "threats" in these countries were elided into one, homogenous danger as differences between liberation groups were erased. Every threat was tied to the ANC; the threat of the ANC was imminent for the white South Africans, so this connection, despite its vagueness, could mobilize the support of this population in South Africa.

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Myths about a ubiquitous threat to South Africa manipulated the South African public during apartheid and perpetuated the Namibia conflict, yet it was efforts to repackage the history of the conflict after it ended that truly distorted the South African understanding of the Border War. The first way in which the South African military sought to disperse memory of the conflict was to erase any remaining evidence that a brutal, illegal conflict had even occurred. The practice of eliminating bodies throughout the war was only one of the more explicit ways of doing this. Here we can see the consequences of forgetting through opacity. The elimination of bodies and other evidence encouraged soldiers to continuously use more gratuitous violence and torture on the bodies of their enemies because they knew that if there were no corporeal evidence of the devastation that they caused then they would not be held accountable. Mass graves discovered after the war show the extent to which they were able to kill soldiers and still keep it a secret. The secrecy of Koevoet's burial sites seemed to work. In 2005, road construction in Ovamboland uncovered mass graves near former South African military bases in which Koevoet troops had quickly buried SWAPO bodies throughout the 1980s. The identities of the bodies had
been erased with time.\textsuperscript{218} ANC activist John Matshikiza wrote in 2005 on the SADF's success in creating collective amnesia about the war:

"Would anybody miss them? To Geldenhuys [then in command of the South African army] and his faceless masters in Pretoria (some of whom were to go on to win the Nobel Peace Prize in later years), they were just so many units of vaguely menacing vermin. To the UN...they were abstract black paws in a recently abandoned East-West power game. To the liberation movement, they were troublesome mouths to feed and clothe.\textsuperscript{219}

Most surprisingly, after discovering the graves, Sam Nujoma, Namibia's first head of state and the president of SWAPO since 1960, erected a monument for the dead SWAPO soldiers and then refused to continue "digging up the past."\textsuperscript{220} This hesitancy to investigate the past embodied the official Namibian narrative, which emphasized that "SWAPO brought us liberation through the armed struggle," but human rights abuses were "unavoidable side effects" in the process of SWAPO triumph. These abuses were not events for dwelling or mourning.\textsuperscript{221} Along with the removal of all physical evidence, written and oral records became similarly restricted. SADF soldiers were forced to remain quiet about their experiences outside of South Africa as a result of the Defense Act; they even had to sign declarations that they would not disclose information on operations after they left the conflict. While the National Party still ruled South Africa, soldiers had to internalize their trauma and repress their stories.\textsuperscript{222}

The psychological operations here were deeply perverse. Soldiers would act out their aggression on SWAPO bodies and then eliminate those bodies in order to create the illusion that an encounter had never occurred. The SADF then enforced an official amnesia in which military

\textsuperscript{219} Metsola and Melber, "Namibia's Pariah Heroes," 89.
\textsuperscript{220} Metsola and Melber, "Namibia's Pariah Heroes," 89.
\textsuperscript{221} This was not the only narrative, but Becker argues that it was the official and dominant narrative about the "liberation war": Becker, "Remaking Our Histories," 284.
\textsuperscript{222} Baines, "Introduction," 10.
stories were kept quiet and memory was suppressed. Gary Baines has argued that this official amnesia “intensified individual amnesia” as soldiers grappled with their experiences. Soldiers were left without a place to express their trauma and were given no treatment for their PTSD, if they had it.223 Attempting to forget was their best option. While the imposed silence of soldiers on the Border War would end through novels, memoirs, and then testimony at the TRC, amnesia among the larger population about the Border War would persist through the early nineties, the end of apartheid, and even the TRC. The TRC only featured important white commanders of Vlakplaas and Koevoet, several other soldiers, a medic, and a few black victims of Vlakplaas operations. The TRC failed to involve as many people from the Koevoet unit as officials had wanted.

Written and oral evidence on the South African atrocities was more prominent in Namibia, but these accounts have unsurprisingly guided only Namibian, as opposed to South African, perspectives on what they called the "liberation war."224 The traditional Namibian narrative has been that SWAPO won freedom through the "barrel of the gun," ignoring the role that many Namibians played in the conflict as agents and victims.225 This narrative is not wedded to geopolitical and ideological causes of the conflict like the South African one, but it participates in a similar obfuscation of the way that the border conflict had a strong impact on Namibian civilian daily life. Reading the short stories and poems in Coming on Strong: Writings by Namibian Women reveals a different image of the border. This compilation does not provide every possible Namibian perspective, but it nonetheless contains varied stories about the conflict, with crucial similarities. One recurring story is that of Koevoet soldiers entering homes and then

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beating Namibian women and children. Unlike Nujoma and the other SWAPO officials, these women dwelled on their traumatic experiences, insisting, "I won't forget it in my life," "That was the worst day of my life I will not forget it," "I cannot forget this time," and "It is better to hear than it is to see."

The comparison between the Namibian accounts of trauma and the white South African accounts of the conflict is important for thinking about how those in power come to understand wartime trauma and how victims remember their own suffering. The official South African narrative certainly obscures all of these memories. The stories presented in chapter two and three do provide similar accounts to the Namibian accounts on how Koevoet soldiers regularly beat and punished civilians. The most notable difference between Namibian accounts and accounts from white soldiers is how each group relates to the necessity of remembering the conflict. For the Namibian women, the "liberation war" came in and disrupted their daily lives in random traumatic outbursts. This rupture and the fundamental alteration it brought to how they lived each day has meant that they will never forget it. Some women lived in fear that the soldiers would "come back and beat [them] until [they] die[d]." Many of the cited South African soldiers simply told their stories; that was their form of remembrance. For others, the TRC confession acted as a "healing process," and they similarly wanted to "make reparation to the Namibians and to try and help and then just make sense of what actually happened there because it was absolute madness."

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228 Valeria Nampila, *Coming on Strong*, 22.
230 Eufemia Uutoni, *Coming on Strong*, 23.
231 Ria Kakelo, *Coming on Strong*, 28.
232 John Deegan, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Cape Town, 7/23/97
how remembrance itself works. For Namibians, traumatic memories are an unalterable condition of their present lives. For South African soldiers, memories can be overcome and, in some sense, forgotten. Perhaps memories of the conflict became a condition of daily life for the soldiers with PTSD, but even for these men, there was a sense that the Veteran's Association could alleviate their trauma through national engagement.  

The "healing" of TRC confessions and reparations for Namibians was supposed to cleanse the guilt of these soldiers. The Namibian women cannot ultimately "heal" the scars of rapes and beatings.

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The mentality of covering up past wounds would determine many of the other ways that South Africa interacted with its history in the Namibian conflict. Even after war fighting ended, Namibia became independent, and apartheid was dismantled in South Africa, the SADF continued to construct myths of its importance to South African security. The recruitment video that I mentioned earlier was made in 1996 and attempted to rewrite the image of the South African Security Force. The Security Forces had become a token example of South Africa's multi-racial society as it was made up of volunteers from all racial groups. Yet this pluralist emphasis sought to rewrite and at the same time obscure the ways racial policies had psychologically alienated black soldiers in SADF units such as Koevoet in the past.

The video was symptomatic of a larger historical amnesia concerning previous South African security operations. Special Forces were framed as delivering vital blows to opponents throughout Southern Africa. The video tied the contemporary 1996 unit directly to the Special Forces unit that arose in 1972. The contemporary unit was claimed to be the same unit as the one in 1972 despite the atrocities those units had committed over the years of apartheid. The South African military still wanted people to view those past Security Forces positively. The sense that

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233 Deegan, 7/23/97.
these soldiers had escaped South African society to wreak havoc in Namibia was lost in the midst of the peaceful transition to the ANC government. The units were perhaps more inclusive in the post-apartheid era, but this video seemed to emphasize the fact that they were in charge of the same missions, namely operating with stealth and acting as "masters of long term survival in the African bush." The recruitment film could have easily run ten years earlier and would have communicated the same message to potential Koevoet or SADF soldiers.

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These myths of an enduring Security Force and the official secrecy around the Border War were interrupted in the late 1990s with an outpouring of remembrance. From 1996 to 1998, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission represented a key opportunity for soldiers and South African elites to rewrite South African history and provide remorseful accounts of the Bush War and its victims. Yet despite the testimony of soldiers, the final TRC Report continued to perpetuate the faulty memory of previous times.

Logistically, it was difficult to get as many soldiers to testify as TRC officials wanted because many were suspicious that their testimonies would be used against them in trials or make them into victims; generals either refused to testify or ignored questions about their crimes because they felt that the TRC was looking to unfairly and automatically find the SADF guilty of ignoring rules of engagement in conflicts.

In terms of published documents, however, the amount written on Koevoet, the Bush War, and even conflict outside of South Africa in general remained miniscule in comparison to other topics on which the government commissioned official reports. Christopher Saunders did a survey of the TRC Report and how it covered conflict outside of South Africa during apartheid.

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He argues that the 60 pages (out of 2,700) about actions in Namibia and Angola in the chapter on "The State outside South Africa between 1960 and 1990" represents the collective denial of the importance of events during the Bush War. He says that the TRC was much less concerned with the details of particular atrocities because there were no victim hearings for the regions outside of South Africa. The TRC was supposed to investigate and provide context for all of the human rights violations over 34 years in South Africa and the surrounding countries. The massive amount of data meant that the TRC focused only on "high profile" cases and used a narrow definition of "gross human rights violations." The pressure of publishing a five-volume TRC Report in two years meant that it was written before many amnesty hearings, including some cited here, which added new testimony on Namibia. Only 13 of the 7,000 amnesty applications were even about incidents in Namibia or Angola.\textsuperscript{236}

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In addition to only covering small parts of the conflicts outside of South Africa, the TRC Report utilized the same framing as many of the traditional military histories and the boosterist accounts. The TRC Report, which explicitly set out to investigate "acts which...led to or created the conditions for the perpetration of gross violations of human right" even began by stating that the involvement in nearby countries was determined by "cold war confrontation."\textsuperscript{237} The TRC Report then admitted, "Koevoet was a highly effective unit" because it had a killing ratio of 1:25 and in the first year it lost only 23 members and killed 511 enemies.\textsuperscript{238} The question was how this event and these statistics would be framed. Former members and media apologists, who had likely covered the unit during the conflict, have embraced these statistics as signs that Koevoet's effectiveness made it one of the best units. While the TRC Report takes a very negative view

\textsuperscript{236} Saunders, "South Africa's Role in Namibia/Angola," 268-272.
\textsuperscript{237} TRC Report: p. 42-43, 2/2/3, and 2/2/6.
\textsuperscript{238} TRC Report 2/2/123
towards Koevoet in its conclusion, saying that they committed "gross human rights violations," they remain complicit with this more sympathetic view by adopting a perverse understanding of effectiveness, which relies purely on body counts.²³⁹

The valorization of the Koevoet unit in the wake of 1989 and even since the TRC provides an interesting case for examination into how the politics of memory attempts to portray and distill violence. Between the end of the conflict in 1989 and the TRC, former soldiers and media members wrote memoirs and interview-based pieces on the SADF in South West Africa, simply in defense of their actions and the conflict.²⁴⁰ The TRC interrupted the production of self-reflexive memory with a much different goal and opportunity. As stated above, it sought to expose the violations of human rights committed inside and outside of South Africa. The TRC Report by no means presented a comprehensive or nuanced examination of specific incidents or specific units but instead tried to touch on each operation that occurred outside of South Africa.²⁴¹ The testimony at the TRC, however, was quite revealing because it provides the most honest picture of how individual soldiers remembered the conflict. Some, like the medic Sean Callaghan, were more willing to reveal everything they experienced. Others, such as Captain Mentz, avoided recounting specifics entirely.²⁴²

In contrast, reflection on Koevoet after the TRC has often been of a boosterist character. In 2013 General Hans Dreyer, who had formed the unit in 1979, unveiled a new memorial in Pretoria to the Koevoet soldiers. The round memorial features a semicircle wall with the names of the 166 soldiers who died over the ten years of its existence with two statues of soldiers

²³⁹ TRC Report, pg. 77
²⁴⁰ See Peter Stiff, The Covert War, Jim Hooper, Koevoet!; For memoirs see: Kamongo and Bezuidenhout, Shadows in the Sand, Durand, Zulu Zulu Golf; Durand, Zulu Zulu Foxtrot, and De Kock, A long night's damage
²⁴¹ TRC Report, 2/2
²⁴² Callaghan 7/31/00; Willem Wouter Mentz, Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa, Tape Recording, Cape Town, 3/12/97.
carrying semi-automatic weapons in the middle of the circle. The wall states, in Afrikaans and English, "We will remember." The key question for the viewer, however, is: "What will we remember?" The memorial articulates a particular memory and understanding of the conflict in Namibia that instructs the viewer to experience melancholy towards Koevoet losses rather than the sorrow of the Namibians, of the traumatized soldiers, and of the conflict in general.

This difficulty is one of the core problems with memorial spaces. As Dana Luciano argues, monumentalism "is not especially historical" because its "pedagogy of self-consolidation is facilitated by reductive, monologic and imprecise versions of historical events," instructing people how to feel by "emphasizing effect and eliding cause."243 This is precisely the message of the Koevoet memorial; the viewer should be inspired by their bravery in such a treacherous foreign environment and mourn the result (i.e. the death of 166 soldiers). These emotions are all valid and important in assessing historical events, but in monuments such as this one, divergent narratives about the past are foreclosed because of the particular meaning the monument gives to the more complicated historical event. Luciano suggests that these monuments utilize mythical understandings of the past to encourage nationalism and a specific cultural identity.244

Discourse about the monument, in terms of comments surrounding the Memorial and in the one article published on its unveiling, has focused on the sacrifice that these soldiers made for South Africa.245 It is as if contemporary South Africa is the same uninterrupted state of the 1980s, as if the Koevoet soldiers were not fighting under the apartheid government. The memorial honors their sacrifice at the expense of thousands of Namibians and their muted

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244 Luciano, Arranging Grief, 172.
voices. It was nationalism of this variety that inspired apartheid separation and foreign conflict. In this way the memorial forgets the cause of such sacrifices in the name of national honor, encouraging the same nationalist politics that marred South Africa for decades.

The Koevoet memorial ceremony, however, presents a wrinkle in this sense of cultural identity and nationalism. The trouble with this nationalism is that many of the soldiers who died and those who went to honor their lost comrades were originally from Namibia, so they did not express the same nationalism as the white South African commanders. Despite the fact that many Namibians would refer to these black former Namibians as outsiders and "South Africans" in their post-conflict writings, one should not forget that the South Africans forced the war onto these Namibians and made them join Koevoet. In the late 1990s, "they found themselves without a country" and had to flee to South Africa. Today, they face alienation from a Namibia that no longer wants them. These people certainly felt kinship to their fellow soldiers, white and black, but it was, in many cases, the brutality of the South African invasion that ruptured the ties with their homeland. These soldiers lauded the memorial in the same way the white commanders, such as General Dreyer, honored it, yet, historically, those in positions of power were always the white commanders. Here we have two groups engaging in memorial politics, yet the alignment of those in power with those who are now alienated is disturbing when the message of the monument has been a nationalist embrace of an immemorial South African military, lauded as the "most successful in this low-intensity insurgent war." White commanders could appropriate the support that black soldiers gave for the memorial in order to

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246 Becker, "Remaking Our Histories," 289; Becker here is referencing the collection of Namibian accounts on the border war Coming on strong. Writing by Namibian Women, which was edited by Margie Orford and Nepeti Nicanor
justify their original actions in Namibia, which included creating the Koevoet unit and then coercing many of the Namibians to join the unit. Black soldiers did not express what would seem to be an obvious dissonance between their experiences and those of white commanders perhaps because the gathering at the memorial created a sense of "coming home to the people [they] lived and died with for so many seasons," which was in stark contrast to their inability to go back home to Namibia after the war.\textsuperscript{250} In this way, the memorial sought to cleanse the psyche of both groups as they were able to experience a cathartic release by "honoring [their] own fallen comrades" in order to mask the deeper trauma of the conflict and obscure from memory those they faced and killed during the war.

We observe a similar whitewashing of the violent racial politics that defined Koevoet in the boosterist writings that have appeared between 1989 and today. Peter Stiff's book \textit{The Covert War} is based on primary interviews, and Stiff frames Koevoet's actions in a very positive way, calling their denial of the black SWAPO revolution in Namibia "heroic."\textsuperscript{251} The other major book based on interviews that focuses on Koevoet soldiers is Jim Hooper's \textit{KOEVOET!} in which he provides an account of the daily life in the unit based on interviews and several months that he spent with Koevoet during the war. As I have mentioned before, Hooper was under military scrutiny, but even in a book published outside of the context of the conflict Hooper remains apologetic towards the unit. He situates the conflict in a tit-for-tat framework where the attacks from SWAPO justified Koevoet counter-attacks and brutality.\textsuperscript{252} This framework obscures the substantial violations that are relevant to the history of Koevoet. Even Sisingi Kamongo, who wrote the first account by a black soldier, claimed that in the conflict "There was no place for

\textsuperscript{250} Potgieter, "Koevoet veterans," \textit{Daily Maverick}.
\textsuperscript{251} Stiff, \textit{The Covert War}, 486.
\textsuperscript{252} Hooper, \textit{KOEVOET!}, 37-48.
politics or apartheid...Black ex-SWAPO and white South African Police in one team - we just had to make it work.”

These repetitive attempts to provide a more "balanced perspective" of the war, which argues that SWAPO was violent towards SADF soldiers, reveals how the psyche maintains its coherence in the face of traumatic memory. Because these men felt alienated both during and after their service and often in different ways, they had to constantly justify transgressions, placing blame on their SWAPO enemies. During the war they could sublimate their trauma and alienation by aggressively eliminating their enemies, enjoying executions as a distraction from their isolation. With the war over and a general social feeling that South Africa had lost in the same way the U.S. lost the Vietnam War, these men clearly felt that they still had to justify their past choices as reasonable and even necessary. The Koevoet unit was generally marginalized in academic literature and public media because of secrecy during the war and the stigma that had developed in the early nineties, but a community of former soldiers and journalists remained writing boosterist pieces that might alter that stigma and soothe their own unease about the past.

Within this community, the unit was portrayed as one of the most effective units or one of the most efficient units despite the acknowledged atrocities. The dominance of body count comparisons and the discourse of efficiency disembodies the trauma of former soldiers and their stories. Even blogs and other internet sites, which many of the former soldiers use to discuss

253 Kamongo, Shadows, Loc. 800.
254 Baines, "South Africa's Vietnam?" 1-21
255 As in both the TRC Report, and the above article on the memorial.
their memories, place an emphasis on how Koevoet was one of the most honorable and appreciated units because they were so incredibly effective at disposing of SWAPO enemies.

It is important to note that these boosterist memorial pieces dovetail with the two predominant arguments about geopolitics, ideology, and isolation described in the first chapter. When justifying the unit, these accounts argue that the crisis of political ideology that had stricken South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, fearing the black and red threats, left the country desperate for new ways to revolutionize the conflict, so they turned to a secret counter-insurgency and counter-intelligence unit in 1979. For these soldiers, they were crucial to changing the tide in Northern Namibia and freeing up soldiers to fight in Southern Angola. Stating the uniqueness of the unit became equivalent to lauding its efficiency; it was that unique brutality that allowed them to become so effective, the narrative went.

While the accounts analyzed above may speak to the general social consciousness about Koevoet, it is difficult to embrace these more apologetic narratives. The TRC occurred between the end of the war and the erection of the monument. The final Report may not have been as thorough as possible, but during the TRC process there was a clear outpouring of remorse and testimony from soldiers who had participated in Koevoet in the bush.

The medic Callaghan, who gave the most candid testimony, said he felt caught in the middle of the conflict not by his own will and felt that his acquiescence was required given that there seemed to be a trade off between his death and that of others because there were weekly firefights that threatened his life. Each SWAPO insurgent murdered or taken captive and later eliminated was supposed to assure him that Koevoet was winning. While classifying this role as one of "omission rather than commission," he remained unsure even after the fact whether his

256 Baines, "Introduction," 10-11
intentions were aligned with the team's intentions to kill their prisoners in brutal and unforgiving ways. He had not explicitly cared whether the prisoners died in the heat of the conflict because of the sense that there was a tradeoff between his life and SWAPO lives; only after the conflict when he was forced to reflect on the experience did he develop a negative moral disposition towards the event and begin to feel the understandable level of guilt.\textsuperscript{258} The outpouring of guilt during the TRC now seems to be a mere blip in the memory of Koevoet.\textsuperscript{259} Dealing with this guilt has led some of the TRC respondents to suggest that they could overcome the trauma of the conflict and "heal" the wounds of the past.\textsuperscript{260} Rearticulating those traumatic memories here contests this attempt to overcome and forget that past.

The positive soldier memoirs over the years,\textsuperscript{261} the reaction to the memorial, and even blog comments have dominated the discourse on the Bush War. People routinely repeat the kill ratio of Koevoet as a sign of its brutal efficiency. Calling this the best unit in SADF history, some insist that Koevoet was never defeated but "sold out by treacherous politicians."\textsuperscript{262} Others frame it as a "low intensity insurgent war" in order to soften the reality of its methods and even results.\textsuperscript{263} They emphasize the bravery of their comrades and defend this hyper-masculine military culture. Finally, they insist on an unknowledge of the apartheid policies. Apartheid is not a relevant consideration to their choice to join Koevoet or fight. They place themselves in a vacuum dictated by the social environment while at the same time denying the racial politics, which were constitutive of this social environment. There were powerful social influences acting

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\textsuperscript{258} Callaghan 7/31/00. \\
\textsuperscript{259} The stories of which I have attempted to capture in previous chapters. \\
\textsuperscript{260} See the comparison with Namibian perspective above. \\
\textsuperscript{261} As above, see: Kamongo and Bezuidenhout, \textit{Shadows in the Sand}, Durand, Zulu Zulu Golf; Durand, Zulu Zulu Foxtrot, and De Kock, \textit{A long night's damage}. \\
\textsuperscript{263} Potgieter, "Koevoet veterans," \textit{Daily Maverick}.
\end{flushright}
here, as I have suggested, but now communities of soldiers, commanders, and journalists justify their participation on the basis of environmental factors alone, such as money, fear of a SWAPO government, and fear of Koevoet terror. The individual acts of aggression operate outside of these factors. Certainly, part of the decision to fight was that many of the Namibians who had decided to turn or volunteered saw greater injustice in a SWAPO government. Yet the insistence that racial politics should not have mattered in their decisions covers up the reach of apartheid policies in Southern Africa. Within these communities, racial politics is still denied as relevant to Koevoet's action even though, as the TRC Report made clear, apartheid mediated all of South Africa's policies.
conclusion

Examining the communities and the ways in which people have expressed memory about Koevoet and the Bush War has revealed that historical amnesia among white South Africans and some black Koevoet soldiers has become a defining characteristic of this conflict. The TRC proved ineffective at attracting many military commanders. While it still managed to create a melancholic moment, that moment seems to have been temporary as monuments, memoirs, and Internet comments have lauded the soldiers' actions and results and have redeployed the rhetoric of efficiency in order to obscure the way in which violence occurred in Namibia. The most terrifying manifestations of this culture based on Koevoet soldiers and supporters are the comments from a white former Koevoet operative. Arn Durand has said, "I'm not sorry for what I did. If I had to go back I'd do it again. I'd just make sure I killed more of them." Durand has taken this rhetoric to the extreme, as he does not even feel the need to justify the unit. Writing two books along the way, Durand has shown that putting the narrative in terms of whether or not the conflict was justified allows soldiers to erase all memories of violence and trauma because they can always provide reasons to remain unapologetic.

In this same way, writers, such as Stiff and Hooper, created a subculture that valorized the unit with boosterist accounts, which sought to justify Koevoet atrocities. Yet those remain the only self-reflective accounts of the war because scholarship elsewhere is relatively disinterested in the specific transgressions of Koevoet soldiers. It is perhaps surprising then to say that traditional military histories align with these boosterist accounts. The traditional histories remove all human elements from the conflict and locate that conflict outside of the meaningful concerns

for 1980s South Africa. On the other hand, the accounts give gruesome detail of the brutal efficiency of SADF units. However, these accounts, in their quest to defend the soldiers and the Koevoet unit, appeal to the lack of control and decision-making power that the soldiers had. These accounts insist that the soldiers were thrown into a conflict that was determined by ideological elites. For these writers, the atrocities of the Bush War were not about the soldiers' individual actions or even the military culture of Koevoet, the people above them had instigated the war for their own political and geopolitical reasons, and the individual soldiers had to do what they could in the situations that they faced.\textsuperscript{265}

Because of these dominant strains in the literature and the new spaces for remembrance, the memory of Koevoet violence has been coded in a particular way; one that emphasizes body counts, effectiveness, and social environment, but discounts its material effects on the bodies and lives of Namibians. Body counts are, ironically, disembodied, and the pure calculations of soldiers traded for insurgents makes the conflict even more abstract.

For contemporary South Africa, these codings have reinforced the contradiction that allowed black soldiers to fight for a racist regime. More broadly, it was the appearance of effectiveness that allowed these methods to migrate to other parts of the South African Police Force and it was this seeming effectiveness that allowed the Security Forces to advertise and act in the same way in 1996, after apartheid ended, as they did in 1986. The historical amnesia over the Bush War and Koevoet certainly did not stop with the end of apartheid or with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as both became small blips in the South African conscience.

I have sought to reclaim the tragic narratives of the Namibian conflict within the South African historicity. I have attempted to provide a human narrative to the dehumanization of Namibians. I have examined how individual acts of aggression within an opaque context

\textsuperscript{265} Kamongo, \textit{Shadows in the Sand}, Loc. 234-390.
revealed that this conflict was not purely ideological or based on the social environment. Finally, I have argued that these specific human narratives can contest the scholarly arguments about the geopolitics and isolation of the Namibian conflict as well as its memory-based flip side, which valorizes the hyper-masculine aggression under the heading of "efficiency."

I return to the opening question, "When did post-apartheid South Africa begin?" The question should not be "When did it begin?" but instead "when can it begin?" The specter of the Bush War certainly still haunts the minds of Koevoet soldiers, through both denial and, for some, repentance, but the personal accounts of TRC amnesty applicants and non-applicants are both opportunities for criticism and retelling. This rearticulation of memory can dwell on and reclaim the violence of the past, disrupting what has seemed to be a culture that remains somewhat agnostic on the historical violence perpetrated by the Security Forces outside of the country.


. Interview by Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. Tape recording.


secondary works


