

Hearts of darkness

Book review

Pauw, J (1997) **Into the heart of darkness: Confessions of Apartheid's assassins.** Cape Town: Jonathan Ball. ISBN 1-8684-058-2 pbk. 346 pages.

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In a work of incisive investigative journalism, Jacques Pauw has explored the underworld of Apartheid's assassins and their reign of murder, torture and mayhem. His interpretative exploration manages to engage and draw out the shadowy central figures through in-depth interviews, transcripts of their own confessions, and archival, corroborative research from a wide range of sources. The book is structured into 21 chapters, each focusing on a particular assassin (e.g. Dirk Coetzee, Almond Nofemela, Ferdi Barnard, Andries Brood, et al.); and includes extensive notes and index, with a useful list of the mind-boggling acronyms that serve to mystify and alienate these accounts (e.g. the CCB, C1, DCC, SB, SAP, etc.). A must-read for all South Africans for its readability, thorough research and insight, the text is also suitable for use at university level in contemporary South African History, Sociology and Criminology. The focus on the apparently sociopathic personalities of some of the interviewees makes it interesting to clinical / forensic applications of psychology, where deviant behaviour patterns are investigated.

The disclosure that Apartheid death squads operated in South Africa was made in 1989 when, hours before he was due to be hanged for the murder of a Brits farmer, former Security Branch policeman, Almond Nofemela, revealed that police and the so called "askaris" - former African National Congress (ANC) or Pan-African Congress (PAC) members, now working for the South African Police (SAP) - had been involved in political assassinations since 1981. At the same time, Nofemela confessed to taking part in the murder of ANC activist, Griffiths Mxenge. For this, Nofemela claimed that he, and two other askaris, "had received a special cash bonus for a job well done" (p175). The dramatic death-row confession led to a reprieve of the hangman's noose for Nofemela, despite persistent denials by the Apartheid regime of the existence of death squads. A month later, former Vlakplaas commander, Captain Dirk Coetzee corroborated Nofemela's sworn affidavit. This corroboration, central to the establishment of the Harms Commission in 1990, was a critical juncture in Pauw's and,

fellow journalist, Max du Preez's ongoing investigation into the existence of death squads. Thus, the book documents the frustrating process and the "bitter fruits" of years of investigative research.

Pauw deals with former SAP Colonel Eugene De Kock in Chapter 2, and offers the reader comprehensive coverage of his trial on 121 criminal charges in 1996. The chapter produces a very different engagement with "Prime Evil" (De Kock's nickname in the SAP) than the account offered by De Kock himself in **A long night's damage** (De Kock & Gordin, 1998). Freed from the fairly descriptive responsibility of "giving a voice" to De Kock, Pauw corroborates and extends his confessions with other sources - often equally shadowy characters, somewhat farcically named "Balletjies" (Balls), "Duiwel" (Devil), "Slang" (Snake), "Staal" (Steel), and "Snor" (Moustache) - and remains committed to exploring contradictions, gaps and silences. Understanding De Kock as a "political serial killer", Pauw felt that "for a long time to come, Eugene De Kock will be a symbol of Apartheid's most evil face: that of murdering and torturing of opponents of its racial policies" (p29). For Pauw, De Kock's criminal trial represented "the unravelling of the web of debauchery committed by a blood-soaked band of brothers at the SAP counter-insurgency unit, based at a farm called Vlakplaas [near Pretoria]. It was a world in which murder was commonplace, where mercy and compassion counted for little" (p29).

The litany of State-sponsored and inhuman acts that emanated from Vlakplaas, have been documented via, inter alia, the operations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). However, Pauw produces clear evidence that then SAP National Commissioner, General Johan Coetzee, and Minister of Police in the Apartheid government, Louis le Grange, were, among other top brass of the SAP and South African Defence Force (SADF), regular visitors and frequent guests at the infamous parties at Vlakplaas. These parties were chiefly noted for the vast amounts of alcohol consumed. This evidence lends credence to De Kock's persistent claims that the highest echelons of the Apartheid regime "knew about" (viz. explicitly ordered and sanctioned) Vlakplaas's atrocities.

Pauw's investigative ability, tenacity and courage in penetrating the veil of secrecy surrounding the death squad operatives and the "Third Force" - allegedly a special unit committed to acts of destabilisation and terror - singles his writing out as extraordinary in many respects. His book has inestimable value for anyone seeking to find out more about Apartheid's dark heart, the death squads; and to "understand" what motivated and sustained Apartheid's assassins in their grisly and heartless work.

REFERENCES.

De Kock, E & Gordin, J (1998) **A long night's damage: Working for the Apartheid State**. Johannesburg: Contra Press.