


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “Child of Koevoet”: Counterinsurgency, Crisis, and the Rise of Private Security in South Africa

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## Abstract

Scholars of various backgrounds have noted how societies across the globe have come to rely on more and more policing and incarceration since the late 1970s. To date, however, detailed analyses of the causes and consequences of this “punitive turn” have been limited to the Global North, with the vast majority of studies focused on the expansion of states’ capacity for violence. This article offers a corrective to the global study of the punitive turn by tracing the rise of South Africa’s private security industry from its inception in the late apartheid period to its current position as one of the largest of its kind in the world. Using newspaper reports, archival material from the apartheid state’s security apparatus, and ethnographic interviews of former and current members of the security industry, it shows how counterinsurgency doctrine, civil war, and deindustrialization shaped South Africa’s punitive turn, precipitating a process where violence was devolved from the state to private actors, including local militias, vigilante groups, and private security firms. This process, it is argued, is far from anomalous, and should be seen as a paradigm for the way the post-1970s punitive turn has unfolded in the majority of the world.

**Keywords:** private security; South Africa; the punitive turn; counterinsurgency; deindustrialization; neoliberalism; apartheid

In 1989 ... Mandela was still in prison, as were a suddenly growing number of people here in the States. Well-waged blue-collar jobs had, for more than ten years, been melting away.... At the same time, there was a measurable rise in what one [jokester] called “guard duty.”

—Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 2011<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Tshilongo<sup>2</sup> remembers the condensed milk and chocolate his father would share with him before leaving for the bush. He remembers the armored vehicles that carried them out of the base in Oshakati (Figure 1). He remembers how school was

<sup>1</sup>Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “What Is to Be Done?” *American Quarterly* 63, 2 (2011): 245–65, 247.

<sup>2</sup>All names are pseudonyms unless noted otherwise. Some biographical details have been altered to preserve participants’ anonymity.



**Figure 1.** A Koevoet patrol returns to base at Oshakati in 1988. Photo credit: John Liebenberg, re-printed with permission from the Liebenberg family trust.

disrupted by the war, and how he and his classmates would go to watch their fathers, brothers, and uncles train on the parade ground. He remembers Ovambo children not much older than himself forced to enlist into Koevoet (Afrikaans: “crowbar”), the counterinsurgency unit that the South African Police (SAP) operated in northern Namibia during the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> He remembers his father teaching him to handle a firearm before he was ten. He remembers the PLAN (People’s Liberation Army of Namibia) fighters emerging from the bush and the shooting that followed.

“I remember all those things,” he tells me, “That is where I felt that experience of the firearm and security. Any challenges that come up with security now, I don’t have that fear because of my childhood.” That fearlessness has kept him alive during his career as a private security officer in South Africa, where he and many of his relatives were granted citizenship after fleeing Namibia when it gained independence in 1990. And to his mind, his fearlessness and that of his relatives and neighbors made South Africa’s leading security companies what they are today. “To make a name of Fidelity,” he says mentioning the country’s oldest firm, “it was because of the power and fearlessness of Namibians.... It is a child of Koevoet.”<sup>4</sup>

Joseph’s former employer Fidelity ADT is the largest company in one of the largest private security industries in the world.<sup>5</sup> In 2020, over half a million people worked as

<sup>3</sup>At the time, present-day Namibia was ruled by South Africa, which referred to the territory as “South West Africa.” In 1966, the United Nations declared South Africa’s occupation illegal and “South West Africa” to be an independent state—“Namibia.” Thus, I use “Namibia” to describe the country after 1966.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Tshilongo, interview with author, Johannesburg, 3 May 2022.

<sup>5</sup>Comparisons of this kind are difficult due to the lack of reliable data and confounded by differing measures of size. As a matter of total licensed officers, South Africa (557,000) ranks sixth behind countries with larger populations: India (seven million), China (five million), the United States (two million), Russia

private security officers in South Africa, accounting for one in every twenty-seven workers in the country.<sup>6</sup> In 2019, South African citizens spent over R85 billion (~US \$5 billion) on security, while their government spent an estimated R100 billion (~US \$7.5 billion).<sup>7</sup> The industry's size is matched by its power in society. In many parts of the country, security firms have taken on the role of the police: they patrol neighborhoods, respond to house calls, make arrests, conduct investigations, guard politicians, break strikes, and carry out evictions.

While its size and scope may be unique, South Africa's private security industry can be seen as part of a broader global trend. Over the last half-century, societies across the world have been affected by remarkably similar phenomena: the rise of law-and-order rhetoric, the mushrooming of prisons and gated communities, the elevation of crime in popular media, and growing contestation over the power and purview of the police.

As issues of crime and policing have become ever more important to everyday politics and governance, scholars have debated the precise cause of what has been called "the punitive turn." In the emerging field of carceral studies, Stuart Hall *et al.*'s *Policing the Crisis*, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag* have proven seminal. In different but related ways, both works traced the origins of this punitive turn to the economic crisis of the 1970s. Writing on the panic over mugging that gripped the United Kingdom in the early seventies, Hall and colleagues argued that the media spectacle of crime allowed politicians to weld reactionary sentiments into new constituencies, which would support the repression of trade unions and social movements.<sup>8</sup> For Gilmore, the vast prison complex that sprouted in California in the early eighties was the product of the end of the United States' military-Keynesian approach to growth. New prisons provided an outlet for the land, labor, capital, and state capacity idled by economic stagnation and deindustrialization.<sup>9</sup> Together, *Policing the Crisis* and *Golden Gulag* showed how the punitive turn facilitated a fundamental restructuring of these societies. Policing and incarceration offered new material and ideological configurations of labor, production, governance, and social life that could stabilize and succeed the crumbling postwar social democratic order.

Though groundbreaking in their theoretical depth and methodological range, neither *Policing the Crisis* nor *Golden Gulag* quite capture the South African case. The restructuring they detail resulted in the vast expansion of states' capacity for violence, while in South Africa similar processes resulted in its privatization. How was it that the United States got the world's largest prison system and South Africa one of the world's largest private security industries?

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(800,000), and Brazil (570,000). In terms of total licensed officers per capita, South Africa (935 per hundred thousand people) ranks fifth behind countries with much smaller populations: Bulgaria (1,714), Latvia (1,068), Estonia (1,006), and Guatemala (945). Nicolas Florquin, "A Booming Business: Private Security and Small Arms," Small Arms Survey (Geneva: Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2011); and Confederation of European Security Services, "Private Security in Europe—2015" (Wemmel, Belgium, Jan. 2017).

<sup>6</sup>"PSIRA Annual Report 2020/2021" (Centurion, PSIRA, 2020), 63, 66.

<sup>7</sup>Statistics South Africa, "Revised Annual Financial Survey 2019," AFS (Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2019); Guy Martin, "Government Private Security Spend Amounts to Billions," *DefenceWeb*, 21 Dec. 2021.

<sup>8</sup>Stuart Hall *et al.*, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law & Order* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2013).

<sup>9</sup>Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

This article argues that the beginning of an answer to that question lies with Koevoet and the way counter-revolutionary war shaped how the crisis of the 1970s played out in South Africa. It aims to show how the apartheid state's embrace of counterinsurgency doctrine during this period precipitated the privatization of violence in the country that directly and indirectly fueled the emergence of a sprawling private security industry. It further argues that, far from an anomaly, the story of private security in South Africa should be seen as a potential paradigm for understanding how the punitive turn took shape in the majority of the world.

Despite widespread acknowledgment that the punitive turn of the last fifty years has been global in scope, there is remarkably little scholarship that examines how and why this turn has manifested in contexts outside the Global North.<sup>10</sup> Since the publication of *Policing the Crisis* and *Golden Gulag*, there has been an outpouring of pathbreaking work detailing the causes and consequences of increased reliance on policing and incarceration—giving rise to an interdisciplinary field that is often called “carceral studies.”<sup>11</sup> Here, the rise of U.S. mass incarceration has loomed particularly large with many studies dedicated to investigating its historical forerunners; the social, political, and economic factors driving its emergence; and its broad social effects.<sup>12</sup> Within this effort, scholars dating back to Stuart Hall have argued that the United States has been a key nexus for the global rise in coercive forms of social control, responsible for exporting culturally revanchist notions about crime as well as novel models for repression such as counterinsurgency doctrine and “broken windows” policing.<sup>13</sup> By and large, however, these studies have focused on the impact of these models on countries in the Global North, such as the UK and France—or for their “boomerang effect,” how coercive techniques developed for countries in the periphery “returned home,” transforming policing in the United States and fueling mass incarceration in the process.<sup>14</sup>

The location of what is often called “the American carceral state” as the epicenter of the punitive turn has led to the presumption that the United States is representative of the broader global trend. In this respect, Marisol Lebrón's excellent 2019 study of

<sup>10</sup>See Marisol Lebrón, *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence, and Resistance in Puerto Rico* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 5–6; Jordan T. Camp and Christina Heatherton, *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter* (New York: Verso, 2016), 2–3. A notable exception is Teresa Caldeira, *City of Walls: Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup>David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Jonathan Simon, *Governing through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup>For a sample of this work, see Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Elizabeth K. Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016); Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup>Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Micol Seigel, *Violence Workers: State Power and the Limits of the Police* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Stuart Schrader, *Badges without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

<sup>14</sup>Julian Go, *Policing Empires: Militarization, Race, and the 'Imperial Boomerang' in Britain and the US* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); Schrader, *Badges*.

the transformation of Puerto Rican policing is symptomatic of this commonplace view.<sup>15</sup> Writing in the tradition of Hall and Gilmore, Lebrón states, “Puerto Rico over the past thirty years mirrors the growth of carceral and neoliberal regimes of dispossession both in the United States and globally.”<sup>16</sup> While there are certainly resemblances across the globe, this elision between the United States, its colony Puerto Rico, and elsewhere risks occluding the profound dissimilarities in the way that the punitive turn has unfolded in the United States versus the rest of the world. After all, U.S. mass incarceration is notable precisely because it is *exceptional* globally. The majority of the world has not seen such a vast expansion in incarceration, nor necessarily such prolific growth in states’ punitive capacities.

This article seeks to nuance and expand on the comparative study of the global punitive turn of the last half century by tracing the rise of private security in South Africa as a development that is parallel to but distinct from U.S. mass incarceration. It begins by showing how counterinsurgency doctrine was integrated into the grand vision and strategy of the apartheid state in the 1960s, encouraging the state to deploy significant resources to fight national liberation movements in Namibia, Rhodesia, Angola, and Mozambique. When the global economic crisis hit South Africa in the early 1970s, these deployments became liabilities. With unemployment rising, black resistance surging, and the country’s position within the global economic order fast eroding, the apartheid’s leaders found themselves facing a serious deficit of state capacity. As this deficit became obvious, a new private security industry emerged to fill the gap, offering protective services to businesses and homeowners. The industry’s growth was spurred on by reform efforts spearheaded by new prime minister P. W. Botha and based on a mix of counterinsurgency doctrine and neoliberal thought. While these reforms seemed to offer apartheid a path to stability, by encouraging the state to outsource the cost of governance and repression, they acted as an accelerant for unrest, precipitating nationwide rebellions and eventually, a civil war. The wreckage of counterinsurgency, I argue, provided not only the personnel and techniques, but the fear, political dysfunction, and social disorder necessary for private security to grow and thrive.

In doing so, I offer a corrective not just to carceral studies, but also to the literature on private security and private mercenary companies. Where scholars like P. W. Singer have argued that these industries owe their origin to “the security gap” created by the end of the Cold War and its “resultant impact on the supply and demand for military services,” I show that not only did these industries emerge well before the fall of the Berlin Wall, but they owe their origins, in part, to the tactics and strategies that Western militaries developed and deployed in their fight against communism.<sup>17</sup>

Traces of this history are still evident in the South African private security industry today. Joseph Tshilongo was one of many people who I met during a broader

<sup>15</sup>See also Camp and Heatherton, *Policing the Planet*; Didier Fassin, *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*.

<sup>16</sup>Marisol Lebrón, *Policing Life and Death*, 5–6.

<sup>17</sup>P. W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 49; see also Kevin O’Brien, “Private Military Companies and African Security 1990–98,” in Abdel-Fatau Musah and J. Kayode Fayemi, eds., *Mercenaries: An African Security Dilemma* (London: Pluto Press, 2000); Peter Lock, “Africa, Military Downsizing, and the Growth of the Security Industry,” in Jakkie K. Cillier and Peggy Mason, eds., *Peace, Profit or Plunder? The Privatisation of Security in War-Torn African Societies* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 1999).

ethnographic study of private security in South Africa who had experienced first-hand the wars that wracked Southern Africa in the late twentieth century. Sensing how profoundly these wars—and by extension counterinsurgency—had shaped my informants' lives and careers formed the early nucleus of this article and eventually led me to archives of the late apartheid period. In what follows, I draw on evidence from those archives, including the records of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the South African Historical Archive in Johannesburg, the South African Department of Defence Archives in Pretoria, the published writings of counterinsurgency experts, autobiographies of apartheid military personnel, and contemporaneous newspapers accounts, including the *Financial Times* of London, *Reuters*, *Business Day*, *Johannesburg Stock Exchange Interim Report*, and South Africa's then paper-of-record the *Rand Daily Mail*.

In addition, I have threaded through the account that follows my informants' recollections of these wars and the crisis that war canalized. By moving between history and memory, I hope to ground political economic transformations in the texture of everyday life and mark what I see as the half-lives of counterinsurgency—the damage done and damage still unfolding. These half-lives are, at once, distinctly South African, but also paralleled across the Global South, where state incapacity has been the norm and counterinsurgency most brutally applied. These parallels, I conclude, signal a need for carceral studies to “provincialize” American mass incarceration and pay attention to the ways the punitive turn unfolded in the periphery of the global economic system.

### Apartheid and Counter-Revolutionary Warfare

In 1968, Lieutenant-General Charles Fraser's first book was printed, bound in blue, and embossed with neat gold lettering. Though Fraser was at the time the third highest-ranking officer in South Africa, not a word of *Revolutionary Warfare* (Figure 2) was read by a member of the public for nearly thirty years. Even so, it was highly influential. It was translated into Portuguese and Afrikaans and endorsed with a foreword by then-Defence Minister P. W. Botha, and widely circulated within the apartheid military and police.<sup>18</sup> Every high-ranking officer who testified in front of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's State Security Hearings cited its ideas, while Botha submitted a full Xeroxed copy to illustrate the philosophy that shaped his actions.<sup>19</sup>

*Revolutionary Warfare* was not a pathbreaking work. It is more or less a summation of “counterinsurgency doctrine.” Alarmed by the advance of communist and anti-colonial movements, Western military experts sought to synthesize the techniques used in European colonial rule into a new form of portable military expertise, suitable for the revolutionary moment of the postwar era. Disseminated in books, manuals, and U.S.-sponsored trainings, counterinsurgency sought to tip the global balance of power in favor of the capitalist West by equipping Third World states with techniques to defeat the national liberation movements that might usher in communism.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup>*Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (henceforth *Final Report*), vol. 3, 38.

<sup>19</sup>“State Security Hearings,” in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Collection, AL 2924, A2.1–5, South African Historical Archive (SAHA); “The State v. Botha and Appeal,” TRC AL3060, vol. 33.

<sup>20</sup>Laleh Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgency* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2012); Schrader, *Badges*.

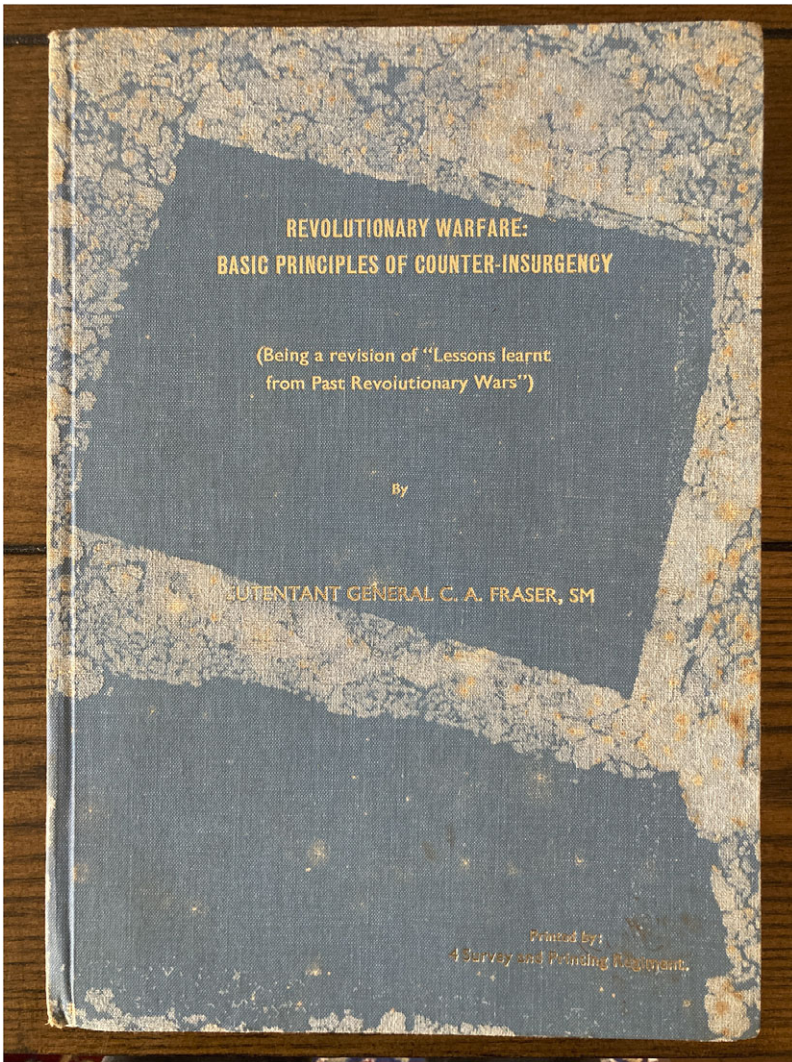


Figure 2. A worn copy of C.A. Fraser's *Revolutionary Warfare* [italicized] unearthed from a rare book store in northern Johannesburg. Author's Photo.

After the wave of protest that culminated in the early sixties with the Sharpeville massacre, resistance movements like the African National Congress, Pan-African Congress, and South West Africa People's Organization turned to armed struggle in early and mid-sixties. In response, high-ranking officials within the apartheid state turned to counterinsurgency doctrine to help fend off what they saw as the rising threat of communist revolution. Foremost among these officials was Fraser, who studied the writings of American and European counterinsurgency experts like

Robert Thompson, John McCuen, and André Beaufre and sought to adapt and apply their work to the South African context.<sup>21</sup>

*Revolutionary Warfare* is the distillation of his efforts. Its argument is as follows: the twentieth century is a period defined by “virtually continuous political revolution,” which has given rise to a new kind of warfare. Unlike conventional war, revolutionary warfare is waged by a small group of insurgents who aim not to defeat the enemy in battle, but to mobilize the people to overthrow the existing regime. Defeating this insurgency, then, requires more than the destruction of the revolutionary organization, but the total eradication of “its influence on the people.”<sup>22</sup> Because “the objective in a revolutionary war is the population itself,” counter-revolution is then “a total war.”<sup>23</sup> Society itself was the essential ground of conflict; citizens’ beliefs and resentments, fears and aspirations, “hearts and minds” became part of the terrain on which counter-revolution needed to operate and exert force. The all-encompassing nature of revolutionary warfare meant that counter-revolutionary strategy, too, needed to be all-encompassing. Everything in society was touched by it and everyone was a potential guerilla or counter-revolutionary.

*Revolutionary Warfare*’s dire tone was somewhat out of step with South Africa’s national mood at the time of its publication. Unlike his colleagues in the United States and France who were facing domestic unrest, the state that employed Fraser was at the height of its powers, having weathered the storm of the early 1960s by crushing internal dissent. With resistance movements like ANC and PAC driven into exile, the National Party presided over a decade of furious economic growth and relative political calm.

So, when the first South African Police units were trained in counterinsurgency in 1967, it was not in response to any domestic threat, but rather to be deployed to Rhodesia and South West Africa/Namibia. Though the fighting was distant from South Africa’s borders, according to the principles of counterinsurgency doctrine the stability of these buffer or “frontline states” was critical to South Africa’s security. Should the national liberation movements in Rhodesia, Namibia, Angola, or Mozambique succeed, they could set off a wave of communist uprisings that could sweep South Africa up in the revolutionary fervor.<sup>24</sup>

This was a risk the apartheid state could not afford. When it learned that the ANC’s Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) and Zimbabwe’s People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) were infiltrating across the Zambezi River in 1967, the SAP deployed fifty men, ten armored vehicles, four helicopters, and two spotter planes to northern Rhodesia.<sup>25</sup> Over time, these commitments would only grow. By 1974, there were over two thousand SAP members deployed to counterinsurgency efforts in Rhodesia with another fifteen thousand military troops in northern Namibia; by 1980, South African Defence Force would have over a hundred thousand troops in Namibia, making it the most militarized country on earth.<sup>26</sup> To meet its growing

<sup>21</sup>“Gen. Fraser Talks on the Terror War,” *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 May 1973: 22.

<sup>22</sup>Lieutenant General C. A. Fraser, *Revolutionary Warfare: Basic Principles of Counter-Insurgency* (4 Survey and Printing Regiment, 1968), 1–3.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>24</sup>Robert Thompson, “Foreword,” in John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: A Politico-Military Strategy of Counter-Insurgency* (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1966), 16.

<sup>25</sup>Timothy Stapleton, *A Military History of South Africa: From the Dutch-Khoi Wars to the End of Apartheid* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 163.

<sup>26</sup>Denis Herbstein and John Evenson, *The Devils Are among Us: The War for Namibia* (London: Zed Books, 1989), 27; Minutes of State Security Council Meeting, 26 Nov. 1979, SAHA



manpower needs, the government instituted one year of mandatory military service for white men, later extending it to two years.<sup>27</sup> Police and military budgets also grew from R342 million in 1970 to R2.8 billion in 1980 and R5.8 billion in 1985.<sup>28</sup>

Aaron Branch was part of the first SAP counterinsurgency units deployed to Rhodesia. Born in Bethal in 1952, Aaron spent his childhood in Johannesburg. After graduating from boarding school, he joined the SAP. After a year in the academy, he was sent to northern Rhodesia for three months—the first of two tours. He remembers walking the length of the Zambezi River from Chirundu to the border of Mozambique. Exactly who they were fighting he does not recall. But he remembers the five-day foot patrols through Mana Pools and keeping watch late into the night. When we spoke, Aaron was two decades retired from the private security firm he started after leaving the police. The details of the counterinsurgency training have since faded from memory, but he credits it with saving his life when two men broke into his farmhouse a few years ago. “The awareness they teach you. When they started shooting, I went for my gun. The bullet hole is still in my headboard. I haven’t patched it. It’s my empty tomb.”<sup>29</sup>

On the night of the robbery, the sound of gunshots woke Franklin Makoni. The longest-tenured employee at Aaron’s security company, the room that Franklin rents is a stone’s throw from the farmhouse and a short walk to the workshop, where he keeps the company’s vehicles in working order. The home he is building is 1,000 kilometers north in eastern Rhodesia, where he grew up. Franklin remembers how at that time soldiers would question the children about the whereabouts of insurgents passing through the area. He remembers fishing with his brother as they watched their cattle graze along the river, and the hair on the arms of the soldiers when they came out of the bush. His brother was startled at the sound of their horses and ran into the dry riverbed. He remembers how the soldiers took aim and the bullet passed under his ribcage. He remembers how his brother lay in the riverbed and how the soldiers asked him why he ran. “If you ran,” he tells me, “they put it through your body.”<sup>30</sup>

As the province bordering Mozambique, Eastern Rhodesia had been the site of intensive counterinsurgency efforts during Franklin’s childhood. Patrols, surveillance, and later forced resettlement sought to isolate the Manyika people of the region from the militants of the Zimbabwean National Liberation Army (ZANLA). For the South African officers and policemen, eastern Rhodesia became a living laboratory—one of many in the frontline states. Officials including Fraser traveled to the parts of Angola, Rhodesia, and Namibia where fighting was most intense to refine their theories, research the latest developments, and collaborate with their counterparts in the Rhodesian and Portuguese militaries. Some of their findings made their way into the state’s counterinsurgency training, which was now mandatory for all police and military personnel.<sup>31</sup> As veterans of the bush wars returned to their units in South Africa, other, less formal tactics like those Franklin and his brother

TRC, *The State v. P. W. Botha & Appeal Collection* (AL3060), vol. 22, doc 0; Ronald Dreyer, *Namibia and Southern Africa: Regional Dynamics of Decolonization, 1945–90* (London: Routledge, 1994), 83; Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 571.

<sup>27</sup>Stapleton, *Military History*, 157; Dreyer, *Namibia*, 54.

<sup>28</sup>Stapleton, *Military History*, 157–58; John Brewer, *Black and Blue: Policing in South Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 244, 276–77.

<sup>29</sup>Author’s fieldnotes, 12 May 2022; Aaron Branch, interview with author, Krugersdorp, 24 Jan. 2022.

<sup>30</sup>Franklin Makoni, interview with author, Krugersdorp, 30 Nov. 2021.

<sup>31</sup>See “Aid to the Portuguese,” South African Department of Defence Archive (SADF), Charles Alan Fraser Collection, box 10, vols. 6–8; “Counter-Insurgency Operations Manual,” Apr. 1974, Aliança Contra as

experienced were absorbed into the state's repertoire of repression, ready for when the revolutionary tide returned to South Africa.

### Crime and Crisis in the 1970s

It was ironically the power of the apartheid state that sowed the seeds of its destruction. Apartheid as a social system depended on what was euphemistically called “influx control,” laws that required all black people to carry “pass books” that certified their gainful employment and deported violators to the rural “homelands.” Black resistance in the 1950s prevented the full implementation of influx control, but in the sixties it was in full effect. The architects of apartheid had designed this sprawling system of policing as a way of balancing racial segregation with the desire to force black people into “respectable” jobs “ministering to white needs.”<sup>32</sup> What they created instead was concentrated unemployment in the homelands and a shortage of skilled labor in cities.<sup>33</sup>

This split labor market would have profoundly destabilizing effects because it coincided with a broader global economic crisis, marked by “stagflation”—low growth and high inflation. While sometimes blamed on spiking oil prices, the causes of the crisis were rooted in the very structure of the postwar social democratic order. After the tumult of the early twentieth century, capital and labor in advanced capitalist countries entered into a compromise. Capital agreed to higher wages for workers in core manufacturing, and higher taxes to fund welfare systems in exchange for labor peace and a stable macroeconomic environment. This bargain was sustainable so long as growth remained strong. But when international competition tightened in the late sixties and energy prices rose in the early seventies, capital sought to preserve its profits by cutting investment and raising prices, setting off a decline in production and spiraling inflation.

Though its social democratic compromise had been geared to benefit the white sliver of its population, South Africa was not spared from this dynamic. By the late sixties, the country was seeing symptoms of the crisis. After a decades-long boom, profits in key sectors like manufacturing began to decline.<sup>34</sup> In 1971, inflation doubled while growth was stagnating.<sup>35</sup> The split labor market exacerbated this underlying dynamic. Labor shortages in town forced employers to hike wages, while mass unemployment in the homelands heightened the pain of inflation for the remaining black workers, who were now responsible for supporting a growing number of jobless relatives.<sup>36</sup>

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Rebeliões em África (ALCORA) Collection, SADF Archive; Timothy J. Stapleton, *Warfare and Tracking in Africa, 1952–1990* (London: Routledge, 2016), 110.

<sup>32</sup>Deborah Posel, *The Making of Apartheid, 1948–1961: Conflict and Compromise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 81.

<sup>33</sup>John Hofmeyr, “Black Wages: The Post-War Experience,” in Nicoli Nattrass and Elisabeth Ardington, eds., *The Political Economy of South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1990), 133; Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 167–77; Charles Simkins, “Agricultural Production in the African Reserves of South Africa, 1918–1969,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 7, 2 (1981): 256–83, 271.

<sup>34</sup>Nicoli Nattrass, “Economic Power and Profits in Post-War Manufacturing” in *The Political Economy of South Africa*, by Nicoli Nattrass and Elisabeth Ardington (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1990), 108.

<sup>35</sup>Charles Simkins, “The Political Economy of South Africa in the 1970s,” *South African Journal of Economic History* 14, 1–2 (1999): 11–36, 12–13.

<sup>36</sup>Hofmeyr, “Black Wages,” 131; Tom Lodge, “Resistance and Reform, 1973–1994,” in Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager, and Bill Nasson, eds., *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 412.

These pressures soon translated into labor unrest. In late 1971, a strike by contract workers in Walvis Bay spread across Namibia, eventually sparking a revolt in rural Ovamboland.<sup>37</sup> In 1972, black bus drivers, dockworkers, miners, textile workers, and doctors in South Africa all struck for higher wages, defying laws that criminalized labor organizing.<sup>38</sup> In January 1973, labor action at a brick factory engulfed the city of Durban in a general strike and opened a new era of militant labor action.<sup>39</sup> In the first three months of 1973 alone, 61,000 African workers went on strike, four times as many as between 1965 and 1971.<sup>40</sup>

If the Durban strike wave gave the apartheid government some indication that the lull in black resistance was coming to an end, the Soweto Uprising removed all doubt. On 16 June 1976, thousands of schoolchildren in Soweto protested against new laws mandating the use of Afrikaans in classroom instruction. During their march, they were met by police who opened fire.<sup>41</sup> In days that followed, over 575 people, many of them children, were killed by police. Later inquiries found that the police unit responsible for a disproportionate number of killings was led by the commander of the SAP counterinsurgency unit in Namibia, a force that would later become Koevoet.<sup>42</sup>

News of the massacre set off a months-long, nationwide uprising. Internationally, the state's brutal response triggered widespread condemnation and led foreign capital to flood out the country.<sup>43</sup> Domestically, thousands of young people went into exile and joined the ANC, which soon began infiltrating militants into South Africa for the first time in fifteen years.<sup>44</sup>

While its spark was political, the uprising was sustained by rising economic distress. In the years since the Durban strike wave, labor shortages had reversed. By the mid-seventies, 28.3 percent of those living in the townships around Johannesburg, 23.8 percent around Pretoria, and 19.1 percent outside of Cape Town were jobless. In rural areas, the situation was worse. In Lebowa and KwaZulu homelands, jobseekers were reported to gather in the thousands, crowding around at labor bureaus in the hopes of being "amongst the tiny minority who would secure work."<sup>45</sup> As Tom Lodge argues, it was the mass of unemployed youth across the country that sustained the rebellion after the initial protests.<sup>46</sup>

The spike in unemployment was both a consequence of economic decline and the government's responses to the crisis, which accelerated deindustrialization. In 1971, to stabilize its economy against inflation, the United States unchained the dollar from the price of gold, delivering a windfall to South Africa. Seeing an opportunity to

<sup>37</sup>Dreyer, *Namibia*, 72–75.

<sup>38</sup>Steve Biko, "Black Workers," 1972 *Black Review* (1973), republished in *New Frame*, 6 June 2019: n.p.

<sup>39</sup>Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 415.

<sup>40</sup>Steven Friedman, *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions, 1970–1984* (Cape Town: Ravan Press, 1987), 40.

<sup>41</sup>For an eyewitness account, see Testimony of Murphy Morobe, "Human Rights Violation Hearings," before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 23 July 1996, South African Broadcasting Corporation, TRC Special Report Series.

<sup>42</sup>*Final Report*, vol. 2, 14 & 24; and vol. 3, 568–71.

<sup>43</sup>Brian Kahn, "The Crisis and South Africa's Balance of Payments," in Stephen Gelb, ed., *South Africa's Economic Crisis* (Cape Town: Zed Books, 1991), 66.

<sup>44</sup>Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (London: Longman, 1983), 340–41.

<sup>45</sup>Seekings and Natrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality*, 95.

<sup>46</sup>Lodge, "Resistance and Reform," 420.

bolster its foreign reserves, tax revenue, and employment, the state began orienting its own monetary policy to serve mining, allowing the rand to gradually depreciate.<sup>47</sup> The policy was ill-fated. The bumper profits of the early seventies papered over the fact that gold mining had entered an inexorable decline. The richer grade ores had been exhausted by decades of extraction, causing total output and productivity to drop precipitously over the course of the decade.<sup>48</sup>

The government's pro-mining policies hamstringing the already flagging manufacturing sector and incentivized a wave of mechanization that would prove catastrophic for the agriculture sector.<sup>49</sup> Layered on top of generous tax breaks, negative real interest rates encouraged farmers to buy tractors on credit. When interest rates finally rose in the early 1980s, many farmers found themselves saddled with unsustainable levels of debt and forced to sell their land at cut-rate prices.<sup>50</sup> In the process, millions of Black farmworkers had become surplus, forced to migrate to cities and homelands where they joined a growing number of people who were restless and unemployed.<sup>51</sup>

On its surface, the crisis as it took shape in South Africa was not dissimilar from those described by Hall *et al.* and Gilmore. The postwar economic order had collapsed into labor and social unrest, while economic decline had produced a surplus of land and labor. But unlike seventies California or the UK, South Africa in that decade was facing a serious deficit of state capacity.

Small signs of this could be glimpsed in the years preceding the Soweto uprising. Immediately after the strikes in Durban, a new kind of job ad began appearing in the classified sections of major newspapers. Posted by factories and steelworks, the ads requested "the services of mature Men as Security Guards," "men with at least 5 years police experience," and "White Security Guards ... urgently required."<sup>52</sup> Soon after, journalists were noting "South Africa's growing number of watchmen and security guards."<sup>53</sup> Companies like Fidelity Security, which had specialized in protecting cash-in-transit vans, began forming new "guards divisions," hiring nightwatchmen and guarding services to factory owners and businessmen.<sup>54</sup>

The major mining houses, too, began expanding their internal security forces and dispatching them to be trained in counterinsurgency doctrine's latest riot-control techniques.<sup>55</sup> Among them was Lynette Nel's father, Johan. In the late sixties, Johan Nel had worked at John Vorster—the concrete and blue tower that housed Johannesburg's central police station and its detention centers where political activists entered but did not leave. But in the early seventies he was approached by

<sup>47</sup>Kahn, "Crisis," 82–83.

<sup>48</sup>C. H. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 204–6.

<sup>49</sup>Trevor Bell and Vishnu Padayachee, "Unemployment in South Africa: Trends, Causes and Cures," *Development Southern Africa (Sandton, South Africa)* 1, 3–4 (1984): 426–38, 433; Feinstein, *Economic History*, 222.

<sup>50</sup>Arthur Webb, "South African Agriculture in the 1970s: A Decade of Transformation?" *South African Journal of Economic History* 15, 1–2 (2000): 159–79, 170; J. F. Kirsten, J. Van Zyl, and J. Van Rooyen, "South African Agriculture in the 1980s," *South African Journal of Economic History* 9, 2 (1994): 19–48, 47.

<sup>51</sup>Seekings and Natrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality*, 176.

<sup>52</sup>*Rand Daily Mail*, 6 Mar. 1973: 24; 7 Aug. 1973: 12; 15 July 1974.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 24 Oct. 1973: 24.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 15 May 1973: 10.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 5 Dec. 1974: 3, 11.

the management of Gold Fields: would he be head of security for one of its mines in the east? Lynette remembers the houses reserved for the mine security, where her family lived. There was a steel cage walkway that ran behind the house, connecting the workers' compound to the mouth of the mine. She remembers playing with her siblings on the mine dumps and the round yellow rubber bullets her brother—who was only a few years older than she—would fire into the riots. Her father kept two chameleons on his desk. “When the rumors of riots reached him, he would turn them black and have them bite [down] on his ears. Then, he would walk into the compound and the riot, the riot would just part. The workers, they named him Satan, *die duiwel*.”<sup>56</sup>

If Aaron Branch remembers the chameleons, he did not say. But Aaron worked for Johan Nel at Gold Fields's West Driefontein mine starting in 1973. After he returned from Rhodesia, an old boss—a former brigadier who had taken a position at Gold Fields—offered Aaron a job as a mine detective: “It was a hell of a lot more than the police, so I resigned.”<sup>57</sup>

In 1980, Pieter Nkuna, too, would come to work security at Gold Fields. Born in the small town of Edinburgh before it was part of the Tsonga homeland of Gazankulu, he grew up listening to the flow of the Sand River. After Standard 8, his grandmother and mother, who grew maize and squash to support them, could not pay his school fees. So, Pieter cut his dreadlocks and followed a school friend to Sasolburg, where he found a job washing dishes in the mine's kitchen. In his second winter at the mine, he was sent to Gold Fields' training center at Leopard's Vlei, near West Driefontein. The training was grueling, but the jobs were plenty. “They had a shortage of security officers there. We were trained to control those riots; how to use tear gas. We had everything, tear gas, gas masks, helmets, shields.”<sup>58</sup> There was, it seemed, a growing demand for coercion that the state could not meet.

Outside the country, too, apartheid security forces were coming under growing strain. Massive strikes in Namibia had opened a new, more intense phase in that country's war for liberation, forcing the military to take over the SAP's counterinsurgency operations.<sup>59</sup> By the mid-seventies, these responsibilities would grow after the Portuguese Empire collapsed and leftist governments came to power in Angola and Mozambique.<sup>60</sup> The liberation of Mozambique, in particular, placed South Africa's closest ally Rhodesia at risk. The combined Rhodesian and South African forces soon found themselves encircled and overmatched. By mid-1975, private security firms, some staffed by American soldiers “disillusioned” by their defeat in Vietnam, were popping up in Rhodesia to fill in the gaps, guarding white farmers against guerilla attacks and conducting bomb sweeps in the capital.<sup>61</sup>

When student protests erupted into rebellion in 1976, it was clear that the war in Rhodesia was one that South Africa could neither win nor afford. Within a month, the government had withdrawn its military support from its allies to the north.<sup>62</sup> But

<sup>56</sup> Author's fieldnotes, 13 Jan. 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Aaron Branch, interview with author, Krugersdorp, 24 Jan. 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Author's fieldnotes, 15 Mar. and 23 May 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Stapleton, *Warfare and Tracking*, 105.

<sup>60</sup> Stapleton, *Military History*, 170.

<sup>61</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 July 1975: 4; 30 July 1975: 2; 4 Oct. 1977.

<sup>62</sup> Giliomee, *Afrikaners*, 575, 601.

even with these troops returning south, officials were not certain that they could restore order. Speaking in September 1976, Justice Minister Jimmy Kruger announced, “The task of protecting business premises is primarily that of the owners. They should not load an added burden on the police.”<sup>63</sup> Kruger’s statements, which were widely disseminated in the press, fed a mounting panic. In the week after the minister’s speech, the *Rand Daily Mail*, South Africa’s paper of record, ran a three-part series titled “Your Security.” The series argued the riots in Soweto and the collapse of Angola heralded “a restless, turbulent age, with violent crime an everyday occurrence and civil unrest adding to the threat to person and property.”<sup>64</sup> Relating the advice of experts—many of whom were veterans of British colonial police in Kenya and Palestine, the author urged readers to “wake up to the importance of security” for their homes and businesses.<sup>65</sup> The combined threat posed by terrorists, riots, and crime meant that a high wall, an electronic alarm, two good guard dogs, and a safe with a handgun were now prerequisites for “a good night’s sleep.”<sup>66</sup>

In the white areas of Johannesburg, it was crime more than anything that metonymized the disordered times. Newspapers breathlessly reported how once quiet neighborhoods were becoming “happy hunting grounds for muggers” who targeted elderly women without remorse.<sup>67</sup> Malls, which were the center of social life, were now reportedly beset by pickpockets, while businesses in downtown Johannesburg were targeted in daytime robberies.<sup>68</sup> In the dense neighborhoods north of the city center, residents complained that even though robberies had become an hourly occurrence, police could take several hours to respond.<sup>69</sup> The police, for their part, blamed the wave of crime on rising unemployment and encouraged residents to hire their own private guards.<sup>70</sup>

Across the country, homeowners followed suit, subscribing to security companies and contracting them to patrol their neighborhoods’ sidewalks, streets, and beaches. Businesses and real estate agents, too, banded together to hire security to “sniff” out bombs and “revitalize” high crime areas.<sup>71</sup> In Johannesburg, businesses and residents of the inner city fled north to the newly disused farmland on the way to Pretoria, where brand new office parks and “gated villages” were popping up on land that had been old vegetable farms and equestrian estates, each new complex designed with “maximum security” in mind.<sup>72</sup> Companies began selling specialized gear like polyurethane guardhouses, constructed so “your security guard can keep tabs ... while keeping out of the weather.”<sup>73</sup> Membership boomed in the security industry’s business association, which began inviting American counterinsurgency experts to lecture at its annual conference.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>63</sup>*Rand Daily Mail*, 9 Sept. 1976: 7.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 14 Sept. 1976.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 14–16 Sept. 1976.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 15 Sept. 1976.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 15 Dec. 1977: 2.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 13 June 1978: 1; 26 Mar. 1982: 28; 11 Jan. 1978: 3.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 11 Mar. 1982: 5.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 13 Oct. 1977: 3.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 7 Jan. 1978: 5; 19 Jan. 1980: 2; 12 Dec. 1981: 2; 3 Mar. 1982: 4; 26 Apr. 1982: 9; 15 Feb. 1982: 2.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 30 Sept. 1978: 16; 26 Mar. 1982: 28.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 13 Oct. 1977.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 16 Sept. 1976: 16.

Security was fast becoming a big business with its tendrils extending into marketing, media, manufacturing, and real estate. Its most significant impact, however, was on the labor market. Managers and supervisors were almost always white ex-military and police who abandoned their pensions for better pay in the private sector.<sup>75</sup> Those who did the everyday work—opening gates, patrolling neighborhoods, and conducting bomb sweeps—were black men, many of them recruited directly from the homelands and farms.

Among these men was a young Mafika Gumbi (Figure 3).<sup>76</sup> A native of Volksrust, Mafika was born where the highveld meets KwaZulu-Natal. The eldest child of a tenant farmworker, he left school once he could write his own name to open up a slot for his siblings. For a time, he helped his father tend to the pasture and cattle of the whites who owned the land where his family lived. But when he reached eighteen in the late seventies, there was no job for him on the farm. Instead, he traveled to Johannesburg, where he found work as a security guard at a technical college. With his first month's salary, he went into town to buy a Coltrane record, where the manager offered a job as a "shop detective." Over



**Figure 3.** Mafika Gumbi during his early years in Johannesburg. Re-printed with permission from Mafika Gumbi.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 1 Mar. 1969: 1.

<sup>76</sup>Mr. Gumbi requested that his real name be used so his experiences might be broadly understood and recognized.

time, he learned how to write statements for the police who came to collect those he arrested for theft. And as the area around Sauer and Pritchard Street in downtown Johannesburg became more violent, he learned how to dress in plain clothes and how to use a gun.<sup>77</sup>

When he and I first met in 2021, Mr. Gumbi was approaching retirement. After forty years in the security industry, he had managed to raise four children and purchase a house with a two-car garage and a garden with topiaries. Still, he wishes it might have gone differently. As he told me one day: “When I look back, I look back emotionally because I did not have a chance to do something else. Security was not a living wage, but it was the only job available to me.”<sup>78</sup>

Across the country, thousands of young men were facing the same predicament. Their fathers and older brothers had worked on farms and factories, in the mines and gardens of the Rand. But as industrial work dried up, the next generation flocked to jobs as watchmen and guards. The pay was often below minimum wage, and guards typically worked eighty-hour weeks, sometimes sixty hours in a row. It was often the only job that they could find. In 1977, Fidelity had often ten times as many applicants as job openings.<sup>79</sup>

All those factors idled by the crisis were beginning to find new life in security. Through the alchemy of panic, security offered new investment opportunities for capital, new uses for land and labor, and new positions for personnel the state could not afford to keep. By 1983, an industry that little more than a decade before was made up of a few cash-in-transit companies and a handful of private detectives now had over five hundred firms and employed a quarter of a million people.<sup>80</sup>

### The Total Strategy: Counterinsurgency and Neoliberalism

Previous scholarship has argued that private security was the outgrowth of a piece of legislation, known as the National Key Points Act of 1980.<sup>81</sup> While it is clear that the industry emerged more-or-less organically in response to the political and economic crisis of the early seventies, the Act did sanction its emergence and helped speed its meteoric growth. Passed under new Prime Minister P. W. Botha and immediately following the ANC’s bombing of Sasol’s new coal-to-oil refineries, the Act empowered the Defence Minister to declare any property critical to national security. The owners of these “Key Points” were thus legally bound to secure them at their own expense.<sup>82</sup> By outsourcing the financial and administrative cost of security to the private sector, the Act aimed at relieving the burden on the state’s security apparatus and opened up a slew of highly lucrative contracts protecting corporate headquarters, airports, dams, pipelines, and power stations to the private security industry.

<sup>77</sup> Author’s fieldnotes, 25 Jan. 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Mafika Gumbi, interview with author, Krugersdorp, 25 Nov. 2021.

<sup>79</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 June 1977: 1.

<sup>80</sup> Kate Philip, “The Private Sector and the Security Establishment,” in Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan, eds., *Society at War: The Militarisation of South Africa* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 213.

<sup>81</sup> Tessa G. Diphorn, *Twilight Policing: Private Security and Violence in Urban South Africa* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 37–38; Michael Brogden and Clifford Shearing, *Policing for a New South Africa* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 71–72.

<sup>82</sup> National Key Points Act 102 of 1980, Gazette no. 7134, notice no. 1515, 25 July 1980, Section 3 (1).



The National Key Points Act was part of a broader reform effort undertaken by Botha that blended counterinsurgency doctrine and neoliberal ideology to defuse the threats facing the state. These reforms were dubbed as “the Total National Strategy” and drew on Botha’s writings in the mid-seventies as Defence Minister. In his annual White Papers, Botha had argued that the state needed a new approach to the crisis at hand. Writing of his own department’s struggles, he had noted how inflation and a depreciating rand had fast eaten away at its budget, while embargoes and capital flight had further forced the military to pay a premium on its loans and weapons purchases. At the same time, the Defence Force was struggling to recruit and retain the personnel necessary to fight its wars and maintain order at home. Cash bonuses for volunteers and an extended period of mandatory service could only go so far. There was, Botha wrote with concern, “an absolute number of young white men ... that might be drawn from the labour market ... without causing irreparable damage to the national economy.”<sup>83</sup> These headwinds meant that the state could no longer solve its problems by depending “purely on military action.” Winning the conflict and defusing the communist threat, he wrote, would instead require “a Total National Strategy” to muster all of society’s resources into an “interdependent and co-ordinated action in all fields—military, psychological, economic, political, sociological, technological, diplomatic, ideological, cultural, etc.”<sup>84</sup>

“The Total National Strategy,” a term Botha borrowed from C. A. Fraser, became the organizing principle of his administration.<sup>85</sup> Botha’s enthusiasm for counterinsurgency doctrine was more than an artifact of his time as Defence Minister. Rather, counterinsurgency had an appeal that went beyond familiarity. Counterinsurgency doctrine—with its idea that revolutionary war necessarily encompassed all spheres of society and that counter-revolutionaries were always at risk of being overrun—seemed to fit the state’s predicament. But perhaps more importantly, by arguing that counter-revolution was only “20% military action and 80% political,” counterinsurgency offered a path forward for a state with waning capacity.<sup>86</sup> Rather than intensifying a war it could not fund with men it did not have, the state could act more like a counter-revolutionary catalyst, unleashing and mobilizing the resources beyond the state to “win hearts and minds.”

In this respect, counterinsurgency doctrine had a certain elective affinity with that other ideology of the times—neoliberalism. As Antina von Schnitzler has shown, economists close to Botha had embraced neoliberalism in the wake of the Soweto Uprising. Drawing on Friedrich Hayek, they argued that the problems South Africa faced were the inevitable results of a bloated state that was too attached to race and overzealous in its approach to the market.<sup>87</sup> Free market capitalism and the relative

<sup>83</sup>P. W. Botha, “White Paper on Defence,” 1977, SADF, Annual White Papers, 15.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>85</sup>The secondary literature often claims that the “total national strategy” originated from the French counterinsurgency expert André Beaufre. But in fact it was Fraser who combined Beaufre’s work with American counterinsurgency ideas of “national strategy” to create the neologism that Botha used. See C. A. Fraser, “Strategy and Strategic Action,” SADF Archive, Charles Alan Fraser Collection, box 4, GOC 32 and 39, and box 5, GOC 23.

<sup>86</sup>Fraser, *Revolutionary Warfare*, 6.

<sup>87</sup>Antina Von Schnitzler, “Disciplining Freedom: Apartheid, Counterinsurgency, and the Political Histories of Neoliberalism,” in Quinn Slobodian and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *Market Civilizations: Neoliberals East and South* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2022), 175.

privilege of whites, they argued, could be preserved if black South Africans were recognized as full economic subjects rather than units of labor.

As neoliberalism gained currency with Botha's advisors, its ideas came to fuse with counterinsurgency, turning "the total strategy" into a curious synthesis of the two. Botha and his top officials began traveling on junkets to flea markets in townships, which had been hotspots for unrest, to investigate how to unleash black entrepreneurship and "get people to help themselves."<sup>88</sup> Generals started speaking of black people's "aspirations ... housing, schools, motor cars, 'the good life'" as key strategic considerations.<sup>89</sup> Classified documents detailing "the Total Strategy" began identifying "the rise of a Black middle class" and "the establishment of a capitalist order especially among urban Blacks" as core military goals.<sup>90</sup> To this end, new levy-funded electrical grids and sewage systems were built in townships, aiming to relieve "the socio-economic bottlenecks" fueling "the revolutionary climate." Corporate tax rates were slashed to incentivize "labour intensive development" in the homelands. Restrictions on black homeownership in townships were eliminated to help fund mortgages in suburban-style neighborhoods on the outskirts of townships, an effort that resonated with the American Strategic Hamlet Program in Vietnam.<sup>91</sup> Deregulation became a tool of pacification, and participation in the market a way to "win hearts and minds."

Elements of the Total Strategy helped Aaron Branch get his security business off the ground. The Total Strategy's planners in the Defence Department had designated homelands as "*groeipolen*" ("growth points") and offered incentives to those who hired directly from homelands.<sup>92</sup> Whenever he was short on guards, Aaron drove his two-ton lorry (Figure 4) the eight hours north from Johannesburg to the Venda homeland. And each time he would drive the eight hours back with the lorry full. "It just grew, grew, and grew and grew," he tells me. So much so that he bought a piece of land in the West Rand, a former vegetable farm, to build a hostel for the guards. "We had six hundred, seven hundred guards. It grew exponentially."<sup>93</sup>

Many of the guards spent their days and nights guarding the offices, warehouses, and factories owned by multinational corporations, some of whom were obligated to hire security under the National Key Points Act. By freeing the state of the financial and manpower costs of protecting the country's infrastructure, Aaron's firm became an auxiliary in the fight against communism. But while the National Key Points Act necessarily signaled the government's stamp of approval for the vast expansion of private security, it is important not to understand private security as a product of neoliberalism's enthusiasm for privatization, as some scholars have

<sup>88</sup>Testimony of Magnus Malan, "State Security Hearings," 4 and 5 Dec. 1997, SAHA TRC AL2924, A2.4, 270–71.

<sup>89</sup>Quoted in Mark Swilling and Mark Phillips, "State Power in the 1980s: From 'Total Strategy' to 'Counter-Revolutionary Warfare,'" in Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan, eds., *Society at War: The Militarisation of South Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 163; Testimony of Malan, 207.

<sup>90</sup>My translation of: "om die opkoms van 'n Swart middelklas en die vestiging van 'n kapitalistiese bestel, veral onder die stedelike Swartes," Secretariaat van die Staatsveiligheidsraad, "Konsep Nasionale Strategie Teen Die Rewolusionêre Oorlog Teen Die RSA: NR 44," 27 Nov. 1986, TRC, AL3060, vol. 20.

<sup>91</sup>*Rand Daily Mail*, 23 Nov. 1979: 4; 26 Oct. 1979: 13.

<sup>92</sup>See "Nasionale Fisiese Ontwikkelingsplan," 27 May 1980, in J. F. Huyser Collection, box 11, vol. 40, SADF Archive.

<sup>93</sup>Aaron Branch, interview with author, Krugersdorp, 24 Jan. 2022; author's fieldnotes, 17 and 22 Nov. 2021.



**Figure 4.** The truck that Aaron Branch bought in the early 1980s to transport his workers for his new security business. Author's Photo.

suggested.<sup>94</sup> Rather, the state's embrace of neoliberalism and the rise of South Africa's private security industry are better understood as symptoms of the same political economic reality. The state that had built apartheid was dead and gone, shipwrecked by the tides of global economic change. Survival would require repression on the cheap.

### The State Devolves: Contra-Mobilization and Civil War

Quite quickly, however, neoliberalism proved to be a less than effective tool of counter-revolution. On 3 September 1984, thousands of people took to the streets to protest rising rents in Sebokeng, a township in South Africa's industrial heartland. In the years previous, new libraries, roads, community centers, housing developments, and electrical and sewage systems had been built in the township as part of the state's "hearts-and-minds" campaign. But in keeping with neoliberal principles, these initiatives were funded by taxes and levies on Sebokeng's residents, saddling those affected most by deindustrialization with the cost of counter-revolution.<sup>95</sup> When the police opened fire on that spring morning, the rent protests exploded what became known as the Vaal Uprising, a nationwide conflagration that has often been marked as the beginning of the end of apartheid.

<sup>94</sup>See, for example, Gail Super, *Governing through Crime in South Africa: The Politics of Race and Class in Neoliberalizing Regimes* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Anne-Marie Singh, *Policing and Crime Control in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>95</sup>Franziska Rueedi, *The Vaal Uprising of 1984 & the Struggle for Freedom in South Africa* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2021), 55, 65.

The uprisings of the mid-eighties worsened the state's already precarious financial position. The rollercoaster price of gold could not cushion the broader effects of deindustrialization and economic decline on the fiscus. As international lenders called in their loans in response to the gloomy economic outlook and the backlash against the government's brutal crackdown, the government's debt-to-GDP ratio rose to an unprecedented 144.8 percent, with debt servicing now consuming 13.1 percent of the total national budget.<sup>96</sup>

At the same time, despite a state of emergency, the government could not manage to crush dissent internally. By late 1986, state security documents were noting with alarm that "the revolutionaries have already succeeded in establishing 'liberated areas' in isolated black communities."<sup>97</sup> Within counterinsurgency circles, this was a tell-tale sign that the final, most dangerous phase of revolutionary warfare had begun. In response to this "rising threat spiral," the documents noted the need "to mobilize groups and individuals to protect themselves and offer resistance against revolutionary actions."<sup>98</sup>

Cryptic though it may seem, this formulation referred to a well-known counterinsurgency strategy of "contra-mobilization," the tactic of deploying members of the population as combatants—either as members of militias and self-defense units or police auxiliaries, known as "special constables." Credited to the British counterinsurgency campaign in what was then Malaya, contra-mobilization was lauded by Fraser as a cheap way to resolve the "grave manpower deficits" faced by all counter-revolutionary campaigns, while also offering the people "avenues of employment," which was key to "winning hearts and minds."<sup>99</sup>

The state had already experimented with contra-mobilization in the early 1970s. Under Botha, the military had reversed its ban on non-white military service, while the SAP started a new "special constable" program in northern Namibia, where Ovambo men served as translators and trackers for "Operation K," the counterinsurgency unit that later became Koevoet.<sup>100</sup> After the collapse of the Portuguese Empire, black veterans of the Portuguese paramilitary units were also absorbed into the Defence Force's and SAP's counterinsurgency units.<sup>101</sup> As personnel shortages and budget constraints mounted in the late seventies, these efforts accelerated. Homeland governments were given control over their own military and police forces; plans were made for new township police forces; new black battalions were formed in the SADF; and money was sent to paramilitary proxies in Angola and Mozambique.<sup>102</sup>

The SAP, too, rapidly expanded its special constable program in Namibia, which had been renamed Koevoet after the Afrikaans word for "crowbar." Designed to be, in the words of the Minister of Law and Order, the instrument "that pries terrorists out

<sup>96</sup>Brian Pottinger, *The Imperial Presidency: P. W. Botha, the First 10 Years* (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1988), 272; Kahn, "Crisis," 66.

<sup>97</sup>My translation of "Het die rewolusionêres reeds daarin geslaag om 'bevryde gebiede' in sekere Swart gemeenskape te vestig," Secretariaat van die Staatsveiligheidsraad, "NR 44," SAHA TRC, AL3060, vol. 20.

<sup>98</sup>"NR 44," SAHA TRC AL3060, vol. 20.

<sup>99</sup>Fraser, *Revolutionary Warfare*, 21.

<sup>100</sup>Joseph Tshilongo, interview with author, 3 May 2022; Stapleton, *Warfare and Tracking*, 108; Pottinger, *Imperial Presidency*, 46.

<sup>101</sup>Stapleton, *Warfare and Tracking*, 111.

<sup>102</sup>Brewer, *Black and Blue*, 273, 283–87; Stapleton, *Military History*, 186–87, 157.

of the bushveld like nails from rotten wood,” Koevoet was credited for its path-breaking approach to what counterinsurgency doctrine called “mobile warfare,” the use of small, roving units rather than fixed positions to deny the enemy territory.<sup>103</sup> Unlike its predecessors, Koevoet carried out weeks-long patrols, deployed several *reaksie magte* (Afrikaans: “reaction forces”) simultaneously, and used high-speed tracking while on patrol. Typically, men like Joseph’s father and uncles, who had learned bushcraft as children, would run alongside the unit’s mine-proof vehicles, scanning the dirt tracks that crisscrossed the Angolan-Namibian border for evidence of PLAN fighters.<sup>104</sup> Once detected, the separate “reaction forces” would be radioed to converge from all sides. Koevoet fast became one of the most vaunted and lethal units in the apartheid security forces. Its tactics were widely copied, and its leaders disseminated within the military and police counterinsurgency units.<sup>105</sup>

Koevoet also encapsulated a darkly entrepreneurial, almost mercenary ethos that would come to pervade the state’s contra-mobilization efforts. Special constables were useful to the apartheid state not just because they could be recruited in large numbers, but also because they could be paid less than white soldiers, thus reducing pressure on the fiscus. But in order to counteract the effect of low pay on morale, Koevoet’s commanders instituted a bounty system, “*kopgeld*” (Afrikaans: literally “head money”) for each insurgent killed. By the end of apartheid, the unit had become notorious for strapping the bodies of PLAN militants to their vehicles to collect bounties and for wearing t-shirts that read: “Murder is our business, and business is good.”<sup>106</sup>

Counterinsurgency experts often cautioned that contra-mobilization could prove disastrous if special constables’ loyalty to the government was less than absolute.<sup>107</sup> By the time of the Vaal Uprising, however, this was advice that the state was either too cash-strapped or too enamored with the power of market incentives to fully heed. Desperate for more manpower, the state began recruiting thousands of new special constables from the masses of unemployed. These special constables, whose hasty training earned them the name *kitkonstabels* (Afrikaans: “instant constables”), became the state’s shock troops in the townships.<sup>108</sup> Notorious for their heavy-handed approach, *kitkonstabels* were often the first targeted by militants for assassinations, grenade attacks, and firebombings.<sup>109</sup> Despite the danger and low pay, many saw no other option. As one municipal police officer put it, “I can’t resign from this job as my family back home would starve.”<sup>110</sup>

Pieter Nkuna worked as a special constable in the Johannesburg township of Katilehong during the worst of the violence there. He had left his job at Gold Fields security after his boss refused him time off to visit his mother. In 1986, he joined the

<sup>103</sup>“The Apparatus of State-Orchestrated Violence in Apartheid South Africa,” SAHA TRC, Jane Argall Collection (AL 3115), C2.

<sup>104</sup>Sisingi Kamongo and Leon Bezuidenhout, *Shadows in the Sand: A Koevoet Tracker’s Story of an Insurgency War* (Pinetown: 30 Degrees South Publishers, 2011), 37–38.

<sup>105</sup>*Final Report*, vol. 2, 73.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 69; Herbstein and Evenson, *Devils Are among Us*, 64.

<sup>107</sup>See, for example, John J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War: A Psycho-Political-Military Strategy of Counter-Insurgency* (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1966), 107–13.

<sup>108</sup>Brewer, *Black and Blue*, 306–7.

<sup>109</sup>*Final Report*, vol. 3, 384–86.

<sup>110</sup>Brewer, *Black and Blue*, 306–7.

SAP. The pay was bad, but the position offered the possibility of a pension. Still young, he threw himself into the work. “I was a sprinter, a no-nonsense cop.” In December 1988, he attracted the attention of the ANC. “The cadres began calling the charge office. They told me, ‘We are coming for you on New Year’s Day, we will celebrate it with you.’” He stopped sleeping. He trained his children to use the automatic pistol, rifle, and shotgun he kept under his bed. He remembers the shape of the grenade as it arched over the wall of the precinct yard. He remembers opening his mouth, so his teeth didn’t shatter. And the crush of bodies that pinned him to the ground. He remembers his lip split down to his chin and the bakkie he loaded and drove to Katlehong Hospital. Afterward, he walked home with a 9 millimeter in each hand and thinking, “If I meet them, I won’t die like a dog.”<sup>111</sup> “Most of my colleagues resigned after that,” he tells me. “They said, ‘We can’t die for what we are being paid.’ That year 1990, my salary was R500.”

Pieter stayed on until his wife unexpectedly passed away. “When she died, I had a breakdown. I could not find the strength to face it. When we used to fill up the truck with dead bodies. So, I resigned.” For a time, he worked odd jobs. Eventually, he found a job (see [Figure 5](#)) a security firm not far from Gold Field’s training center Leopard’s Vlei, where his career began.<sup>112</sup>

Even as the SAP churned through special constables, the state turned to even cheaper sources of repression, funneling weapons and cash to gangs, youth clubs, community patrollers, vigilantes, and conservative groups it hoped would oppose the



**Figure 5.** Pieter Nkuna climbs back into his reaction vehicle while working a day shift at the private security firm where he now works. Author’s Photo.

<sup>111</sup> Author’s fieldnotes, 15 Mar. 2022.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

ANC. Most prominent among these paramilitary proxies was the Zulu nationalist movement Inkatha. Formed in 1975 by Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the prime minister of the Zulu homeland, Inkatha had positioned itself as a “moderate” alternative to the ANC.<sup>113</sup> After Inkatha came under attack by the ANC for its pro-government position, Buthelezi petitioned Botha’s administration to provide Inkatha with military training. In what was dubbed “Operation Marion,” two hundred Inkatha members were flown to northern Namibia’s Caprivi Strip, where military units, modeled after Koevoet, trained them to use heavy weaponry and counterinsurgency techniques.<sup>114</sup>

Once returned to South Africa, the Caprivi trainees worked for the KwaZulu police force during the day and carried out assassinations of ANC activists and massacres of ANC supporters at night, often with direct support from the apartheid security forces.<sup>115</sup> The state’s other proxies operated in a similar fashion. In August 1983, vigilantes, aligned with the Ciskei homeland’s government, killed ninety people who were boycotting the bus system in Mdantsane township.<sup>116</sup> In the winter of 1985, vigilantes in Cape Town’s Crossroads settlement killed over sixty-five people and displaced sixty thousand others as police officers looked on.<sup>117</sup> In January 1986, a state-sponsored vigilante group abducted and beat over four hundred men who opposed the policies of the KwaNdebele government.<sup>118</sup> Later that same year, members of the *MaRashea* gang joined the police in attacking striking mine workers in the Free State.<sup>119</sup>

Areas like Sebokeng, Chesterville, Khayelitsha, Alexandra, Thokoza, Tembisa, and Edendale were plunged into what can only be described as a civil war. Between 1985 and 1986, deaths from political violence skyrocketed from 175 to 1,352 and would remain high through 1990 due in no small part to the acts perpetrated by the state’s many proxies.<sup>120</sup> The fight against apartheid had become the total war that counterinsurgency doctrine prophesied. But it was a war mostly contained within black communities, seeding them with a kind of trauma impossible to quantify.

But though they joined the government in its fight against the ANC, apartheid’s proxies were never fully under state control, as officials would later admit.<sup>121</sup> Vigilante leaders used the weapons and money the state provided to set up what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission later called “virtual private fiefdoms” sustained by “financial extractions and informal judicial control of the

<sup>113</sup>Walter Felgate, “Challenges to Be Faced in the Transition to Democracy,” Speech to South African Institute of Race Relations, 8 Oct. 1997, SAHA TRC, Walter Felgate Security Papers (AL3456).

<sup>114</sup>Testimony of Brian Gcina, TRC Special Hearing on Caprivi, 4 Aug. 1997, South African Broadcasting Corporation, TRC Special Report.

<sup>115</sup>For example, during the 1990 massacre known as the “Seven Days’ War,” police, according to witnesses, supplied Inkatha militants with “buckets of ammunition.” *Final Report*, vol. 2, 626; Testimony of Daluxolo Dlamini, TRC Special Hearing on Caprivi, 5 Aug. 1997, South African Broadcasting Corporation, TRC Special Report.

<sup>116</sup>*Rand Daily Mail*, 6 Oct. 1983: 14.

<sup>117</sup>*Final Report*, vol. 5, 463–67.

<sup>118</sup>Nicolas Haysom, “Vigilantes and the Militarisation of South Africa,” in Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan, eds., *Society at War: The Militarisation of South Africa* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 189.

<sup>119</sup>*Final Report*, vol. 3, 347.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 2, 389.

<sup>121</sup>See, for example, Testimony of Michael Adriaan van Den Berg, Section 29 Hearing of the TRC, 3 Oct. 1997, SAHA, Freedom of Information Programme Collection (AL2878), B01.5.75.02.26, 40.

population.”<sup>122</sup> According to Buthelezi’s closest adviser, the violence unleashed by Inkatha was as much about internecine feuds over resources and power as about political differences with the ANC, saying of Inkatha: “The whole place is fragmented. So, unless you understand this, you don’t understand a lot about violence, because this is where you get these warlords evolving who are laws unto themselves. And they run the show the way they want to run their show.... It’s the people in those positions who you’ve got to please before you can get a job or a house or whatever.... It is part of the structure and the nature of the animal.”<sup>123</sup>

The auxiliaries of counter-revolution were freelancing, setting up protection rackets, hijacking syndicates, and for-hire hit squads. In theory, contra-mobilization was designed to preserve South African sovereignty in the face of the communist onslaught. In practice, it caused the state’s monopoly on violence to completely unspool. As counterinsurgency unfolded in conditions of deindustrialization and mass unemployment, violence became a means of financial survival and entrepreneurship a genre of war.

The liberation movements were not spared from this process. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report notes, the ANC’s “self-defense units” tended to “easily degenerate into bands of armed young men using their guns to control territory, women and resources.”<sup>124</sup> According to its own leaders, the PAC lost more of its operatives in armed robberies than clashes “with the enemy.”<sup>125</sup> When the ANC leadership sought to “halt the extortion, car hijackings, rape, robbery and summary executions” carried out by self-defense units, their attempts were “only partially effective.”<sup>126</sup> The ANC had prided itself on its restrained and judicious use of violence. But by the time freedom was achieved, the onslaught of counterinsurgency had caused liberatory violence to detach from its political aims, lapsing into what can only be called criminal predation.

These patterns of criminality did not expire with South Africa’s transition towards majority rule. Mark Shaw observed in the mid-aughts, “It is not by coincidence that those areas of the country which experienced the highest levels of political conflict ... now have the highest levels of syndicated criminal action.”<sup>127</sup> Indeed, as Gary Kynoch has argued, the country’s persistently high rate of crime is, in large part, the result of the fact that combatants on both sides did not demobilize with the dawn of democracy, but rather applied the skills they learned to criminal enterprise.<sup>128</sup>

There is evidence the private security industry played an active role in the state’s counterinsurgency campaign. Security firms offered a convenient front for covert actions. In 1981, a private mercenary company, likely under orders from Botha, attempted to stage a coup against the left-wing government of the Seychelles.<sup>129</sup> And

<sup>122</sup>Testimony of Van Den Berg, SAHA AL2878 B01.5.75.02.26, 472.

<sup>123</sup>Testimony of Walter Felgate, Section 29 Hearing of the TRC, 7 July 1996, SAHA TRC AL3456.

<sup>124</sup>*Final Report*, vol. 3, 725–26.

<sup>125</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 2, 373.

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 3, 725–26.

<sup>127</sup>Mark Shaw, *Crime and Policing in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Transforming under Fire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 72.

<sup>128</sup>Gary Kynoch, “Crime, Conflict and Politics in Transition-Era South Africa,” *African Affairs* (London) 104, 416 (2005): 493–514.

<sup>129</sup>*Final Report*, vol. 2, 160–63.



in the early nineties, former Security Branch officers used the private security firm Spoornet to carry out mass shootings of train passengers in Johannesburg, while domestic counterinsurgency units used security firms as fronts for assassination squads.<sup>130</sup> Throughout the eighties and nineties, private security firms that were staffed by bush-war veterans acted as go-betweens for the apartheid regime and its satellite regimes, helping train and supervise homeland military and police forces.<sup>131</sup> The firm Springbok Patrols, now known as Fidelity ADT, was involved in training Inkatha members throughout the early nineties.<sup>132</sup>

Because security was largely unregulated and full of unscrupulous actors, routing its covert actions through the private sector allowed the state to insulate itself from potential blowback, while offloading some of the cost of repression. But because these operations were, by nature, covert and the files detailing them likely destroyed, it is difficult to know exactly how extensive these operations were or how private security figured in the state's broader contra-mobilization strategy.<sup>133</sup>

In the state security documents that do remain, private security receives no mention—perhaps in part because the force of the market meant that private security needed little direction from the state officials. As the state security apparatus buckled under the weight of mass resistance, businesses, mines, factories, universities, and homeowners expanded their reliance on private security. In the tumult of the eighties, private security firms were hired to break strikes, protect their properties, control student protests, chase the homeless off greenspaces, and fend off shoplifters.<sup>134</sup> In certain moments, the industry sold itself as a safe alternative to the apartheid police who could incite violence with their very presence. But in others, it worked as a force multiplier for the state, assisting police roadblocks and joining the riot squads during the Vaal Uprising.<sup>135</sup>

Along the way, the security industry transformed the techniques and matériel of counter-revolution into marketable products. In 1982, the security firm Peaceforce began offering clients in Soweto the services of “mobile units.” A repackaging of counterinsurgency doctrine's “mobile warfare” tactics, Peaceforce's “mobile units” would respond in the event of unrest in exchange for a monthly fee.<sup>136</sup> By 1984, Coin Security had also ventured into this arena, offering their commercial and industrial clients the option of hiring a helicopter-deployed parachute unit marketed as “Rapid

<sup>130</sup>Ibid., 612, 700–1.

<sup>131</sup>Independent Board of Inquiry, “Special Report Bisho: Ciskei shootings, September 7, 1992,” Wits Historical Papers (ZA HPRA), Independent Board of Inquiry Records, AG2543-A-A16; *Final Report*, vol. 2, 414, 427, 433.

<sup>132</sup>Sara Blecher, “Safety in Security? A Report on the Private Security Industry and Its Involvement in Violence,” Mar. 1996, Wits Historical Papers (ZA HPRA), Independent Board of Inquiry Records, AG2543-A-A16.

<sup>133</sup>For details on the destruction of security documents, see Verne Harris, “‘They Should Have Destroyed More’: The Destruction of Public Records by the South African State in the Final Years of Apartheid 1990–1994,” in Richard J. Cox and David A. Wallace, eds., *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society* (Westport: Quorum Books, 2002).

<sup>134</sup>BBC, 18 Mar. 1985; *Toronto Star*, 28 Aug. 1987; *Reuters*, 13 Aug. 1987; *Rand Daily Mail*, 27 May 1981; 3 July 1982; 3; 9 Dec. 1982; 1; 18 Nov. 1982; 9; 23 Feb. 1984; 1; 24 Feb. 1984; 2; 5 Mar. 1983; 3; 4 July 1983; 1; 7 June 1982; 4.

<sup>135</sup>*Rand Daily Mail*, 14 Jan. 1982; 19 Apr. 1985; 2.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., 23 Feb. 1982; 14.

Deployment Force.”<sup>137</sup> During the uprisings of the mid-eighties, Gold Fields spun its internal security detail into its own security division, which rented out the armored personnel carriers they used to break strikes on the mines to other companies worried about the threat of unrest.<sup>138</sup> By 1986, Peaceforce’s “mobile units” had become part of the core business model for the security industry which now applied them to fight crime. For a monthly subscription, homeowners could enjoy the protection of 24/7 patrols by “armed reaction vehicles,” an eerie appropriation of Koevoet’s “reaction forces” for the suburbs.<sup>139</sup>

When crime peaked in the mid-1990s and stories of lightning-fast hijackings and violent home invasions reverberated across the country, this business model became immensely profitable. From the mid-eighties to the late nineties, industry revenue grew at an annual rate of 200 percent, reaching US\$2 billion in 1999.<sup>140</sup> Success set off a wave of consolidation: Gold Fields sold its security division to Gray Security, which was joined by firms like Paramed and Klipton Security to list on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange.<sup>141</sup> As barriers to investment fell in the late nineties, multinationals like Chubb, ADT, Securicor, and Group 4 Flack (now G4S) bought into “the fast-growing African market,” pouring in R2.5 billion in investment in the year 2000 alone.<sup>142</sup> Attracted by the “high-quality, annuity-type income” produced by the subscription model, private security gained a reputation as “a recession-proof investment,” steady and reliable amid broader economic volatility.<sup>143</sup> By 2001, Credit Suisse estimated it was the largest security industry of its kind in the world.<sup>144</sup> By 2010, the financial newspaper *Business Day* estimated it was the second-largest industry in South Africa, encompassing over 7,400 firms and employing over 387,000 people.<sup>145</sup>

After liberation came to Namibia in 1990, veterans of the counterinsurgency units there flooded into jobs in South Africa’s private security industry.<sup>146</sup> Among them was a young Joseph Tshilongo, who began his career as a cash-in-transit guard for the aforementioned Springbok Patrols. When the ANC came to power in 1994, many of Joseph’s relatives who had been in Koevoet joined him in the private sector. Over the years, they brought their knowledge and experience to their work as cash-in-transit guards, armed reaction officers, anti-poaching rangers, bodyguards, and trainers for the next generation of security officers. The state they had fought for was gone, but the wreckage it left ensured that their skills would be needed for decades to come.

## Conclusion: Provincializing Mass Incarceration

Listening to Joseph Tshilongo outside his home in northeast Johannesburg, I was struck by a familiar feeling—one that had come up in my conversations with Aaron

<sup>137</sup>Ibid., 18 Oct. 1984: 4.

<sup>138</sup>*Financial Times*, 6 June 1986.

<sup>139</sup>*Financial Mail*, 8 Aug. 1986.

<sup>140</sup>See *Reuters*, 22 July 2003; *Financial Times*, 4 Oct. 2001.

<sup>141</sup>*Reuters*, 3 Mar. 1999.

<sup>142</sup>*Financial Times*, 4 Oct. 2001; *Nordic Business Review*, 3 Sept. 2001.

<sup>143</sup>*Johannesburg Stock Exchange Interim Report*, 24 Feb. 1999; *Reuters*, 15 Sept. 2000.

<sup>144</sup>*Financial Times*, 4 Oct. 2001.

<sup>145</sup>*Business Day*, 22 Dec. 2010.

<sup>146</sup>See also Lennart Bollinger, *Apartheid’s Black Soldiers: Un-National Wars and Militaries in Southern Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2021), 152.

Branch, Franklin Makoni, Lynette Nel, Mafika Gumbi, and Pieter Nkuna. It was a feeling of lives irrevocably altered by events remembered but submerged. Wanting to trace or perhaps displace the weight of these events, I pressed Joseph for a moment when it might have gone differently: “Why did your father and uncles join Koevoet?” His answer was at once vague and specific. Koevoet, he explained, was similar to the security firms that guarded his home and mine. The only difference was scale: “Koevoet was formed to provide security for the whole world. My father joined to protect the people of Namibia and to win democracy.”<sup>147</sup> It took months before I recognized the logic in his answer. It was the artifact of the counterinsurgency lectures he had overheard as a child: Namibia is a special site in the global struggle to defend capitalist democracy, and Koevoet was democracy’s most powerful tool. An artifact of an ideology whose ambitions were global and whose half-lives still burn today.

Reckoning with these half-lives that link counter-revolution to private security troubles the way contemporary South Africa is situated in the global imagination. After all, South Africa is usually seen as an exceptional country. Internationally, the country has often been taken as singular—exceptionally racist, exceptionally unequal, exceptionally violent. For many South Africans, too, the country’s experience with apartheid has set it apart, different from the West but distinct within Africa and the Global South.

At first glance, South Africa’s private security industry seems to be yet more evidence for the country’s exceptional status—the odd by-product of twists and turns of the last national liberation struggle of the twentieth century. But South Africa is far from the only country where private security firms have thrived, nor the only place where private entities made up of erstwhile revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries exercise considerable power over life and death. In this respect, Johannesburg and Cape Town are not dissimilar from Bogota or Nairobi, Kingston or Lima, Rio de Janeiro or Port-au-Prince.

If one takes seriously the idea that counterinsurgency was a global project, these similarities between countries within the Global South come to look like more than passing resemblances. After all, it was the South where the postwar proponents of the capitalist world met their fiercest skeptics and consequently, the region for which counterinsurgency doctrine was originally developed. As the place where the Cold War was hottest, the Global South has been the place where counterinsurgency’s methods have been most widely and brutally applied. The late apartheid state was by no means the first nor the last to fund paramilitary proxies as part of a counter-revolutionary war. In this respect, South Africa is, to borrow a phrase from Neville Alexander, “an ordinary country” on the periphery of the global economic system.<sup>148</sup>

Within the context of the Global South, South Africa’s experience with state incapacity is similarly “ordinary.” The conditions that constrained and eventually wrecked the late apartheid state—economic decline, capital flight, ballooning debt, volatile commodity prices, and weak popular support—are not at all unique to late apartheid South Africa, but in fact general to the Global South. While these economic headwinds were undoubtedly strengthened by the embargos and sanctions achieved

<sup>147</sup>Joseph Tshilongo, interview with author, Johannesburg, 3 May 2022.

<sup>148</sup>Neville Alexander, *An Ordinary Country: Issues in the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy in South Africa* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003).

by the global anti-apartheid movement, South Africa's pariah status was less a cause than an expression of the country's dependent position in the global order—not significant enough to sway the West nor domestically dynamic enough to achieve self-sufficiency.

Considered in global context, the rise of South Africa's private security and the broader process of privatized violence it heralded might look less like a freak accident of the dying days of apartheid and more like a possible paradigm for the way in which the punitive turn unfolded in the Global South. Determining exactly how paradigmatic the South African story is will require carceral studies to expand its current horizon of attention. While the field's predominant focus on American mass incarceration has produced analytically sharp and theoretically enlightening work, centering the United States as a frame of reference risks generalizing a story that is, in actuality, specific to the Global North. Provincializing the American "carceral state" and attending to places like South Africa where the punitive turn was not especially carceral nor particularly state-centered will necessarily sharpen the field's analyses and expand its theoretical purchase. But more critically still, a more global horizon would allow carceral studies to plan a future that is truly a measure of the world it seeks to transform.

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