

The Impact of the Cold War and the Fall of the Berlin Wall on Southern Africa

John Daniel

Southern Africa's immersion as a region into 'the international civil war of the twentieth century', as Sue Onslow (2009: 2) has described the Cold War, came relatively late in that seven-decade long conflict and lasted only a short period, no more than two decades. Yet the price paid in human and material terms was horrendous, arguably, as I have suggested elsewhere, 'one of the great crimes of the twentieth century' (Daniel in Onslow 2009: 50). The gradual winding down of the Cold War in the latter half of the 1980s likewise impacted on events in the south of the region, contributing significantly both to ending a decade of bloodshed as well as to the early 1990s transition to democracy in South Africa. The fall of the wall in Berlin was unquestionably one of the defining images of the twentieth century but it was not the decisive trigger to change in southern Africa. It was, as I will argue, a separate cold war-related development prior to the fall which was the greater catalyst. But first the terrible impact of the Cold War, a catastrophic legacy little recognized by the South African public of the present day.

The politician most responsible for the catastrophe of the Cold War in Southern Africa was PW Botha. In 1966, he assumed the post of Minister of Defence in the National Party government. Up to this point, the South African government's primary security concern had been the rising tide of African nationalism and the threat which European decolonisation from Africa was seen as posing to continue white-minority hegemony in the south of the continent. PW Botha's vision of regional security was, however, broader. According to a South African Defence Force (SADF) submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), he conceptualized the threat to South Africa within the context of the 'East-West ideological conflict'. In his view, the 'West was

threatened by Soviet expansionism' and he envisioned South Africa as playing a vital role in that conflict 'as part of the West' and as part of 'a global struggle against the forces of communism' (1996a: 4). Central also to Botha's thinking was the notion that the 'defence line' must be kept 'as far as possible away from South Africa' (Ibid).

Consistent with this view, a number of pre-emptive steps were taken post-1966. These included i) the deployment of police units to both northern Namibia in response to SWAPO's decision to launch an armed struggle and into Southern Rhodesia to assist Rhodesian government forces fighting Zimbabwean and ANC guerrillas. According to the SADF, these units were dispatched 'to fight against men who originally came from South Africa and were on their way back to commit terrorism in South Africa' (1996a:5) – a classic expression of pre-emptive interventionist thinking; ii) what the SADF referred to as 'limited support' to Portuguese forces fighting liberation movements in both Angola and Mozambique. This included helicopters and tracking personnel for use in Angola and intelligence and logistical support in Mozambique (1996a: 6).

By April 1970, this limited support had developed to the point where a senior SADF intelligence analyst, Brig. Willem 'Kaas' Van Der Waals, was stationed in the South African consulate in Luanda as liaison officer to the Portuguese armed forces in Angola while in Mozambique several high-ranking SADF officers were deployed at the Portuguese regional military headquarters in Nampula, northern Mozambique. One of these was Brigadier Cornelius (Cor) Van Niekerk who in 1979 was appointed to head up the Department of Military Intelligence's (DMI) Directorate of Special Tasks (DST), a covert unit supporting operations by the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) in Mozambique and the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in Angola.

By the early 1970s, therefore, there was an extensive co-operative network involving the Rhodesian, Portuguese and South African governments and their security forces committed to preventing the forces of Southern African Black Nationalism advancing further south than Zambia and Tanzania. As these relations deepened, so too did their discourse of anti-Sovietism. According to the apartheid intelligence operative, Craig Williamson, by 1971 the security studies field had become a veritable industry with all of South Africa's police and war colleges offering courses in the theory and practice of counter-revolutionary warfare whose

‘central tenet ... was that the Soviet Union was central to our security problems...that the coexistence of the Soviet Union and imperialist states was unthinkable. One or other must triumph in the end. And before that end comes, a series of frightful collisions between the Soviet Republic and the bourgeois states will be inevitable’ (TRC 1997:2). In this paradigm, Southern Africa was conceptualized as part of the bourgeois world in which the Soviet Union would ‘use a series of revolutionary civil wars ...as a means to advance (in camouflage) the Marxist ideal of world revolution’ (Ibid).

The overthrow by revolutionary military officers of the longstanding Salazar dictatorship in Portugal in April 1974 and their decision immediately to abandon their African wars fundamentally changed the balance of power in the Southern African region. In one fell swoop, the eastern and western flanks of apartheid’s *cordon sanitaire* separating white and black Africa collapsed. In strategic terms, this meant that now for the first time ANC and SWAPO guerrillas could gain direct access to the economic heartlands of ‘the enemy’. Even more ominously for the beleaguered regime of Ian Smith in Southern Rhodesia, it would now face insurgent incursions along its lengthy eastern border with Mozambique.

The events of 1974 also affected the power balance within the National Party. Prime Minister John Vorster’s power base had since the early 1960s when he served as Minister of Justice been the police and its allied intelligence agencies. Three years after he assumed the premiership in 1966, Vorster created the Bureau of State Security (BOSS) to co-ordinate the activities of both the security arms of the police and the military intelligence division of the SADF. The establishment of BOSS accentuated the longstanding inter-agency tensions within the security arena and BOSS’ dominance was particularly resented by Minister of Defence PW Botha.

The Portuguese coup and the prospect of avowedly and Soviet-backed Marxist regimes assuming power in Mozambique and Angola triggered a fresh round of inter-agency friction. With events seeming to have confirmed the logic of his cold-war thinking, PW Botha pushed for a more militarized response. On this occasion, Vorster sided with Botha at least in regard to Angola. In October 1974, the SADF began to render support to the two western-aligned groupings (the Front for the National Liberation of Angola or FNLA

and UNITA) opposing the Soviet-backed Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in the three-sided struggle for power in post-colonial Angola.

With the collapse in mid-1975 of a power-sharing agreement negotiated in January 1975 (the Alvor Agreement) amongst the three guerrilla groupings, the United States Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, with CIA support, began to urge South Africa to intervene directly but covertly in the Angolan civil war to stop the MPLA from seizing power. In August 1975, Vorster authorized Botha to undertake a covert military invasion (Operation Savannah) of Angola with a view to install UNITA in power in Luanda. The operation at the time was illegal, and in terms of the Defence Act the deployment of South African troops beyond national borders required parliamentary approval. Not only was this not sought but not even the Cabinet was informed of the operation. As Annette Seegers put it, 'the first Foreign Affairs heard of Operation Savannah was when it received a protest from the Portuguese government' (1997:210). In short, while Henry Kissinger in Washington knew of the invasion, South Africa's then foreign minister, Hildgard Muller, did not.

The operation lasted some eight months and was terminated only when news of it leaked to the outside world and the United States publicly denounced it. By then, SADF forces were camped on the outskirts of Luanda and poised to attack the city in an attempt to dislodge the MPLA regime. In an interview (Schirmer 2000), PW Botha described the goal of the operation as follows:

The CIA had an informal agreement with us that the US would mine the harbour of Luanda and we would take Luanda with the help of Savimbi... Viljoen [Chief of the SADF, Gen. Constand Viljoen] and Col. Jan Breytenbach made use of certain parts of the army with the help of the Air Force to clear the southeastern parts of Angola from communist infiltration... at the very last moment, when our troops were near Luanda, I received a phone call from our Ambassador in the US telling me that The US Congress had laid restrictions on Pres. Ford not to assist Angola and we decided to withdraw.

Despite the humiliation of the enforced withdrawal from Angola, the operation was regarded as militarily successful and it strengthened Botha's hand politically. Conversely, it weakened Vorster's position that was seen as having danced to the American tune to no political advantage.

In his study of the South African security state, Alden (1996: 118–9) argues that a consequence of what PW Botha described in Parliament as being ‘ruthlessly left in the lurch by an undertaking that was broken’ (Ibid: 40) was a decision to embark on a nuclear weapons’ development programme. In the years ahead, South Africa developed at least six nuclear devices. A test on one of these in 1979 was detected by a US spy satellite. While Botha always denied the existence of a nuclear programme, FW de Klerk confirmed it after 1990 when he agreed under US pressure to dismantle it in Toto.

THE NATIONAL SECURITY STATE: COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY WARFARE

In September 1978, PW Botha replaced John Vorster as South Africa’s Prime Minister. The way was now clear for Botha to implement his vision of a national-security state and to achieve this he appointed a fervent cold-war warrior to succeed him as Minister of Defence. This was Gen. Magnus Malan, then Chief of the SADF, and a graduate of US army counter-insurgency training in the Viet Nam era.

Amongst his first tasks was to draft the 1979 White Paper on Defence. In doing so, he drew on an earlier draft which Botha had himself written. In it, Botha had identified the Soviet Union’s goal in South Africa as being to foment revolution in the region. He argued that South Africa was facing a ‘total onslaught’ both externally and internally. He pointed to Soviet and Cuban involvement in Angola and the international anti-apartheid solidarity campaign as evidence of the external threat ‘while the ANC was singled out as the main internal revolutionary threat’ (SADF 1996a: 7). The ANC, it should be noted, was not regarded by either Botha or the Department of Defence at this time as an autonomous actor, a domestically-grounded national liberation movement. It was instead conceptualized as a proxy of Moscow, the willing instrument of the Soviet Union’s global ambitions. The quotation from Craig Williamson cited at the head of this paper reflects this view. According to Williamson, the general view amongst the securocrats of the time was that it was time ‘to take the gloves off’ in the fight against the enemy (Ibid. 8) as, in their view, the situation in the region had reached a revolutionary phase

and that it was now time to take on the insurgents using their ‘own weapons’ and on their ‘battlefields’ (Ibid: 5) – both classic tenets of counter-revolutionary warfare theory.

Late in the 1970s and for close on a decade, the South African government unleashed on its regional backyard a strategy of counter-revolutionary warfare. Popularly dubbed the ‘total strategy to counter the total [read Soviet] onslaught’, it involved the following:

1. Scuttling for a time during the Carter presidency of the 1970s seemed to be promising prospects of a settlement to the war in Namibia in favour of a further ten years of conventional warfare directed at SWAPO forces based in both Namibia and Angola;
2. arming, training, funding and deploying local surrogate or ‘contra’ forces in each of Angola, Lesotho, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe. These not only targeted the local militaries for attack but also state infrastructure in the form of transport routes, clinics, schools, electricity lines as well as the planting of tens of thousands of mines in the farming areas. Nowhere was this more so than in Angola and Mozambique;
3. organizing security personnel into covert groups which operated as cross-border civilian death squads abducting and or assassinating insurgents and their sympathizers;
4. targeting insurgent facilities in the form of safe houses, food and weapons storage facilities etc for attack and destruction, often even in built-up areas where large- scale civilian casualties were an inevitable consequence.

The net effect was the widespread destabilization of the region and a level of death and destruction unprecedented in the histories of the states affected. According to United Nations estimates, by the late 1980s at least half a million Southern Africans had died as a direct or indirect result – induced famine, for example,- of this South African-orchestrated aggression. Commenting on this, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in its Final Report noted that the majority of the victims of the apartheid regimes attempt to cling to power were Southern Africans and not citizens of the country itself (TRC 1998: Vol.2, Ch. 1, pp. 3–4).

THE FALL OF THE WALL

Amidst this regional cauldron of death and destruction came the events of Berlin 1989. Just short of three months later, Pres. de Klerk astonished all but the most informed of observers by announcing his willingness to negotiate a new constitutional dispensation with political elements which his National Party had for decades branded as communist puppets, the instruments of a Soviet grand design to control the African sub-continent. Was there a link? Of course, but was the former – the events of November 1989 – the direct trigger for the second, the extraordinary speech of 2 February 1990 in Parliament in Cape Town? Some have argued as much but, in my view, their case is thin. My counter argument is that the fall of the wall only accelerated a transition process already underway in the region for a good three years.

In an article in the *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* in January 1996, I took issue with those whose analysis of change in southern Africa ascribed seminal importance to events in Europe by suggesting that it was rather the United States government's 'response to the changing international realities – and the very specific impact that had on its strategic thinking on South and southern Africa – that was the decisive factor in the South African transition...that both the Bush administration and the security establishment in South Africa had, by late 1989, recognized that for some time the Cold War was over well before the wall was breached. That event was more like the end of the end' (1996: 101–2).

The beginning, I argued, was the 'accession to power in the Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev and the crucial signal was the Reykjavik summit between Gorbachev and Reagan in October 1986' (Ibid: 102). While the primary focus of that gathering was arms control, its key agreement for southern Africa and other cold-war driven regional disputes in Afghanistan, Nicaragua and Ethiopia amounted to 'a redefinition of spheres of interest in the world' ...[by which] 'the United States agreed to a non-interventionist role in Eastern Europe, Nicaragua and Afghanistan in return for which the Soviet Union ceded Africa to the United States – specifically the Horn of Africa and southern Africa'(Ibid).

While the hard-line securocrats around PW Botha continued to beat the drums of war, senior intelligence figures and the more enlightened members of the cabinet including Foreign Minister

‘Pik’ Botha read the signs differently, as did senior members of the ANC like President Oliver Tambo, Head of International Relations Thabo Mbeki and Intelligence head Jacob Zuma. Fifteen months after Reykjavik, secret talks between South African government officials and the ANC were initiated. By then it is now known, National Intelligence in South Africa was secretly circulating the draft of a speech uncannily similar to that delivered by de Klerk in Parliament in February 1990. But they still had to move cautiously and largely clandestinely. Two events changed that scenario for them and pushed them to the fore.

The first was the SADF’s military setback at Cuito Cuanavale in Angola in late 1987. Confronted by the increasingly obvious limitations of a military strategy, Pres PW Botha authorized Pik Botha to negotiate a way out of the Angolan-Namibian impasse. The end result was the New York Accords of December 1988 which triggered the withdrawal of both Cuban and ANC military forces from Angola and South African troops from Namibia and which, in turn, led to its independence in March 1990. The second was the enforced removal from office in September 1989 of an ailing PW Botha and his replacement by FW de Klerk.

CONCLUSION

It should be clear from the above that by the time of the events around the Berlin wall that the momentum for change in South Africa was gathering pace. What the fall of the wall did was not create the conditions for change but push them forward and speed up the whole process. What it did was lessen the obstacles confronting those promoting a new way forward. It was, for example, now possible for FW de Klerk, under intense pressure from the United States and facing the prospect of intensified sanctions, to tell his critics that the cold war was over, that ‘we’ had won and the Soviets lost and that this had in turn, weakened the ANC in that it had lost its main sponsor. Consequently, he could argue it was now possible for the National Party to confront them politically and on a more even playing field. The ANC, he could argue, now had no choice but to negotiate.

This of course, was a misreading of the ANC’s position. The whole thrust of the ANC’s diplomacy from the time of its banning in 1960 had been to force its opponents to the negotiating table.

Only the most romantic of elements in the ANC's armed wing had imagined that Pretoria could be taken militarily. Wiser ANC heads knew better. Thus, when offered the opening of talks, the ANC responded unhesitatingly, certain in the knowledge that it could never be defeated electorally. Thus it was that while de Klerk and his top aides in National Intelligence had read the cold war signals post-1985 correctly, they were never able to understand the true realities of the nationalist struggle in southern Africa where it was not the Soviet Union that was the real problem. What was the problem for the white minorities were the legitimate aspirations of the black majority. However, the addiction of the National Party to a racist paradigm left it unable to accept that black South Africans wanted for themselves – and not some imagined Soviet master – the same thing the white minority had, namely, the right to rule and misrule themselves.

John Daniel is the academic coordinator at the School for International Training in Durban, South Africa.

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