

STUDENTS AND MILITARISM -- Brett Myrdal and Chris Giffard

Militarism has become an integral part of our lives, and is developing a war psychosis within our society. In this workshop, rather than outlining descriptively this war psychosis, we intend to sketch some of the reasons for this development and the processes through which our society has become militarised.

It is not only the SADF and the institutions of the South African state which disseminate military values. The radio, television, commercial press, advertising and the education system (amongst other things) all work together to portray the war in a certain way, showing the "enemy" as worth resisting, and the present system in South Africa as worth defending.

Clearly, militarism is an essential ingredient in the ideology of the South African ruling class. But the reasons for the intensification of militarism relate dynamically to the developing conflict and the changing conditions of struggle. For example, we can look at the shift from portraying the conflict as being between black and white- the "swart gevaar"- to presenting the conflict as being against an external threat- the "rooi gevaar". On the one side South Africans of all races allied with Christianity, free enterprise and Western civilisation fight against, on the other side, the dark forces of communism, barbarism and chaos.

It is easy to recognise the repressive role of the SADF, but it cannot undertake this role without support for it's operations. Therefore it's ideological role is critical in winning this support. Military leaders have emphasised the need to win the "hearts and minds" of the people. They describe the war as " 80% socio-economic and only 20% military" and add that "if we lose the socio-economic struggle then we need not even bother to fight the military one".

X The concern of the SADF is to develop a militarily defensible government policy. Military leaders have recognised the need for economic and political reforms and accompanying ideological restructuring. The SADF has been instrumental in the state's reform initiatives, in an attempt to broaden the support base of the ruling classes through the incorporation of 'coloureds' and indians in the constitutional proposals.



This need of the military to inculcate militaristic ideology and the importance of its dominance has many causes:

- \* The war of occupation in Namibia, through which South Africa denies the desire of the majority of Namibians for a free and democratic society- the SADF learnt a hard lesson of the necessity to win the "hearts and minds" of the people;
- \* The SADF's defeat in Angola by the MPLA in 1975, and the independence of Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe have made South Africa more vulnerable to guerrilla insurgency;
- \* The mass uprising in 1976 continuing into 1978 posed a real threat to the South African state. Many young South Africans left to join the ANC's guerrilla army, Umkhonto we Sizwe. Since then the number of guerrilla attacks has increased;
- \* This period also provided the stimulus for the growth of mass-based organisation - trade unions and women's, community, student and political organisations, many of which give strong allegiance to the Freedom Charter and non-racialism.

Faced with this the SADF needed to present a particular conception of itself:

- \* They used the concept of "neutrality" in order for the SADF to place itself above and outside of politics. It is forced to legitimise its activities in the eyes of both the South African and the international communities:

"Defence is not part of the political system, rather it is simply the neutral force which ensures that the internal policies of this country can be sorted out". -Major John Cupido, SA Cape Corps, 1982

Yet the attempt to appear as a neutral force must become more futile as the SADF takes on the tasks of the police in repressing internal unrest.

- \* The SADF is concerned to be seen as a multi-racial army fighting for South Africans of all races. The increasing recruitment of blacks into the Permanent Force and the intention to extend conscription to "coloureds" and indians are propagandised as claims to being above apartheid;
- \* South African guerrillas are labelled as "terrorists" supported by communism. This allows the state to ignore demands for clemency and to hang guerrillas as criminals. At the same time it undertakes cross-border raids to destroy "terrorist bases", such as the Maseru raid in which 40 unarmed South African refugees and Lesotho citizens were killed.



There is obviously a need for these militarised values to be opposed by progressives. The university is a critical arena in which this opposition can take place. By presenting alternative ideas and interpretations of the role of the military, we can pull some students over to support our political objectives, and 'neutralise' still more, thus removing their active support for state initiatives. In the second section of our paper, we're going to look at how this opposition has been handled by students, and throw out ideas of how this can be done in the future.

Opposition to the military in the white community has been taken up mainly by the church and the Conscientious Objectors Support Groups (COSGs) in the form of support for objectors. This public support has provided legitimation and protection for objectors. Added to this, the political stance taken by progressive sectors of the church has had a politicising influence in the white community.

In the last two years the COSGs have expanded into two additional areas:

- \* They are involved in education in churches and schools, and
- \* They are beginning to forge organisational links with progressive sectors of the church, liberal groups and students. In March this year, COSG(Western Cape) participated in a public protest meeting against the Defence Amendment Bill with the Black Sash, the Women's Movement for Peace, the South African Institute of Race Relations, the Civil Rights League and NUSAS.

It is in part those who refuse to serve in the SADF who have enabled this opposition to be organised. Every year since 1977, between 3000 and 4 000 have resisted conscription in South Africa. Most of these have left the country or are members of the "peace churches". But it is the group of objectors outside the "peace churches" that constitutes the main threat to the dominance of militaristic ideology.

Between 1977 and 1981, 4 people chose to go to jail. Between 1982 and the beginning of 1983, 6 more people objected. Some of the objectors are universal pacifists, who will not serve in any army under any circumstances. Among the others, reasons for refusing to serve have ranged from a muted expression of opposition to violence in the SADF to a full-scale critique of South African society and the role of the SADF in defending it.



Recent objectors have exposed the role of the SADF by arguing that it is engaged in a civil war, that the "enemy" are fellow South Africans, that South Africa is occupying Namibia illegally and that it is deliberately attempting to destabilise surrounding countries. They have argued that the legitimate grievances and demands of the oppressed should be heard and not silenced, as they have been in the past.

It is these arguments in particular that have been expanded and extended by the student movement into a thorough critique of the nature of South African society and the role of the SADF. At the level of the university campus, we're talking about opposition to the military in the form of resistance (objection) and education through that resistance.

Why then do these objectors pose an ideological threat?

- \* The objectors are members of the white privileged group- this opens cracks in the state's white support base which helps to develop organised opposition;
- \* By voicing their opposition to the SADF, objectors unite with the <sup>ttt</sup> majority of South Africans and contribute to the building of a non-racial struggle.

Almost all students have direct or indirect experience of the military- all white men are forcibly conscripted, and the effects of this are felt by friends and family. All students are subject to militaristic ideology, inculcating the notion of support for the SADF. However, this ideological preparation is not sufficient for them to render service voluntarily. In fact, most students resent forced conscription which controls and affects them for 37 years of their lives, making them more open to education around the issue.

It is the gains we can make on an ideological level that make it a useful issue for the student movement to take up. And although ideological gains are real, and are gains in themselves, it is up to us to use these gains to strengthen our organisations.



This year, however, the draconian Defence Amendment Act was passed to combat the threat posed by objectors. Essentially, the state is attempting to divide opposition to the SADF by making provision for religious pacifists only (6 years of 'community service') and imposing heavy sentences on all other objectors. The legislation has had a contradictory effect - as well as uniting opposition, it stimulated a campaign to end conscription (based on a Black Sash resolution at its conference earlier this year). This call to end conscription is being taken up by various organisations in the form of "Anti-conscription committees". It's quite clear that this demand will **not** be met by the state in its present form - it cannot. But that doesn't mean the demand shouldn't be made. The campaign provides scope for education around the issue of conscription and for the extension of the oppositional support base. It's a demand that can be supported by progressive church leaders, and the very fact that it can't be met can be used to demonstrate to people what conscription is there for.

As a last point, it is important that we do not lose sight of the major campaign facing the progressive movement at the moment - the campaign against the Constitutional Proposals. There are very significant interrelations between the military and the constitution:

- \* The military is directly involved in pushing reform;
- \* The state is attempting to structure a new society which 'citizens' will be called on to defend;
- \* The proposals add a new dimension - the threat of the extension of conscription.

Therefore resistance includes creatively exploiting these links to expose the reform initiatives and to mobilise opposition.

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