

Prime evil: In his own words

Book review:

De Kock, E & Gordin, J (1988) **A long night's damage: Working for the Apartheid State**. Johannesburg: Contra Press. ISBN 0-620-22198-4 pbk. 331 pages.

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From a socio-historical perspective, **A long night's damage: Working for the Apartheid State** provides the reader with an invaluable insight into the mind-set and the amorality of the South African State during the so-called "Total Onslaught", through the experiences of former South African Police Colonel, Eugene De Kock. The book documents the grim exploits of De Kock, at one time the Apartheid government's most efficient political assassin, when shooting, burning, poisoning and blowing up bodies of anti-Apartheid activists was the "patriotic" norm for certain sections of the Security Branch Police. Now 51 years old, De Kock is serving a double-life sentence, plus 212 years, in Pretoria Central Maximum Security Prison, for 89 crimes, including 6 murders.

De Kock was interviewed by **The Sunday Independent** political journalist, Jeremy Gordin, who organised the interview material into chronological sections, and provided a framing Foreword, Interlude and Afterword. The details of Gordin's collaboration with De Kock speak to the intention of the book. Gordin claims that it was important that De Kock's story be told, "not as a sign of agreement with his views or crimes, not as a mark of any abiding interest in cruelty or sensation, and not for the sake of indulging in ... moral indignation" (p23). De Kock collaborated with Gordin to expose what they (both) believed to be a conspiracy; that De Kock "had become the proverbial fall guy" to protect a number of people from certain prosecution, for example, politicians in the Apartheid government and generals in the security forces (p23).

The royalties from the book have been donated by De Kock, via a trust fund, to "the victims of apartheid and their families, especially the youth", as "a small gesture of reconciliation" (p4).

This is a compulsively readable book which details De Kock's emotionally bleak childhood in George, his troubled adolescent years, and the two decades of killing and torturing in defence of Apartheid ideology. The question as to whether Apartheid

created De Kock (a deranged murderer); or whether De Kock was scapegoated for the sins of Apartheid (an obedient foot-soldier, following orders), is never really fully answered. There were hundreds of De Kocks in service of the security apparatus of the Apartheid regime. Many might have met the current diagnostic criteria for a sociopathic personality disorder. Some were sadists who relished in their calling. National Party ideology and the concomitant dehumanising racial policies provided fertile breeding grounds (and legitimisation) for activities fuelled by fear and hatred.

In addition, it is noteworthy that the oppressive machinations of the Apartheid government, with their sanctioned death squads, are by no means a unique phenomenon. Chile, Argentina, Columbia and other military-political regimes have at various times used similar measures to retain power. De Kock / Gordin concede that environmental and personality factors cannot displace personal responsibility for one's actions. Indeed, the issue of psychopathology was raised at De Kock's trial, but no psychiatric evidence was introduced that could convince the court there existed any discernible psychopathology that mitigated his actions.

By far the most engaging (and revealing) aspect of the book is Chapter 1, that covers De Kock's childhood, from 1949 to 1967. De Kock's early experience reveals anxieties, disappointments and alienation that might provide clues of emotional maladjustment and lack of empathy for others. His family context was characterised by harsh and often inconsistent paternal discipline, and marital discord between his parents in the form of frequent arguments. De Kock describes his mother as a "gentle caring person", dominated by his father who drank heavily. The emotional distance between the young De Kock and his authoritarian father, a staunch National Party supporter and magistrate, coupled with the effects of a severe stutter, are dominant themes in his accounts.

De Kock tells poignantly of his victimisation and anxiety, thus:

"I stuttered from birth and it grew worse as I grew older and became more self-conscious. By my adolescent years I had pretty much given up on taking part in conversations. In my mid-teens, I was sent to the Speech and Hearing Centre at the University of Pretoria. The therapy helped, but I never lost my inordinate fear of speaking, and I have never forgotten the ridicule to which I was subjected, both to my face and behind my back. I also could not cope with being shouted at. I clearly recall two primary school teachers who made me feel as though life were not worth living. Children in my class (in Grade Two, then Standard One) would rather wet themselves than ask to go to the toilet, and they would also wet themselves when the teacher started yelling at them. I simply became speechless with fear and just took the hidings. One was simply too small to do anything. Even today, if someone yells at me, I have to discipline myself not to attack. I can understand people get angry and tense and lose their tempers, but I refuse to understand those who take it out on children." (pp51-2).

Clearly, De Kock suffered considerable emotional and physical abuse which might have contributed to his blunted affect when engaged in activities of unconventional warfare and assassination on behalf of the Apartheid State. However, De Kock is explicit in his *resistance* to attribute his later actions as an adult to his troubled childhood and adolescence - to use this as an excuse, or to blame others (p45). Placing blame

elsewhere is, of course, a diagnostic feature of a sociopathic personality, who expresses little emotion and no remorse for crimes. While his parents escape blame, it is evident that De Kock feels socialised into a “kind of subculture”, namely,

“The seeds of the death squads had been sown before I was born and begun to flourish when I was a child. When legislation was passed that allowed for detention without trial, another step was taken in the development of death squads. This particular legislation led to a kind of subculture among security police. We began to believe we were supermen who could behave ruthlessly in the name of the state. The state had made torture legitimate.” (p97).

Gordin provides few details of his research methodology, e.g. interviewing style. A criticism of the book - or of Gordin’s “investigative mind” behind it - lies perhaps in his inability to draw an embittered De Kock away from recounting his role in State oppression and murder (viz. a string of “facts”), to reveal more about *himself* (viz. his thoughts and feelings). De Kock’s activities during the Apartheid regime have been well documented in all media, particularly during his trial and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings. Reiteration here is repetitive and unnecessary. About his personal motives, De Kock is candid only to a point which serves impression-management or self-validation. This is apparent when De Kock, then serving in the South African Police counter-insurgency unit, Koevoet, in South West Africa (Namibia). He was asked by another officer why he took so many SWAPO prisoners, that is, rather than killing them as guerrillas in a “border war”. De Kock replies thus:

“I am not suggesting that I was a great humanitarian, but I did take prisoners. On both sides mercy was neither given or expected. One’s emotions soon became blunted and you had to make a conscious effort not to lose your values.” (p79).

This principled and merciful humanity is counterpoised with examples of chilling brutality. While in service with Koevoet on the Namibian border (above), De Kock describes killing SWAPO guerrillas as a “game” to keep troops occupied during quiet seasons, namely, “we use to refer to these incursions as winter games and we used to set out to track down and kill these infiltrators like Crusaders hunting Saracens” (p74). The Christian versus heathen metaphor, possibly echoing the good-bad binaries of the “Total Onslaught” ideology, provided both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of De Kock for murder. To take a human life meant very little to De Kock in this context. Yet, the discussion of “bedding another man’s wife” triggered off his explosive temper (p115), and he assaulted one of his own Vlakplaas death squad members on two occasions. It is this bizarre combination of Calvinistic Puritanism, virulent anti-communism, blunted affect and explosive rage that appeared to drive him.

Clearly, his emotional instability was exacerbated by stress. When De Kock left the Koevoet unit in 1983 he was said by colleagues to be “battle-fatigued, *bos-bevok* (bush-fucked), so to speak” (p86) - and officially diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) - as a result of sustained combat conditions. Nine operational tours in the “Rhodesian Bush War”, each lasting three to four months, preceded his operational experiences and self-estimated 400 combat-contacts with guerrillas in Namibia. However, this period also marked the formation of the section C of the security apparatus (cf. covert death squad), of which De Kock was commander, at Vlakplaas.

Vlakplaas was allegedly a training centre and shelter for “rehabilitated terrorists” who later became known as “askaris” (p95). The chain of command moved (allegedly) directly up the hierarchical structure of the security forces to cabinet-ministerial level in the Nationalist Party government. De Kock wryly notes that “when dirty work had to be done, they called for Eugene De Kock” (p96).

Thus, in line with the aim of this book, De Kock does not shrink from taking responsibility for his “dirty work”, and accepts his retributive incarceration; but De Kock and Gordin are of the opinion that he (De Kock) should be joined in prison by the politicians and generals who planned, ordered and sanctioned his activities. The reader is left to apportion legal and moral responsibility accordingly.

Despite its few flaws, De Kock and Gordin’s book is a valuable contribution to contemporary South African history - a history we all need to be aware of in order to prevent the “context” for such human rights abuses ever happening again.