

CONSCRIPTION - THE REAL DEBATES

A ... "staggeringly cool dissection of the practicalities the popular rhetoric ignores"... is how Frontline (Vol 6 No 1) describes Helmoed-Romer Heitman's article in defence of conscription. Heitman himself denounces the arguments against conscription as ... "either ill-informed or ... sprung from a desire to achieve some or other political end..."

While the contention around ~~conscription~~ continues the call-up remains, as does the reality that gives fire to the debate. Part of that reality is the concern, based on objective grievances, that young white South Africans articulate about military service. Most conscripts may well be unaware of the implications of such service; there are many who come to experience a moral anguish at being involved in a system they do not support, and may even oppose. This moral objection to service within the SADF is at the core of the movement against conscription.

Part of the following article is therefore a restatement of that morality -- the right of the individual to hold and practice his or her own beliefs, -- and the basis of those beliefs, namely the political links between the SADF and broader South African issues.

But we must go further than this. The proponents of conscription argue that we must address the practicalities of the issue, which are, in their terms, the objective manpower needs of the SADF. While such considerations do not affect ethical decisions, it is important to demonstrate that conscription is unnecessary in South Africa. The second half of this article will therefore examine the manpower issue in the light of alternatives to conscription. At the same time we will critique the parameters in which Heitman has argued in favour of conscription.

Much of the following evidence was submitted to the Geldenhuys committee investigating military affairs on 13 August 1985 by the End Conscription Campaign.

1. A question of morality

People will always differ in opinion -- it is trite to say so. The mark of civilisation is that we can live with these differences, debate them, and even learn from them. These opinions may become so important to us, so central to our lives, that we describe them as 'principles', even as matters of conscience. This is important for us. It helps to guide us, give meaning to our lives, and sustain us in difficult times.

The right to hold our own beliefs, and to practice them, is one of the central tenets of a free and democratic society. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states :

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to ... manifest his (or her) religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship or observance."

A similar position has been asserted by other international conventions, for instance article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966; article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 1950; article 3 of the American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man; article 12 of the American Convention on Human Rights.

Freedom of conscience is the liberty to decide and act on one's ethical convictions -- to weigh up the morality of a certain action and to choose to participate therein or not. The sources of our convictions may stem from a variety of religious, philosophical or political beliefs, yet we will often stand united over certain issues. Conscription is a case in point.

Many objectors to military service oppose conscription on the grounds of universal pacifism -- they argue that war is no solution to political problems, that all wars anywhere are unnecessary and unfounded, and that to participate in, or force others to participate in, the institutions of war is incorrect. *There are others who object to military service on a 'partial' or 'selective' basis*, who believe that certain wars, or sides in a war, are morally wrong and cannot be supported. Within the churches, groups have argued a position of a "just war" and lay down certain criteria by which a war may be considered just and even worthy of support. Such criteria include :

1. it must be declared by a legitimate authority
2. it must be waged for a just cause
3. it must be carried out with a right or good intention
4. the war must have a reasonable chance of success
5. the war must be undertaken only as a last resort

~~Some oppose conscription from strong moral or political positions, others take a religious stand. Whatever the category of conviction, or the reasoning by which such a conviction is reached, the important factor is the strength of personal conviction that to serve in the military would be wrong.~~

~~The notion of freedom of conscience with regard to military service is extended by the Nuremberg Principles, which emerged from the trials of Nazi war criminals in Nuremberg, Germany. According to these principles, a person under military authority who is ordered to commit "crimes against humanity", "crimes against peace", or "war crimes" would be punishable under international law and would thus have a right and a duty to refuse such order.~~

Compulsory conscription, without the option of viable alternatives to military service, allows for no moral choices. It is in violation of the internationally accepted rights of individual conscience. If the South African government were to uphold these rights all who face military service would have a choice, based on their beliefs, to participate in the SADF or not.

A question of discrimination

A common factor amongst those who object to participation in the SADF is their opposition to apartheid. Many assert a direct link between the role of the SADF and certain apartheid practices. While such a link is denied by SADF spokesmen, we clearly need to examine these assertions further.

The mainstream churches have declared apartheid "a heresy" and "a sinful contradiction of the gospel" (see Resolution 32 of the 1982 Anglican Church Provincial Synod or the minutes of the 1984 Conference of the Methodist Church). Many take a deep moral opposition to racial discrimination, and cite its presence in South Africa as contradicting our hopes for a free and democratic country.

Certain politicians would argue (and have even used Sunday Times advertisements for that purpose) that apartheid is dead. Nevertheless the central mechanisms of racial division, disenfranchisement and discrimination can be seen to remain in South Africa. They are enshrined in the constitution of our land via such legislation as the Population Registration Act, the Land Act, the SA Constitution Act, the National States Constitution Act, the Group Areas Act, and others. Reforms to petty apartheid, described by critics as 'cosmetic', cannot unfortunately remove the bedrock of black discrimination and consequent mass dissatisfaction in this country.

Apartheid has often been described as institutionalised violence. Township residents bear witness to a daily round of pass arrests, unemployment, underpaid jobs, inadequate recreational and educational facilities, overcrowded dilapidated houses, and of course, a continuing toll of wounded and dead from clashes with the security forces. During last year, as the South African economy slid ever deeper into recession, and the ranks of the unemployed grew longer (up to fifty percent in areas of the Eastern Cape), there could be little doubt of the hardships experienced by most township residents.

A climate of frustration and desperation has been created without recourse to adequate forms of political expression. In the last two years we have witnessed a massive and prolonged explosion of popular opposition to apartheid -- hardly a township in South Africa has remained unaffected. The inability of the State to generate viable governmental alternatives through 'normal' political processes means popular protest and unrest will become a way of life.

More and more black South Africans, confronted by the sharp end of military and police actions in the townships, are coming to feel that the 'apartheid state' must be countered with militant action. A spiral of violence and counter-violence is in process with no real respite in sight. Such confrontation has in fact been occurring at a lower intensity for decades.

(same paragraph as above) -

We have witnessed the growth of a black liberation movement committed, rightly or wrongly, to an armed struggle and the eventual establishment of a democratic and unitary state.

The ethics of a 'liberation struggle' aside, mass political unrest such as has occurred across South Africa is not and cannot be the work of a handful of political agitators.

It is the expression of objective grievances through the only political channels remaining to black South Africans.

Conversely the most effective way of ensuring continued instability and disaffection is the current state strategy of stamping out protest marches, dealing violently with mass demonstrations, removing, incarcerating or banning black political leaders, and banning or restricting popular mass-based organisations.

The most effective way to address mass unrest in South Africa and avoid continued violence is to redress the root grievances leading to such unrest.

The military diversion

Despite protestations to the contrary, the SADF is no longer viewed as a neutral institution independent of government. It has been implicated at three levels in the bureaucracy of apartheid; firstly, at the level of political power and decision-making; secondly, in the implementation of certain specific apartheid practices; and thirdly, in their role of monitoring and containing the current crisis, including putting down township unrest.

The SADF plays an important role in formulating government policy, especially through its participation on the State Security Council (described by political scientists as the 'inner cabinet'). The rise to power of PW Botha within the Nationalist Party received strong backing from the military, as well as sectors of Afrikaner capital such as SANLAM. Some of the central themes of PW Botha's "total strategy" stemmed from debates in the Defence College and Military Academy during the early 1970s. These included the notion of a "militarily defensible policy" and a reformist approach to politics, in conjunction with an expanded, hard-hitting security apparatus.

Explicit SADF support for government policy has been clearly stated by Defence Minister General Magnus Malan :

"The Defence Force supports government policy and is responsible for peace, law and order in this country. This policy is the same as that laid down by H F Verwoerd, namely multi-nationalism and self-determination of nations." (Cape Times 28.10.1979)

The SADF has been directly involved in implementing apartheid policy such as the arrest of pass law offenders (for instance Operation Palmiet during October 1984). Regular assistance to police in manning roadblocks throughout South Africa has been given.

(Same paragraph as above)

In the period March 1983 to April 1984 27 000 military personnel were involved in such operations. The SADF has further been involved in the forced removal and resettlement of black communities, often with strong resistance from the people concerned. Areas in which such operations have occurred include the Zimbabwe/Venda border, St. Lucia (where a SADF missile base was to be established), the area between Mafeking and Zeerust, at Ditakwaneng in the Northern Cape, at Riemvasmaak near the Augrabies Falls, in the Gathlose-Maremane area (now Lohatla, site of Operation Thunderchariot), and the area between Kosi Bay and Ingwavuma ^{(evidence submitted in the 'Surplus Peoples Project').}

Probably the most contentious part of the SADF's involvement in South Africa has been its role in containing civil unrest. According to Magnus Malan in parliament, to draw up a list of the occasions on which troops were used to control unrest and monitor townships "would take months to compile" and would run "to hundreds of pages". Since the uprisings in the Vaal during September 1984 it has been policy that the army and police are jointly involved in situations of internal unrest. This was confirmed by the appointment, in January 1985, of Adrian Vlok as joint Deputy Minister of Law and Order and Deputy Minister of Defence.

Affidavits collected from township residents cite instances of unwarranted harassment and even brutality by SADF personnel. The SADF and SAP are viewed as "the enemy" by township residents and treated as such. It appears that the deployment of troops in the townships has not had the intended effect of containing unrest but has rather deepened the conflict through the intensified resistance of black residents.

We can agree with the analysis of Dr Simon Baynham, political scientist at UCT, when he writes :

"Where highly trained and powerfully armed soldiers -- who are equipped for a combat role and thus may take on the appearance of an army of occupation -- are called in to support the civil power, it is going to escalate the level of violence. Military weaponry and training are designed for killing on a battlefield not for subduing crowds". (Sunday Star 14.7.1985)

It can be seen that the SADF is both directly and indirectly involved in the implementation and defence of apartheid -- particularly the suppression of political protest against apartheid as a social system. This has led it to the point of violent confrontation with the people that it should ultimately be serving. On this basis those with moral or religious objections to the institutions of apartheid to participate in good conscience in the SADF.

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find it impossible

Apartheid and conscription

Opponents of conscription take this argument a step further. They assert that it is apartheid itself, and the defence thereof, that has created the need for a massive security apparatus, and hence the need for a conscripted army.

South Africa has fought in two world wars without conscription. For the first sixty years of this century we managed with a volunteer army. In 1960 changes came, and it is necessary to understand the reasons for these changes, since they are located in the changing political milieu.

During the late 1950s a number of mass-based organisations were extremely active in their opposition to apartheid laws. They included the South African Congress of Trade Unions, the African National Congress, the SA Coloured Peoples Organisation, the SA Indian Congress and the SA Congress of Democrats. These organisations had collectively engaged in drawing up a blueprint for a new South Africa, known as the Freedom Charter. Following a successful campaign in defiance of apartheid laws, and anti-pass demonstrations around the country, police opened fire on demonstrators at Sharpeville, killing 69. A state of emergency was declared, the ANC and PAC banned, 20 000 people rounded up and arrested, and the army was mobilised. By the end of 1961 the ANC, operating from underground, had launched its campaign of armed struggle. Jim Fouché, then Minister of Defence, called on white mothers "to give up their sons in defence of their land." A ballot system of conscription for white males was introduced. By 1967 this had been changed to universal conscription for all white males.

Subsequent to 1960 and the intensification of the struggle against apartheid the South African military machine has mushroomed. The defence budget has increased from a mere R44 million in 1960 to an estimated R5 123 million for 1986/87. Major leaps in defence spending occurred in the early 1960s, then again in the early 1970s, corresponding with waves of strike action particularly Durban in 1973, and with the growing war against SWAPO in Namibia; and then a further leap after 1976 when the Soweto riots took place. In all the defence budget has increased 11 643% in twenty-five years.

In 1972 following the strike of 20 000 Namibian contract workers and the rapid growth of the Namibian border war, South Africa committed itself to military operations in Ovamboland and Southern Angola. Today it is estimated that 10% of the total budget is being spent on Namibia. The annual cost of the war alone is R600 million.

South Africa's continued presence in Namibia has been declared "illegal" by the International Court of Justice. The overwhelming attitude of Namibians, both black and white, is that South Africa must leave them to decide their own future.

(new paragraph)

It is evident that the security apparatus marshalled over the last two decades is serving a specific function. In as much as the SADF can be called a defence force it is defending apartheid inside the country, and defending South Africa's occupation of other countries. Such conflicts are considered unnecessary, indeed unjust, and can be resolved by other means - conscription to fight in these wars is considered equally unnecessary.

3. An uneasy separation

At this point it is appropriate to respond to some of the arguments put forward by the proponents of conscription, in particular Helmoed-Romer Heitman (Frontline Vol 6 No 1). Heitman has premised his arguments upon a separation of the military and political fields. He addresses the manpower needs of an abstract South African army faced with certain threats. These, he argues, will remain the same regardless of the internal policies pursued by the government of the day. South Africa, he states, "is strategically important in the East-West scenario", and will remain so for many years to come.

While Heitman cites "insurgency" as one of the major threats facing South Africa, he portrays this as orchestrated by outside influences seeking to overthrow the existing social order. This is very much the manner in which the threat perception of the SADF and State Security Council has been formulated. The explanation of externally directed insurgent forces has worn thin in the face of two years mass-based countryside upheavals, and amounts to a cynical obfuscation of the real grievances leading to such unrest. Nevertheless the use of "rooi-gevaar" tactics by the Botha government has had some measure of success in diverting attention away from the internal situation, where the real threats facing the Nationalist government clearly lie.

To argue within the parameters of the SADF's own perception cannot do justice to the topic. It is essential that we judge conscription in the terms of its underlying motivation and political necessity. Heitman, however, has already let himself off the hook by denying the relevance of internal South African politics. Could one ignore the importance of internal policy in the days of World War II when the imperialist aspirations of Nazi Germany led to the militarisation of an entire generation of youth. By ignoring the status quo Heitman has set it up as a continuing norm around which military issues must be debated. Such an argument is, in essence, amoral.

A question of numbers

To turn to Heitman's mathematics on military manpower, a number of flaws are evident. He has pointed out that at present there is a standing force of around 80 000 men, and a further mobilisable force of around 320 000 from the Citizen Force and Commandos.

(Same paragraph as above)

He admits that South Africa could do with a smaller mobilisable strength of 210 000 (of whom 150 000 are for 'internal' use), but argues that these men must be full-time army personnel. This would give a standing army over twice as large as our current one. Heitman then applies British figures for the cost of full-time private soldiers and quite obviously arrives at unreasonable figures for the budget.

It is unclear why, under a volunteer system, Heitman cannot accommodate a large part of his 210 000 in part-time or reservist positions, and still end up with the same size standing force as today. Perhaps he is already admitting to himself a number of harsh realities about the SADF under apartheid.

As Sir Richard Hunt has pointed out in a subsequent letter Heitman is not very convincing in his arguments

The SADF is basically a white man's army. The ratio of whites to non-whites excluding the SWA territory force is approximately 8 to 1. Army spokesmen have from time to time assured us of its "multiracial nature" and much has been made of the few black army units in existence. Nevertheless the upper echelons of the military remain exclusively white.

While the SADF may well be eager to increase its "multiracial nature", it is worth noting that not a single black person volunteered for service during 1985. The SADF is basically unpopular amongst the majority black population, and cannot enjoy their support or participation. This will continue for as long as the army is seen to be supporting apartheid in opposition to their own interests.

Ultimately, it is the white man who is called upon to defend his own interests. The SADF has to draw its manpower from a mere 18% of the population. Given the contention around the SADF, and the objection to service even from sectors of the white population, it is inevitable that the SADF must resort to conscription to maintain its numbers.

The 65 000 national servicemen currently serving in the SADF represent 1,3% of the country's five million whites, but only 0,22% of South Africa's total population of thirty million. A non-racial army serving under a democratic government and consequently representative of the people of South Africa would enjoy their support and participation.

At least one out of every five hundred people could be expected to volunteer for military service every year, and probably more. This would provide a fully adequate \leftarrow , which could be maintained as a volunteer army with citizen force components, or as part of a broad-based and community orientated national service, in which military training was one of a number of options.

annual intake of 60 000.

This latter option may well be the most viable. Under a democratic system the government has a mandate from its citizens to make certain demands of the people - it would be entitled to ask for a certain period of national service (say, of one year's duration) from all its citizens, both men and women, black and white.

For such national service to be acceptable it must contain a variety of alternatives, including work in welfare, religious and community-based organisations. Service in the military would be one of the options. A population of 30 million such as we have now provides approximately 600 000 school-leavers annually, quite a sizeable number to be engaged in a national service programme. If only one tenth of these choose the option of military service the required number of recruits would still be provided.

A variety of methods by which an army can be staffed are available, and there are many ways in which a country's youth can be creatively employed to serve it. At no point should it ever be necessary to violate an individual's moral or religious convictions. Where ever coercion, in however slight a form, is applied, allowance for conscientious objection must be made. Further, any country which sees fit to use its youth for national service can only do so on a democratic mandate from the people as a whole. We may recall the words of the Freedom Charter in its proscription for a better future :

"South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people..."

4. To conclude

For the SADF and the Nationalist government apartheid has become a double-edged sword, forcing them to conscript white youth. On the one hand it is apartheid itself that has created its own war, necessitating a massive security apparatus. On the other the government is trying to staff an already unpopular army out of a mere 18% of the population. Support cannot be mustered from the majority of the population because in the end that war is directed against them. This was stated in a resolution from the 1983 Black Sash national conference :

"If a conscripted army is necessary, it will be because of the political failure to respond to the desires of the citizens, and that army will be engaged in a civil war, which is a good cause for many to refuse military service. In such a civil war, if the State has to rely on conscription to man its army the war is already lost."

The issue of conscription in South Africa is at the same time an issue about apartheid. While it is possible to abolish conscription, such a possibility requires the abolition of apartheid in its entirety and the institution of a unitary democratic state based on the will of all South Africa's people.

In the meantime the groundswell of opposition to conscription is growing. It is heartening that so many whites have placed their affiliations firmly on the side of democracy and justice; polarisation bodes ill for our future. Critics of the campaign to end conscription would be well advised to note the moral stands so many people younger than themselves have taken, and to examine their own morality a bit more closely. While the voice of reason may be only a whisper in SA today, one day it shall speak loud and clear.

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