

Book review: Apartheid's Stalingrad – How the Townships of the Eastern Cape Defied the Apartheid War Machine by Rory Riordan^{1,2}

Ashwell Glasson³

Many books have been written about Apartheid in South Africa, often from a strategic or historical perspective, frequently highlighting significant events and the leading personalities of the day. However, this book and its author, Rory Riordan, have achieved the rare feat of documenting the dynamic history, personality, and political policy in action over the early years of the anti-Apartheid movement, through to the release of Nelson Mandela. It is exhaustively researched and written in a truly accessible manner, making this book a must-read for students, historians and others with an interest in fresh and newer insights into the South African Apartheid era. The author also covers an immense range of security force plans and actions, making it particularly appealing to military and law enforcement historians, especially those with an interest in case study history of insurgency and counterinsurgency, rather than doctrinal or academic studies in those fields.

In addition to Riordan's journalistic mastery, the standout feature of this book is its geographic coverage – specifically, what is now known as the Eastern Cape province, as well as the Ciskei and Transkei homelands during the period from the early 1940s to 1990. While much has been written about the evolution of Apartheid, its policies and the security forces' campaigns and opposing campaigns in provinces such as the Transvaal and Natal and the proximate homelands during the Apartheid era, the author has brought the Eastern Cape story into the light—famous events, such as the Motherwell incident, Crossroads and Langa feature strongly. Riordan locates himself in this work as both an activist and a journalist, and thus, readers will understand that Mr Riordan was a highly committed anti-Apartheid activist, attempting to be both observer and protagonist at the same time. This approach makes his writing rich and passionate, filled with granular detail. Still, he strives to maintain his other commitment – that to journalistic objectivity.

This is likely one of the first comprehensive texts to document that formidable time in the Eastern Cape. It is essential to note that, although the author primarily focuses on the Eastern Cape, he connects the insurgency and counterinsurgency to the rest of South

¹ DOI: 10.12700/jce eas.2025.5.4.405

² Rory Riordan, *Apartheid's Stalingrad – How the townships of the Eastern Cape defied the apartheid war machine*, Jacana Publishers, viii + 537 pp., \$36.64 (paperback), 2022, ISBN: 978-1-4314-3280-6.

³ College Registrar, Southern African Wildlife College and PhD Candidate, Stellenbosch University, Faculty of Military Science; ORCID: 0000-0003-4982-9998; registrar@sawc.org.za.

Africa and the activists in exile. This offers new historical insight into the diverse personalities and decisions made across all sides of the Apartheid struggle. From Mathew Goniwe's seemingly innocent transfer from one school to another, to the antics of unskilled security police operatives, whose detention techniques nonetheless led to immense trauma for detainees.

Riordan has collected and narrated several crucial interviews and oral histories, and, along with David Goldblatt, has captured some haunting images of activists, community organisers and leaders who played a fundamental role in the insurgency in the Eastern Cape. Portraits of Govan Mbeki, Ernest Malgas, Judy Chambers, Raymond Mhlaba, and others remind us of the pedigree of the anti-Apartheid leaders. David Goldblatt's simple, yet compelling portrait photography may contain some of the last pictures of certain activists.

In reading *Apartheid's Stalingrad*, one realises that the author was himself an activist and player in the anti-Apartheid movement. In founding the Human Rights Trust in 1986 and establishing a magazine, Riordan had unprecedented access to many of the anti-Apartheid leadership, allowing him to interview storied leaders like Chris Hani, Mathew Goniwe, Khusta Jack and many others. He also engaged with Apartheid functionaries and leaders.

The author pays specific attention to the period in which the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed and how it mobilised and challenged the formation of the tricameral parliament, seen by many as a political ploy to undermine the anti-Apartheid movements and generate international support for the Apartheid government.

The author's attention to key geographical areas in Port Elizabeth and Grahamstown, such as the Ibhayi township and various other non-white areas, provides significant insight into the day-to-day lives of their citizens. Examples of this include the financial limits placed upon the Ibhayi Township Council expenditure, which meant that municipal services were limited. Bringing some of the rawness of township life to the reader, Riordan also highlights some of the joyful moments, such as quiet gatherings at night where activists from across the spectrum could meet and socialise.

Strategically, the author also tackles the explicit Cold War support that the South African Apartheid government received from the United States, specifically lighter-than-usual sanctions during the Reagan administration era. Furthermore, the author unpacks the shift in strategy by the anti-Apartheid movements, especially during states of emergency, and later, what is often overlooked in other texts on the success of the anti-Apartheid movement – winning the support of the workplaces. Where the unionisation of non-white workers was normalised, and private employers had a growing say in dealing with mass stayaways, strikes and workplace unrest.

The summation of Riordan's work also highlights that Apartheid was an undeniably whole-of-government approach to countering the anti-apartheid movements and their various attempts to bring about a whole, non-racial, democratic dispensation. His granular style makes this work particularly vibrant and valuable to a range of historians and students of African studies.