

Beyond Judgements and Emotions: Understanding the Koevoet¹²

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Polish right-wing football fans were waving pictures of Janusz Waluś as a sign of support. His name is not widely-known: the Polish immigrant to South Africa wanted to stop the democratic transformation of South Africa, since he was afraid of the dissemination of communism due to his negative experiences in his original home country. Hence, Waluś assassinated Chris Hani, an influential communist member of the African National Congress (ANC). Waluś was released from jail in 2022.

There was another man, who was also released in 2022 in South Africa. His role is more important and complex when it comes to analysing the history of Southern Africa: Eugene de Kock, who received the nickname “Prime Evil” in the Western mainstream media. He is responsible for the death of many anti-apartheid activists and guerrilla fighters who were engaged themselves with the resistance against the white minority rule and racial segregation. De Kock grew up in an Afrikaner nationalist family, and as he became an adult man, it seemed to be one of the most natural issues to contribute to maintaining the system. Led by these intentions, he served in the South African Defence Force (SADF) in order to fight against the ‘roi gevaar’ (red danger) and ‘swart gevaar’ (black danger), which were the keywords for apartheid, used to describe the black nationalist and socialist movements.

Negotiating de Kock’s activities is a great challenge for experts. Many of them are biased by judgement and emotions; hence, Steve Crump took up a serious task when he wrote his paper about the special counter-insurgency (COIN) force of SWAPOL (South West African Police), the Koevoet (‘crowbar’ in Afrikaans). The outcome is more than remarkable: readers can gain genuine information and knowledge about the history of this controversial topic.

The author reveals his aim to distinguish himself from people without relevant experience, or those who tend to confabulate history: revisionists, academics, and armchair historians. (p. 3.) This study is built up on a solid basis of oral history: veterans of Koevoet talked about their war experiences and contributed by permitting the use of their photos from the Border War (1978-1984). All of these documents, which elevate the credibility, aim to have the readers involved in this part of war history. Diagrams

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with descriptions offer help to understand the analysis better, since this study contains numerous elements of military policy analysis.

The structure of the study includes eleven chapters (only eight of them have their own numbers). The chapters are organised in a chronological order, even though each chapter has been written on a different topic. Neither the Introduction, which is a separate chapter, did not get an own number, nor the pages presenting the armoured vehicles, insignia and uniforms. These pages are technically a separate part of the study that share additional pieces of information. The technical terms, along with their abbreviations, were collected in the Glossary, and the shortened forms are used in the main corpus. Readers may gain knowledge about the author in the Preface, in which Crump gives a short summary about his experiences in Africa. The story-telling part begins from the first numbered chapter.

Koevoet served in Namibia; nevertheless, the relevant experience of this unit came from the previous war in Rhodesia, namely the Bush War. One of the “Founding Fathers”, Eugene de Kock fought against the armoured opposition of Ian Smith’s white minority rule regime. This field recommended a great chance to develop martial and investigative skills. When South Africa decided to make South West Africa nominally independent in 1978, the war in Angola had been raging for four years. The anti-apartheid SWAPO’s (South West African People’s Organization) armoured wing, the PLAN (People’s Liberation Army of Namibia) was fighting on the side of the Angolan Marxist MPLA (People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and its military wing FAPLA (People’s Armed Forces of Liberation of Angola). South Africa, which depicted itself as an anti-communist country, intervened in the decolonization of Angola (Operation Savannah). For this reason, the presence of SADF on the northern fields of today’s Namibia was part of daily life.

The nominally independent South West Africa had its own police force, the SWAPOL, which was able to undertake only police-related tasks. Without considerable support from South Africa, the SWAPOL could not fight against the PLAN supported by the FAPLA, the Cuban forces in Angola, the Soviet Union, and the People’s Republic of China. Hence, the Koevoet was established in 1979 to support the apartheid regime, and to fight back the PLAN.

As the quasi predecessor of the Koevoet, the Ovambo Home Guard was less and less competitive with the Namibian insurgents; crossing the Red Line (defence system in the Northern part of South West Africa), they attacked farms owned by white people. De Kock, who moved to South West Africa, upgraded his skills by learning the methods and tactics of the COIN units, which were led by Nel. The South African government also behaved in a supportive way, as Colonel Johannes (Hans) Dreyer, who had a remarkable amount of experience from the South African Police Security Branch, became the leader of the Koevoet.

All the armies were suffering from the lack of a good amount of equipment. The Casspir vehicles and helicopters rapidly became an essential part of the Koevoet. Regarding the weapons, the situation was much different. Besides the original equipment, AK-47 guns and other Eastern Bloc weapons were collected from the rivals. Hence, in this sense the Koevoet shared similarities with the African indigenous insurgent organisations, or any other more important guerrilla army.

The Koevoet was a phenomenon that could not be put into the basket of “tools of the apartheid.” Archival sources from the countries of the Cold War Eastern Bloc share the observation of their diplomats that 30-40 per cent of the Koevoet soldiers were black. These African indigenous men had various motivations. One of these motivations was survival: De Kock experimented in Rhodesia and Zambia with enrolling captured soldiers of the enemy in the SADF. These soldiers played a key role in exploration. The other cause is connected to the population of Namibia: the SWAPO was originally an organisation of the Ovambo tribe, the majoritarian ethnic group (49-53 per cent of the total population between the 1940s and 1980s) could be seen as a prospective oppressor in the future. Crump’s paper contains pictures about the Koevoet’s Ovambo soldiers; in conclusion, there must have been a minority among this tribe which opposed the liberation movement.

The star of Koevoet was rising until the mid-1980s; the Lusaka Accordance, the linkage principle, and the collapse of Dirk Mudge’s government were obvious signs of transition. Therefore, the South African troops were withdrawn from Angola, and the tasks of the Koevoet were also reduced to domestic activities within the borders of South West Africa. On the other hand, anti-terrorist warfare remained its most relevant task. While the pro-South Africa regime was making several efforts to create a more humanistic image (allowing non-whites to watch movies in cinemas, visit restaurants, etc.), the Koevoet did not change their brutal methods and the way the dead bodies of PLAN guerrillas were transported across the country.

Today’s Namibia struggles with two major controversial political issues: 1) The possible redistribution of land owned by white farmers and entrepreneurs; 2) The pension salary and veteran status of former soldiers of the Koevoet. Regarding the second issue, only those soldiers are eligible who served between 1988 and 1990, while the rest of them cannot apply for these benefits. The same is true for veterans of the South West African Territorial Force. Even though the Namibian society is the most peaceful among its post-apartheid counterparts in South Africa and Zimbabwe, tensions are still palpable, the PLAN veterans having distanced themselves from the former in September 2022. As a result of memories of the bloody war, the Namibians remained firm on this issue. Hence, I recommend Steven Crump’s paper to everyone who wishes to understand the war history of apartheid and its frontline states, and especially to those who are passionate about genuine, first hand experiences.