

**Wishing Us Away:
Challenges facing ex-combatants
in the 'new' South Africa**

by

Sasha Gear



Violence and Transition Series, Vol. 8, 2002.

[Sasha Gear](#) is a Researcher at the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.

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Introduction

This report provides an exploration of some key issues affecting ex-combatants in South Africa. It is based on a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups with former members of various armed groupings that participated in South Africa's recent conflict.¹ The analysis is organised under six inter-related themes:

- Betrayal
- The SANDF Experience
- Community Expectations, Perceptions and the Stigmatisation of Ex-combatants
- Violence and Crime
- Trauma and Distress
- Revenge Violence, Former Enemies and Reconciliation

For the purposes of the report, 'ex-combatants' are defined as the fighters of South Africa's past violent conflicts who are not currently situated within the state agencies of safety and security, i.e. South African National Defence Force (SANDF), South African Police Services (SAPS). Little is known of the present situations of these ex-combatants. Indeed, many former fighters, who often carry with them decades of militarised experiences and the accompanying burdens of these have, as one respondent put it, 'just disappeared into South Africa ...' where they must attempt to build new lives for themselves.

Demobilised² ex-combatants who no longer hold positions in the formal security structures are conventionally considered a vulnerable population. This is because the termination of their combatant activities requires them to find alternative methods of income generation and support - a demand for which they are often ill equipped. Furthermore, they find themselves in a hostile environment characterised by high levels of unemployment. This vulnerability combined with their former combatant status has led to characterisations of this population as a security threat.

Not all ex-combatants are equally placed in relation to this context. As is evident in South

Africa, many former fighters of the Liberation Movement presently occupy prominent positions in both government and the corporate world. These ex-combatants have certainly not 'disappeared' but, instead, play visible and fundamental roles in society. But this is by no means true for the majority of ex-combatants. This investigation attempts to contribute to an understanding of the situations of those ex-combatants who have 'disappeared' from the public eye and the discourses of dominant society.

The respondents

South Africa has a vast and heterogeneous ex-combatant population, originating from an array of armed formations and experiences.³ This report focuses primarily on some of those whose participation in (or preparation for) armed conflict took place under the auspices of the African National Congress's (ANC) Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), including some who operated within Self Defence Unit (SDU) structures, and the apartheid state's South African Defence Force (SADF).

Within both these general categories there are a host of other combatant category distinctions to be made. At a very broad level the SADF combatants can be divided into Permanent Force members and those who served on a part-time basis as members of the Citizen Force. MK soldiers can broadly be considered to fall into those who left South Africa to train in exile (and who might have been deployed in South Africa or not) and those who operated internally throughout their combatant days. Especially within MK though, categories of combatants cannot be rigidly defined. For example, many, while perceiving themselves to be fighting for liberation in the townships where they lived, had only very tenuous or remote links with the ANC and its formal armed structure (MK). Others 'linked' themselves to MK through minimal training, and/or the provision of certain ordinances. Others who went for training in exile did so for varying periods of time. Some spent the large part of their lives in exile, while many of the later recruits were in exile for as little as one or two years.

For the purposes of this report ex-combatants who participated in the ANC's armed struggle are uniformly referred to as 'MK/SDU'.⁴ The majority of these respondents operated primarily inside South Africa. Many of them however, had exile experiences when they left the country to receive training offered by the ANC in the early 1990s. Before this they had operated as SDUs or 'comrades' in the townships. Although some of the research participants spent long periods in exile - having left South Africa in the 1970s or 1980s - these are the minority. Three focus groups with these respondents were complemented by several in-depth interviews.

Former SDUs from the township of Thokoza on the East Rand (Gauteng) are categorised separately from other MK/SDU respondents for their very particular combat experiences. They participated in some of the most intense violent conflict that took place within South Africa's boundaries. The violence that engulfed Thokoza in the early 1990s was akin to that of high-intensity warfare. Respondents in this category are also usually considerably younger than other ex-combatants. One focus group and five in-depth interviews were conducted with these respondents. Additional material was collected through a focus group with parents/caregivers, and another with girlfriends/ex-girlfriends of Thokoza SDUs.

This study also draws on a series of interviews with ex-combatants conducted on behalf of the CSVR during 1999 and 2000 in KwaZulu-Natal.⁵ These interviews were mainly with former members of the non-statutory forces, i.e. MK, the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA, the Pan African Congresses' armed-wing) and local SDUs. In addition, several interviews were conducted with former combatants aligned to the Inkatha Freedom Party, who had been trained by the South African Defence Force in Namibia's Caprivi Strip. Interviews were also held with members of the Inkatha-aligned Self Protection Units (SPUs).

South African Defence Force (SADF) respondents⁶ divide between those who were Permanent Force members, and those who were members of the Citizen Force. Alternatively, they can be categorised as ex-Special Forces and former conscripts. (This is the case for respondents, but importantly, not all Permanent Force members were in Special Forces). All respondents who held permanent positions did so within the SADF's Special Forces' Reconnaissance Commandos. In this report these respondents are referred to as 'Special Forces' operators or 'recces'. Also housed within Special Forces but on a part-time (or Citizen Force) basis, were members of the Parachute Battalions. These respondents are also referred to as 'Special Forces' operators or, alternatively, 'parabats'. Most of the ex-Special Forces respondents were deployed exclusively outside South Africa. Interviews were conducted with a total of seven ex-Special Forces operators.

The other main category of SADF respondents is that of former conscripts, specifically those who had done their military service during the 1980s. All but one of these respondents had been involved in combat in either the former South West Africa (Namibia) or Angola. Some of these respondents had, in addition, been deployed in South Africa's townships. One focus group was conducted with former conscripts, and another with female relatives of conscripts who had had similar combat experiences. The female relative group included wives, ex-wives and mothers of former conscripts. Most 'wife' respondents are, in addition, sisters of former conscripts.

While the bulk of the conscript data was collected through these focus groups, this information is supplemented in places with the words of other conscripts, accessed through subscription to an English-medium internet chat-line of ex-SADF soldiers. Although former soldiers with a range of SADF experiences subscribe to 'ArmyTalk',⁷ most were engaged with the military in a Citizen Force capacity. This additional method of data collection provides important supplementary material for an ex-combatant category that represents a significant proportion of South Africa's white, adult male population. Subscribers to this group appear to broadly represent a different section of this population from that represented by those who participated in the focus group (none of whom subscribe to the chat-line). Contributions from this source are indicated by "AT", for 'ArmyTalk'.

In addition to these key respondent categories several additional interviews were carried out with former APLA members and members of Inkatha Self Protection Units (SPUs). The small numbers in both cases preclude these interviews from constituting respondent categories. Rather, the interviews are used as supplementary material where appropriate.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted between July 1999 and May 2000. Apart from the specific interviews that took place in KwaZulu Natal (mentioned above) and some

ArmyTalk chat-line contributions, the research was done in the province of Gauteng.

With the exception of one APLA interviewee, all ex-combatants who participated in the research process are men. The absence of the voices of ex-MK women particularly, constitutes a crucial gap in the research. In addition, numerous other ex-combatants whose current situations also remain unknown, do not feature. As such, the focus of this study is relatively narrow. However, while its findings are not representative of the diverse ex-combatant population, they are indicative of a range of issues and problems percolating within the ranks of South Africa's former soldiers.

Notes:

¹ The following interviews and focus groups were conducted during the research phase of this report: three focus groups with former members of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and former members of Self Defence Units (SDUs) aligned to the African National Congress (ANC); one focus group with former Thokoza SDUs; one focus group with female partners of Thokoza SDUs and one with relatives of Thokoza SDUs; one focus group with former conscripts of the South African Defence Force (SADF) and one focus group with female relatives of former SADF conscripts. In addition, a total of 26 interviews were conducted with former members of MK, APLA, SDUs, Self Protection Units (SPUs), the SADF and other key informants. Further to these research participants, discussions held with additional relevantly-placed individuals contributed to information gathering and data analysis.

² 'Demobilisation' is used here in its broad sense. It refers to all of South Africa's ex-combatants who are no longer part of the state's armed structures, and not only to the former members of the Non-Statutory Forces (MK and APLA) who were affected by the formal demobilisation process.

³ For a breakdown of different ex-combatant groupings in South Africa, see Gear, S. *Now that the War is Over: Ex-Combatants, Transition and the Question of Violence. A Literature Review*. CSVR report.

⁴ This is not to say that the histories of many ex-combatants do not fall more clearly into either an 'MK' or an 'SDU' description. Rather, as far as most of our respondents are concerned, the categories are blurred.

⁵ See, *Report on Ex-Combatants in KwaZulu Natal*, unpublished report, CSVR, December 2000. This report was commissioned by the CSVR and based on the KwaZulu Natal interviews.

⁶ In instances the words of ex-SADF soldiers are cited merely as 'SADF'. This is in line with requests made by some respondents who fear the possible consequences of more precise identification.

⁷ ArmyTalk <http://moo.sun.ac.za/mailman/listinfo/armytalk/>

Next section: [Betrayal](#)