

**VOTING WITH THEIR FEET:
WHITE STUDENTS, CONSCRIPTION
AND THE BRAIN DRAIN AT RHODES
UNIVERSITY. ★**

JEREMY BERNSTEIN AND FIONA ADAMS

paper prepared for presentation at the 19th Annual Congress of
the Association for Sociology in Southern Africa (ASSA).
University of Durban-Westville. 6 July 1988.

**THIS IS WORK IN PROGRESS AND SHOULD NOT BE QUOTED
WITHOUT THE AUTHORS' PERMISSION.**

- 1 -

INTRODUCTION

The November 1987 mutiny by more than 400 members of the South West Africa Territory Force [SWATF] occurred in the midst of what is believed to be South Africa's largest military incursion ever mounted into Angola.¹ This was the first official indication of significant discontent among South Africa's troops of whom 40 percent are national conscripts.

Yet the phenomenon of resisting incorporation into South Africa's military apparatus in whatever form, is by no means a new one. As the current crisis escalates, many conscripts believe their only choice in resisting conscription is emigration - what many exiled conscripts refer to as "the chicken run".

This paper examines in greater detail the social and material impact of conscription. More specifically, it attempts to assess the extent to which a desire to avoid compulsory military service in the SADF is a motivating factor for male students in deciding to emigrate. In order to provide a context for the research, the following issues are outlined: firstly, white South African attitudes towards conscripts; secondly, the growth of resistance to conscription; thirdly, the state's response to this resistance movement, and finally, emigration

1 - Weekly Mail Vol 3 No. 46.

A5.19

as a consequence of conscription. The discussion is based on a survey conducted at Rhodes University during 1987. Findings established that the majority of respondents were contemplating emigration. These findings and their socio-economic implications are outlined.

An attempt was also made to gauge respondents' understanding of the alternatives to emigration, i.e. a non-military form of national service. Their understanding was found to be inadequate and it is suggested that this is an important area for future research.

WHITE SOUTH AFRICA'S HERO

On the southern tip of fulminating Africa
there is a country fair of many nations where
its people work and play and rest in safe security
Thanks to those men who fight a ruthless enemy:
A foe whose aim is to destroy all forms of harmony
Western democracy, respect and sovereignty.
And so to all the men who fight to keep our country free
we pledge support and sing from every heart our praise.

We stand here united against the enemy
who uses all means to undermine stability.
We thank those who fight them that all of us are free
to work, to worship and to build our own destiny.²

The vast majority of white South Africans view the South African Defence Force (SADF) as a body whose primary role is to defend and protect South Africa from aggression by external forces and their

2 - Extract from a concert dedicated to the "boys" on the border.
In: Human Awareness Programme Militarization Dossier (hereafter HAP) 1986. B9 p2.

internal cohorts. This perception has been fuelled by the SADF's increasing participation in attempts to "restore law and order" internally, and more recently by its involvement in the Angolan conflict. South Africa's invasion of Angola, previously justified on the basis that it was necessary to counter SWAPO's guerrilla war and to ensure the security of the Namibian people, are now being presented as a bolster to Unita in its fight against the MPLA government. The MPLA itself is viewed as a surrogate for Russian and Cuban expansion in Southern Africa.³ Internal activities of the SADF have long been presented by the state through the news media (especially the state-controlled SABC) as legitimate activities designed to secure the safety of all South Africans in the face of a Moscow-inspired and controlled total onslaught.

Conscripts, who make up 40,06% of the SADF's numbers,⁴ are crucial to the SADF's ability to carry out its operations. Compulsory conscription was introduced for white men in 1967 and was administered through a ballot system. In 1970, this system was replaced by an extension of the call-up to all white male South African citizens. Since then, the length of military service has been increased from twelve months to two years continuous initial training, plus an effective two years of camps. The call-up was also extended to thousands of immigrants following the promulgation

3 - op. cit.

4 - HAP A2 p1

of the South African Citizenship Amendment Act of 1984.⁵ The recent President's Council Youth Report recommended the further extension of conscription to all population groups, as did a recent National Manpower Commission (NMC).⁶

Conscripts are portrayed as white South Africa's heroes by the media, the government, the SADF and advertising. A "factual" report in a major Sunday newspaper illustrated this in the following way:

A young South African lieutenant was flung to the ground. Eight bullets ripped into his back-pack. Another bullet tore through the upper part of his right arm. But bravely he joined the battle, firing at the enemy with his R4 rifle. A SWAPO bullet shattered his right hand. Lt Jan van Deventer refused to give up the fight. He grabbed his rifle in the left hand and continued to return fire. Alongside his close friend, a corporal, fell to the ground. He was dead. The firefight raged on. During the next 15 minutes the officer saw four more of his comrades injured - two seriously. SWAPO, under intense pressure from the accurate South African counter-attack, decided they'd had enough. Dragging three dead and a number of injured with them, the terrorists fled north - to the sanctuary of the Angolan border.⁷

RESISTANCE TO CONSCRIPTION

5 - HAP A1 p2

6 - See National Manpower Commission: High Level and Middle Level Manpower In South Africa: Recent Developments. (hereafter NMC) Republic of South Africa. 1987. p36.

7 - HAP B3 p2

A growing number of conscripts and their families have come to question the role conscripts' involvement in the SADF requires them to play. A 22 year-old who was jailed for two years for refusing to do military service argued that :

Since the conflict in this country is a civil not an external war, participation in the SADF is a profoundly political action. Participation does not act in the interests of the nation as a whole, it contributes only to the cause of the dominant minority.⁸

A UCT study into student attitudes towards military conscription found that those opposed to it had a deep sense of moral outrage at the immorality of apartheid and strongly rejected the presence of troops in the townships. They believed the SADF was waging an unjust war.⁹

The SADF's activities in Southern African states have, since the 1975 invasion of Angola, been seen as illegitimate destabilization by those who oppose apartheid. Its internal role is perceived not as neutrally defending the interests of all South Africans, but rather as defending the interests and perpetuating the policies of a minority ruling group. The perception of the SADF as a force placed firmly on the side of apartheid has been heightened since the initial deployment of troops in Sebokeng in 1984 and by the overt involvement of troops in quelling "unrest" in townships

8 - HAP B8 p1.

9 - HAP B8 p1.

throughout South Africa on an ongoing basis since then. Further, the structural involvement of the SADF in Joint Management Centres (JMCs) and other policy making structures; the use of troops to prop up discredited community councils through such practices as enforced rent collection, and to implement apartheid policies such as forced removals, have added to the SADF's image as the defender of apartheid. In addition, SADF troops involved in the Civic Action Programme (CAP) are seen as fulfilling the political role of "winning the hearts and minds of the people." As part of this programme, uniformed national servicemen are seconded to government or bantustan departments, working as teachers, engineers, doctors, dentists, lecturers, administrative personnel, and as intelligence gatherers. The CAP is very much part of the "total strategy" designed to counter the "total onslaught".

Prior to the recent SADF invasion of Angola, it was the escalation of overt SADF involvement in civil conflict, especially after troops moved into the townships of Sebokeng in 1984, which prompted growing resistance to conscription among sectors of the white population. Resistance to conscription is primarily evidenced, at an organisational level, by the development and growth of the End Conscription Campaign (ECC), which was started in 1983/84. Although the ECC represents some 52 church, women's, youth and political organisations, its primary support and its most active members are drawn from the white youth. The organisation campaigns for freedom of choice to refrain from doing military service without penalty and to bring about public pressure to end compulsory conscription. However, the ECC is forced to operate

within the parameters set by Section 121 (c) of the Defence Act which make it an offence to "use any language, do any act or thing with intent to recommend to, encourage, aid, incite, instigate, suggest or otherwise cause any person or any category of persons or persons in general to refuse to render any service to which such other persons or a person of such a category or persons in general is or are liable or may become liable in terms of this act".¹⁰

The extension of conscription to immigrants has resulted in another form of resistance: following the promulgation of the South African Citizenship Amendment Act of 1984, thousands of immigrants became automatic citizens of South Africa. All those aged between 15 and 25 then had to register for military training and the first large-scale call-up after the promulgation of the Act saw the induction of about 1200 immigrant's sons into the SADF. However, by April 1985 more than 600 people had refused South African citizenship to avoid military training, and thirty people had been deported for refusing citizenship.

This has potentially serious implications for South Africa's manpower needs as the recent NMC noted:

The legislation (ie South African Citizenship Amendment Act) may be regarded as a deterrent to remaining in the RSA and may result in immigrant families leaving the country owing to the fact that their sons are liable for national service. Since the heads of families are often either High Level Manpower (HLM) or Middle Level Manpower (MLM), this may be detrimental to the RSA's pool of skilled manpower.¹¹

A further indication of increased resistance to conscription is a rise in the number of conscripts who fail to report for duty (from 1 596 in 1984, this figure increased to 7 589 in January 1985). Figures for 1986/87 are not available as the Minister of Defence, Gen Magnus Malan, has prohibited their release. The government explains the increase in the numbers who fail to report by saying that many are students who get deferment. However, students who are deferred are not expected to report and, according to the ECC, are thus not included in the 1985 figure.¹²

A desire by members of the conscripted sector to avoid military service has long been perceived as an important factor in decisions to emigrate. In 1985, The Star estimated that some 3 000 - 4 000 people had left South Africa since 1979 in order to avoid the call-up.¹³

11 - NMC p36.
12 - HAP A1 p2
13 - HAP A1 p2

STATE AND RIGHT-WING RESPONSES TO RESISTANCE

State responses to resistance to conscription have taken a variety of forms. In 1970 the maximum sentence for conscientious objectors was increased to fifteen months and penalties were introduced for encouraging or assisting a conscientious objector.¹⁴ Regulations promulgated under the current State of Emergency make it an offence to "undermine or discredit the system of compulsory military service". This has had the effect of further curtailing the dissemination of information relating to the activities of the SADF and of resistance to those activities by conscripts and by the communities against which the SADF is employed. This particular clause in the Emergency Regulations is clearly designed to curtail the extent to which the ECC can continue to address its concerns yet remain within the parameters of legal organisational work.

The ECC has been singled out for attack through detentions and smears. Right-wing publications such as the Aida Parker Newsletter and Veterans for Victory pamphlets have been widely distributed in schools, through the commercial media and through pamphlet drops. Their aim is to discredit the ECC by claiming it is part of the

14 - HAP B8 p2. See also HAP A1 p1. It should be noted that increases in conscription and in the penalties for objection have arisen not only in relation to resistance to conscription, but more broadly in the context of a variety of threats faced by the South African government from the democratic movement within South Africa, and as a result of events in neighbouring states.

total onslaught on South Africa. Describing the ECC as a "wolf in sheep's clothing", one Veterans for Victory "Special Update",¹⁵ says that the ECC is (wittingly or unwittingly) spearheading "the historic communist campaign to undermine the legitimate defence forces of the country as part of a vital revolutionary strategy".¹⁶ Veterans for Victory pamphlets are reputedly published by Lt-Col Robert K. Brown, editor of "the world's most popular 'macho' magazine, Soldier of Fortune, often dubbed the 'mercenaries' bible".¹⁷

Parliament has also been a source of attacks on the ECC, largely from Nationalist or Conservative Party members. In 1985, the then Deputy Minister of Defence, Adriaan Vlok (now Minister of Law and Order), described those who approve of the ECC's aims as being "like clay being moulded by our enemies - at this very moment they are being used by the African National Congress (ANC) to achieve the ANC's evil goals in South Africa".¹⁸ More recently the ECC was described as being one of South Africa's "four main enemies" - along with the United Democratic Front (UDF), ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP).¹⁹

15 - See Grocott's Mail 15 November 1987.
 16 - Veterans for Victory, Special Update, November 1987.
 17 - HAF B2 p4.
 18 - HAF B8 p4.
 19 - Quoted in Nathan, L "Resistance to Militarization: Three Years of the End Conscription Campaign" in S.A. Review 4. SARS. Johannesburg. 1987.

EMIGRATION

The growing civil conflict in South Africa has prompted a rise in the number of emigrants in the past four years, many of whom are skilled or professional people. The following figures illustrate this trend:²⁰

	Emigration	Immigration	Loss/Gain
1983	8 427	30 483	+22 237
1984	8 550	28 793	+20 243
1985	11 401	17 284	+ 5 883
1986	13 711	6 994	- 6 717
1987	(January - May)		- 2 716

From January to May 1987 the following numbers of professional people emigrated:

Engineers	452
Accountants	293
Educationalists	326
Doctors, dentists	114
Total	1 185

As can be seen from the above figures the number of immigrants per year has dropped each year between 1983 and 1986, while the number of emigrants has increased. A significant proportion of those emigrating (approximately 49% between January and May 1987) are professional or skilled people.

20 - Weekly Mail Vol 3 No 28 1987.

A variety of reasons for the increase in emigration have been put forward, including the worsening political climate in South Africa and the economic recession. As was mentioned, a desire by members of the conscripted sector to avoid military service has long been perceived as an important factor in decisions to emigrate.

Emigration is one of a limited number of options open to those who object to compulsory military service. Their only other alternatives are to go to jail for a possible six years, to attempt to evade service through deferments, changing addresses and so on, and (for a limited number) to apply for religious objector status.

One conscript who chose emigration as the only viable option noted in a letter to the Registering Officer of the South West Africa Territory Force:²¹

I am making use of this letter to tell you that I have moved to West Germany, not only to continue my studies through the sponsorship of SWAPO, but that I am out of Namibia and South Africa primarily because I refuse to do service in an army which is the instrument used by the Apartheid State to suppress brutally the rightful political, social and economic aspirations of the Namibian people. I, and thousands of others who have been forced into exile, will be back in Namibia as soon as true independence has been won.²²

However, the extent to which conscription is a major motivating factor in decisions to emigrate, particularly among skilled or professional people, has not been documented. In the light of the

21 - The South West Africa Territory Force (SWATF) falls under the direct command of the South Africaqn Defence Force (SADF) and is responsible for the conscription of Namibians into South Africa's security structures.

22 - HAP AB p2.

recent meeting between the SADF and the ECC it is important that this should happen. After having rejected out of hand ECC's recommendations put forward to the Geldenhuys Commission, and after refusing on a number of occasions to debate the issue of conscription on public platforms, the SADF recently agreed to meet with an ECC delegation to discuss the issue of alternative service. Although details of that meeting have not yet been released, a joint statement was issued which said that:

Members of the SADF and ECC met to receive the ECC's proposals for changes to the existing legislation with the view to accommodating conscientious objectors within the system of an alternative 'non-military' national 'community' service.²³

While it is clearly too early to read into this meeting any indication of a fundamental change in the state's attitude to the ECC and to its campaign, it does suggest that the state is concerned about the possible effects of emigration of skilled personnel on the economy.

RHODES SURVEY

In response to these issues, the major aim of this research was to gauge the extent to which male students at Rhodes University are considering emigration after completing their studies in order to avoid the call-up. The results of this survey conducted during

23 - Weekly Mail Vol 4 No. 23 1988:

1987,²⁴ strongly indicate that there is a direct link between the loss of skilled people and the obligation to do military service in an institution which furthers the implementation of apartheid.

The questionnaire was distributed to all male students registered at Rhodes University and resident in Grahamstown. A 30% return covering a broad spectrum of disciplines was obtained.

1. Students who intend emigrating

53% of respondents are contemplating emigrating.
47% definitely intend staying in South Africa.

Of those who are contemplating emigration:
66% are eligible for conscription.

Of these, a full 28% are contemplating emigration solely to avoid conscription, while a further 28% give conscription as one of their reasons. Only 44% are not motivated at all by conscription.

These figures effectively confirmed the hypothesis that the majority of students who intend emigrating from South Africa after completion of their studies are motivated by a desire to avoid compulsory military service. Although only 28% of respondents have

24 - For a more detailed breakdown of these figures, see Adams, F and Bernstein, J. "An Assessment of the extent to which a desire to avoid compulsory military service in the SADF is a motivating factor in decisions to emigrate by male students at Rhodes University. Unpublished Third Year Project. Department of Journalism and Media Studies. Grahamstown. 1987.

conscription as the sole reason motivating their desire to emigrate, conscription is at least one reason for the majority of respondents.

2. Students' opinions on compulsory military service.

Of the total respondents:

0.4% did not answer the question

64,3% said conscription should not be compulsory

35% of these were not eligible for military service.
42% were eligible but had not done any military service.
23% had done military service.

25,3% said conscription should be compulsory

17% of these were not eligible for conscription.
47% were eligible but had not done any military service.
36% had done military service.

10% were uncertain whether or not conscription should be compulsory

29% of these were not eligible for conscription.
38% were eligible but had not done any military service.
33% had done military service.

A lack of time precluded any analysis of the reasons given for respondents' attitudes to conscription. This is an area where further research is needed. However, a number of general trends did emerge from the reasons that were given. The most noticeable of these was that the majority of respondents who were opposed to conscription gave ideological reasons for their decisions, including moral, religious and political reasons (e.g. freedom of choice, the political role of the SADF in defending apartheid). A relatively small number gave material reasons, and saw conscription as a "waste of time" and an interruption of their careers. At the

same time, of those who favoured compulsory military conscription, the majority also appeared to give ideological reasons (ie the need to counter the "total onslaught") while the remainder felt that conscription "matured" young men. It is interesting to note that many of those who favoured conscription felt that the length of service required was too long, and that camps were unnecessary. It is clear that this is an area which needs more extensive research.

An attempt was made to gauge whether students who intend emigrating would reconsider their decision if alternative non-military forms of national service were available. However, it appeared that for the majority of respondents national service, that is, service to the nation, was perceived as identical with military service in the SADF. There could be a number of reasons for this, including a possible ambiguity in the phrasing of the question itself. The whole question of what is meant by service to the nation, as opposed to military service, needs to be raised and debated and is an additional area for future research.

CONCLUSION.

These figures represent a startling number of skilled/degreed men who are contemplating emigration. As pointed out in the Economist Intelligence Unit Country Report (South Africa):

Though the actual numbers leaving seems modest, they disguise a qualitative imbalance. In the actual period to August (1987) South Africa suffered an outflow of, for example, nearly 1,500 people with professional, technical or managerial backgrounds. That figure is significant in relation to South Africa's supplies of such people and does have a restrictive effect on some areas of potential economic growth.²⁵

While the South African economy is in effect paying for or heavily subsidizing the training of those who emigrate, it does not recoup those costs (either materially or socially) by the reintegration of trained personnel into the economy. Even though a high proportion of those who are contemplating emigration are receiving education and training in the humanities and social sciences, their loss in social terms is as important as the professional or commercial economic losses represented by the remainder of those who are contemplating emigration.

25 - EIU Country Report: South Africa. No.4 1987. p24.

In a Cape Times editorial in response to the release of these figures, the point was made that students:

should remember that their studies are heavily subsidised by taxpayers. Their intention, if carried into effect, would be a squandering of the resources of the society which made their studies possible. During the current financial year, the so-called "white" universities and technikons are receiving subsidies totalling more than R1 000m.

If young people accept the opportunity to attend university at the public's expense, they have an obligation to give something back. Else they are unjustly depriving others, who remain committed to the future of the country, of the chance to attain their full potential.²⁶

While this comment is justifiable on one level, it fails to recognise that students who intend emigrating do not necessarily object to giving something back to their country. What they do object to is doing this in a way which serves the interests of the minority ruling group rather than the country as a whole.

It also became clear that a research project of this nature was unable to incorporate any analysis of potentially important variables, such as:

a) whether or not having completed a portion of national service made any difference to conscripts attitudes and to decisions to emigrate;

- b) the nature of skills that are being lost and the economic significance of these;
- c) the effects of the Angolan invasion on perceptions about the SADF and its role (the survey was conducted prior to the 1987 invasion by the SADF).
- d) whether the State of Emergency has altered conscript's perceptions and if so, how.

These are all potentially fertile areas for future research.

It is clear from the above that the majority of students at Rhodes University who intend emigrating after completing their studies are motivated by a desire to avoid military service in the SADF. While this research has not shown concretely the effects of this loss of skilled personpower on the economy, it is obvious, given the current economic crisis in South Africa that this loss is insupportable. It also appears that despite the state and right wing's ideological attack on the anti-conscription movement, and despite further clampdowns on the dissemination of information about the SADF and its activities, the issue of conscription is still likely to prompt conscripts at Rhodes University to vote with their feet.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, F. & Bernstein, J. "An assessment of the extent to which a desire to avoid compulsory military service in the SADF is a motivating factor in decisions to emigrate by male students at Rhodes University". Unpublished Third Year Project. Department of Journalism and Media Studies. Grahamstown: 1987.

"Student Run", Cape Times, 04 December 1987

Economic Intelligence Unit. Country Report (South Africa) No. 4. 1987.

Grocott's Mail, 15 November 1987.

Human Awareness Programme. Militarization Dossier. Johannesburg: 1986.

Nathan, L. "Resistance to Militarization: Three Years of the End Conscription Campaign" in S.A. Review 4. South African Research Services/Ravan Press. Johannesburg: 1987.

Republic of South Africa. Report of the National Manpower Commission into High Level and Middle Level Manpower in South Africa: Recent Developments. 1987.

Weekly Mail Vol. 3 Nos 28, 46 1987.
Vol. 4. No. 23. 1988.

Collection Number: AG1977

END CONSCRIPTION CAMPAIGN (ECC)

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

This document is part of a collection held at the Historical Papers Research Archive at The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.