

BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking the Frontline

Guerillas and Combative Mothers: Women and the Armed Struggle in South Africa

Siphokazi Magadla. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2023. Pp. 222. R300, paperback (ISBN: 9781869145163).

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Guerrillas and Combative Mothers by Siphokazi Magadla is an exciting addition to the literature on the experiences of women in the armed wing and underground of the African National Congress (ANC). Grounded in detailed interviews of over forty women, Magadla's book illuminates the multiple reasons comrades like Belinda Martin and Phumla Mgaba had for joining the struggle. She allows them to narrate what they did and in their own words trace their triumphs, disappointments, hopes, anxieties, and confusions. They were and are far from passive victims of male chauvinism and sexism. The life stories of the women whose testimonies shape Magadla's narrative stress that while the road was disproportionately harder for them — especially as it pertained to sexual assault/rape, sexist promotional practices, and the initially limited access to reproductive care and women's hygiene — a more holistic and focused analysis of their dynamic lives recasts them into survivors of assault, outspoken activists, brilliant underground operatives, and militant armed combatants. As far as many of these women are concerned, they transformed institutions like Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) into an armed wing that became less patriarchal over time and positively impacted the fight for gender equality after apartheid. Towards this end, the book covers women who joined the struggle in exile (27–88), fought inside the country (89–120), as well as what happened to various women post-1994 in the reformed South African National Defense Forces (SANDF) and for those who transitioned to civilian life (121–88).

According to Magadla, women who went into exile like Thenjiwe Mtintso in the late 1970s and Nomfundiso Kulati in the mid-late 1980s, were accomplished activists and organizers inside South Africa before opting to leave. Several had been tortured in police custody and they left to continue the fight for their families, communities, and themselves. For those who remained inside South Africa, for a host of reasons, Magadla reminds us that in an urban-based guerrilla struggle, what constitutes “the frontline” could be anywhere one operated. Apartheid South Africa was a police state where Black movement and sense of entitlement to space in the cities were criminalized and hyper-surveilled. This made the sabotage campaigns and infiltration operations conducted by MK, and the secretive attacks of self-defense units in the 1970s and 1980s highly dependent on the labors of women like Nondwe Mankahla and Pumza Dyantyi, who transported the weapons/items needed for these missions, provided safe houses, and executed missions themselves. Several of the interviewees detailed and meditated on the multiple roles and responsibilities they often occupied as mothers, daughters, caregivers, workers, and guerrillas. Adding to an already

rich literature, Magadla argues the multiple identities played by women, “shaped the distinct character of politicized, militant and combative motherhood” (96).

The latter chapters provide unique research and insight into the transition to democratic rule and integration of the armed forces post-1994. Magadla argues, “MK women who joined SANDF used this experience in MK to initiate, strategize and implement policies that would facilitate and prioritize gender equality” (122). However, the integration into SANDF had a host of structural problems ranging from demanding unreasonable educational requirements and requiring inordinate amounts of proof confirming what ex-combatants did during the struggle to receive ranks or qualify for specific amounts of monetary compensation. Many who chose to transition into civilian life, or who were underground operatives now needing to rebuild their lives, did not feel they were financially and materially compensated enough for the sacrifices they made during the struggle. As many women were and still are the main or sole breadwinners for their families, this neglect has had crippling impacts on Black communities across the country. Magadla demonstrates how all this unfolded and details the psychological scars that continue to haunt many post-1994 (175–79).

In closing, *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers* is a critical addition to the canon on the ANC’s armed struggle and the central role women played in its unfolding. The strength of this book lies in Magadla’s determination as an African feminist to center the narratives and memories of the women interviewed. This guides her excellent reframing of what constitutes “the frontline” and breathes life into her careful examination of the experiences of ex-combatants post-1994. That said, one would have wanted a more rigorous interrogation by Magadla of some of the perspectives shared by her interviewees on the struggle, such as the claim that patriarchy diminished in MK over time. Furthermore, the political philosophies of Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) and Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) could have been explored in more detail for the benefit of a broader audience. Consequently, their addition at times reads more as a footnote to a well-established hegemonic ANC narrative of the liberation struggle.

Taken together, Magadla’s book is a must read for scholars of the ANC’s armed struggle as well as for those interested in wider histories on women in liberation movements. Her usage of interviews, poems, and conference presentations is a refreshing departure from accounts which rely primarily on classic primary sources in state created archives. Women were central to the liberation struggle in South Africa and *Guerrillas and Combative Mothers* brings their feelings, emotions, hopes, analysis, dreams, and disappointments to light.