

# BOOK REVIEW

**Daniel L. Douek.** *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in South Africa*. London: Hurst, 2020. xvii + 509 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$39.95. Paper. ISBN: 9781849048804.

The narrative of South Africa's recent past is well known; the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990 was followed by a turbulent period of negotiations leading to free elections in 1994. Countless popular and scholarly publications have examined this transition, and there is wide recognition that "post-apartheid" South Africa is still deeply molded by apartheid's bitter legacy. But this new book by Daniel Douek stands out for its sustained investigation of how South African counterinsurgency forces secretly and systematically fostered violence during the transition and in that way shaped the contours of the new government and society.

Douek draws on detailed and well-documented research in archival sources and the secondary literature. He supplements that with interviews conducted in South Africa in 2009 with thirteen ex-combatants of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress. Douek won their confidence and met with them as friends during that period, as well as conducting formal, confidential interviews, mostly in the city of Mthatha in the former Transkei. The thirteen are identified by numbers only to preserve anonymity, but each person's background is briefly described.

The book begins with two chapters on the armed struggle before 1990, one discussing the MK-led insurgency and the other the counterinsurgency strategies of the apartheid regime. The next two chapters focus on the secret counterinsurgency activities of the regime from 1990 to 1994 and on MK's strategy during the same period. Chapter Five covers the war from 1988 to 1994 in the Transkei, which was MK's stronghold during that period.

The next set of chapters are thematic, although they still proceed in chronological order. They cover spy recruitment by state forces, the assassination of Chris Hani (the charismatic military and political leader of the ANC's progressive forces), MK's marginalization in the new merged "security forces," post-transition violence as a counterinsurgency legacy, and spy scandals in post-transition South Africa.

Does Douek "prove" the implicit conclusion that the apartheid security forces largely achieved their goals of molding both the transition and the

shape of South African society? The provocative wording here is mine, not his. The author correctly does not claim that history is proof. That would be too strong a statement to make, and I would reserve judgment, not having done sufficient in-depth research on Southern Africa in the last two decades to be able to make that judgment.


It is also clear that the jury is still out. The verdict will be determined not only by the past, but by what is happening as this article is being completed in January 2022. And South Africa's future, like its past and present, will be shaped not only by forces inside the country but also by the five-hundred-year history of global inequality, or what many of us are calling "global apartheid" (<https://bookshop.org/lists/understanding-global-apartheid>).

Even so, it is clear that Douek's evidence and his argument justify a serious debate among scholars now working this terrain with new primary sources, as well as responses by many of those directly involved in any way in this shadowy domain of recent South African history.

I am in no position to evaluate the accuracy of the evidence Douek provides, and I am sure he would agree that on this subject in particular, almost all oral and written sources likely contain not only mistakes but also deliberate deceptions.

A couple of cautions are worth noting for future scholars and other readers. First, among the documentary sources cited, there appear to be only a few in Afrikaans. It seems likely that scholars who are fluent in that language may be able to turn up significant new evidence. Second, the one error that did catch my eye was a reference to a Truth and Reconciliation document described as documenting the assassination of Michael Lapsley. This should have been a reference to an assassination attempt, since Father Lapsley is still, fortunately, alive and active despite having lost both hands when the letter bomb exploded. (<https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories-library/michael-lapsley>)

My bottom-line assessment is that this book definitely does not provide the "full story" of the history it relates. But it is a work that is indispensable for understanding that history.

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