

Daily Life in the Exile Camps of the African National Congress (South Africa)

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I spent the past year in Cape Town on an IIE Fulbright Fellowship where I conducted oral histories of members of Umkhonto we Sizwe; the former armed wing of the African National Congress. This research will form the basis of my dissertation, "Cosmopolitanism in Close Quarters; Everyday Life in the Exile Camps of the African National Congress." My research is primarily concerned with reconstructing the habitus of ex-combatants over a thirty year period, roughly from 1961 to 1989.

During this time, the African National Congress reconstituted itself as an exiled political party while it directed the armed struggle against apartheid. This effort included opening training camps in a number of southern African countries, recruiting youths leaving South Africa, and then infiltrating trained combatants into South Africa. As consequence of exile, many of these combatants also saw combat in conflicts in Angola, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

Over the last twelve months, I located several ex-combatants and recorded their myriad experiences in a series of extended interviews. Interviewees discussed topics as diverse as training and combat, food and eating, discipline and indiscipline, and theatrical performance and athletics in the camps. In addition, many interviewees contributed their perspectives on the multiple wars that plagued southern Africa during this

period. These interviews, combined with newly released archival holdings, present episodes in the liberation struggle not often seen in more celebratory accounts.

My research attempts to achieve two related goals. First, I will structure this material along the lines of new military histories, which place a greater emphasis on the social dimensions of soldiering and warfare. Beneath the surface trappings of hierarchy, discipline and uniformity lies a lively field of social relations in constant flux. A major concern of this project is explaining these relations within the context of conflicts in southern Africa over the latter half of the twentieth century. Second, I hope that a detailed historical rendering of the memories of ex-combatants will contribute fresh perspectives on the liberation struggle. The vast literature on the struggle against apartheid shares two unifying



characteristics, one, it is largely a history derived from the autobiographies of prominent figures, two, it is fixated on over-determined narratives that marginalize more unwieldy accounts.

While in South Africa, I debuted portions of this research at a colloquium entitled "Radio and Its Publics," held at the Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research, and at meeting of the Human Sciences Research Council. Both presentations proved to be highly enriching experiences. I had the opportunity of presenting new research to a learned audience of South African scholars, while in the process gaining many valuable insights and critiques.

Stephen Davis is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History.