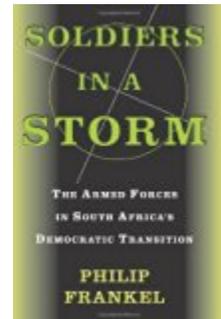


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Philip Frankel. *Soldiers in a Storm. The Armed Forces in South Africa's Democratic Transition*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000. xvi + 247 pp. \$65.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-3747-0.

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Phillip Frankel, of the Department of Political Science, University of the Witwatersrand, has published a book on the most crucial problem of South Africa's transition to democracy, i.e. on the transformation and integration of the country's armed forces. To a large extent Frankel's book is an 'off-spring' of the project on the history of the national armed forces in the period 1990-1996, commissioned by the new South African National Defence Force (SADF), which however remained 'internal' and therefore inaccessible to a broad reading public. Fortunately, however, Frankel had permission to use material from military archives for his 'public' work as well.

The first chapter of the book - Negotiation: Forging the Military Pact - is devoted to the early 1990s when 'theoretically' various military organisations, but in practice two of them - the South African Defence Force (and the Department of Defence) and Umkhonto we Sizwe, or MK, (and its 'parent' body - the African National Congress) - conducted talks about the future of armed forces in a 'new' South Africa. As rich as this part of the book is, some important points are overlooked or 'vulnerable' for criticism. For example, Frankel begins this chapter with 'Prelude: Talks about Talks, 1991-1993'. However, in this reviewer's opinion, the 'talks about talks' stage preceded this period, and talks were conducted through several channels from the mid-1980s. Moreover, it was during the late 1980s when the ANC top leadership began receiving signals from the SADF highest echelons on the urgency of a political settlement. (Frankel does write that 'there is some evidence to suggest informal discussions occurred between individuals from the South African military and MK as early as ten to fifteen years before (p.2)', however he does not disclose the origin of this claim). So, as to the period in question it

would be better to call it something like 'Bilateral Talks', because, in those years direct and publicly known talks did take place.

In a number of cases, Frankel apparently overestimates the capacity of the SADF to influence developments. Thus, he describes how 'the SADF strategists' discussed 'the comparative costs and advantages of integrating MK members as a group or individually' (p.5) as if it depended on them, and not on the ANC and MK.

Frankel correctly notes the 'political astuteness' of MK representatives (p.9) who were not just 'professional' but experienced politicians in the best meaning of this word with a much broader worldview than their SADF counterparts. He explains in detail how the MK representatives were defending their position: 'MK saw [the future of integration] as a genuine merger of forces and not the absorption of MK into the SADF.' They rightly believed that 'What applied to one party should apply to another' and accused SADF commanders of making 'discriminatory, devious, perceptive, and arrogant' judgments. (p.16)

However, at the same time Frankel echoes Pretoria's propagandist clichés by speaking about 'apolitical, technician professional soldiers in SADF' who insisted that 'under apartheid they had simply followed the commands of a legally constituted political authority' (p.17), as if they did not know that the apartheid regime was regarded as illegal by the UN and most countries of the world, not to mention the majority of the South African population, who were barred from 'constituting' that 'political authority'. Frankel apparently forgets that white South Africans had a choice, albeit a difficult one - to serve the criminal regime, to fight against it, or at least

to refuse to serve. So to be 'apolitical' for an SADF soldier was in reality to defend a criminal policy which was universally regarded as a 'crime against humanity'.

Frankel notes that 'the SADF representatives left pleasantly surprised by the level of general knowledge about military aviation on the part of their counterparts.' (p.7) This was not the only surprise: the level of knowledge by the SADF about the MK and the system of its training was rather pitiful. In the next chapter it is noted that 'the appearance of [MK] cadres with some naval expertise produced confusion in the SAN' (p. 64). One could ask here why the much-praised Pretoria intelligence could not even detect the fact that MK had been trained for over four years in a Soviet Naval Academy? At the same time it is not clear what Frankel means by 'African standards' of MK, 'at least in the field of military aviation' (p.22), because all the ANC pilots, both helicopter and jet, with the exception of one or two, studied in the USSR.

It may be added here that courses of regular officer training in the Soviet Union taken by MK members were more extensive (and probably, more intensive) than those of their new colleagues of the former SADF: the term of such courses in the Soviet military academies was at least three years, while in South Africa it can be as little as six months. It is true that the number of MK officers fully trained in conventional warfare was inadequate, however this was not a fault of the MK Command but rather of its Soviet counterparts. Head of MK Command (and future Minister) Joe Modise several times, well in advance, emphasised the need to train an officers' corps for the future armed forces of a democratic South Africa, but the usual rule of the Soviet military was to train foreign personnel for the type of arms and equipment to be supplied. However, later, in 1986, when that need became obvious in anticipation of the radical changes in South Africa, the USSR Ministry of Defence had to agree to this.

Frankel writes with painstaking details about the lengthy process of negotiation on military matters. In particular, he is correct in his assessment that the creation of the Sub-Council on Defence of the Transitional Executive Council was supported by both sides, that is MK and SADF, because 'it allowed each military formation to monitor the other while maintaining its internal autonomy' (p.33). Unfortunately, Frankel fails to add that this parity of a kind was exactly what SADF initially wanted to avoid. He calls MK 'the weaker party' (p.35) compared to the SADF, but 'weaker' should hardly be used as an equivalent of 'smaller' and in any case the

strength and the weakness of one or another military formation cannot be properly measured if it is taken out of the context of its political ties and popular base.

I find the author's claim that each of the 'historic antagonists' [MK and SADF] 'saw itself as the armed wing of the "victors" in the apartheid struggle' (p.36) rather strange. Perhaps (if we forget about their debacle in Angola), the SADF Command could claim to be 'victorious' to the extent they managed to contain the armed struggle inside South Africa at the level of 'low intensity.' But their 'mother' organisation, the National Party Government, far from being able to claim to be a victor in 'the apartheid struggle,' had to agree to the elimination of the very apartheid system it had created and upheld for over forty years. The same applies to the phrase, uncritically quoted by Frankel from Brigadier Bill Sass's article where (after the battle of Cuito-Cuanavale!) 'success' was named as one of the 'SADF traditions' (p.39).

Frankel gives a sober assessment in the conclusion of this first chapter. Even if, on the surface, 'the SADF appears to achieve more than it surrendered', six years later, 'many of the original arrangements so carefully negotiated in 1993-1994 are in tatters, partly due to rapid democratisation, partly because SADF negotiations failed to see past the horizon' (p.40-41). Further, 'most MK leaders regarded negotiations as a stage in a much more sweeping and longer political process within which the peaceful transition to democracy was one facet of a broader project that would ultimately be appropriated in the name of the South African people' (p.41). Moreover, they were 'deeply schooled, through a mixture of choice and necessity, at the critical interface between military and political affairs in a fashion that was, with individual exceptions, way beyond the exact comprehension of their SADF opponents ...' (p.41) So much for the 'apolitical' nature of the armed forces!

'All knew deep down,' continues Frankel, 'that after a diplomatic period of time when the ANC had consolidated its power base - be it three years or five - MK would inevitably begin to make the necessary changes to the military pact as circumstances required, no matter how fine-tuned within a wealth of sealed and signed documents' (p.42). It remains to be added that this stage was indeed reached in South Africa in about five year time when the former MK members occupied the most crucial positions of the overall Head of the SANDF, Head of the Army, Head of Military Intelligence, etc.

The second chapter of Frankel's book is devoted to the actual 'integration' of the SADF, bantustan 'armies' and

'Non-statutory forces (NSF)', that is MK and the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA), the armed wing of the Panafricanist Congress. The title of the chapter, "Caesarean Section': The Birth of the South African Defence Force,' is a little strange as the process of integration, albeit troublesome, was practically bloodless and in any case hardly resembled a surgical operation. As detailed as this chapter is, some aspects leave this reader a bit puzzled. In particular, it would be good to know in what ways Transkei's leader General Bantu Holomisa negotiated sending his officers 'on staff courses to other parts of Africa' (p.54) and to what extent the ANC (and perhaps, PAC) was involved in this project. (When Holomisa approached this reviewer in July 1991 in Durban about the possibility of training them in the USSR, he underlined that some of the ANC cadres previously trained by Moscow were already at his disposal, i.e. seconded to the Transkei Defence Forces by MK.)

Frankel's interpretation of MK involvement in Angola is rather vague. His phrase 'some MK soldiers gained experience in conventional warfare as South Africa moved to support various insurgent groups ranged against the de facto Angolan government following Portuguese withdrawal after 1974.' (p.46) provokes several questions. True, MK fighters were engaged in fighting UNITA initially, while protecting their convoys, and from 1983 in a counter-offensive against UNITA as well. However these engagements were not so much 'conventional warfare' but 'counter-insurgency' actions. On the other hand, SADF, with the exception of the 'battle of Cuito Cuanavale' and some other operations in Angola, was also mostly involved in counter-insurgency and not in 'conventional warfare'. Besides, for lengthy periods of time SADF soldiers were actually performing police duties, in particular in black townships.

Frankel writes that 'some 400 MK members' were trained in Zambia, Libya, Tanzania and Uganda where according to him 'the standards' differ from 'internationally recognised principles' (p.57), but he omits the fact that the training of officers for regular forces was organised for MK in such famous Soviet establishments as the Frunze Academy in Moscow.

The degree of indoctrination in the 'apolitical' SADF is well seen in the case when the South African Navy (SAN) command insisted 'that all senior NSF personnel at it bases complete a security vetting document, part of which contained reference to previous Communist party affiliations' a step 'no doubt motivated by the Soviet background of former MK officers'. (p. 69) All in

all, the Navy, which was supposed to be more 'liberal' in South Africa than the Army, behaved as if no radical changes were required. As the British Military Advisory and Training Team (BMATT) reported, it was becoming clear that 'there are elements within SAN who not only do not support the integration process but are actively trying to torpedo it'. (p. 65)

This chapter has many examples of the insults made by the defenders of the illegal regime about liberation movement members. One must deeply respect the patience of MK soldiers and their commanders which prevented all attempts to sabotage the process of integration. Frankel writes: '... some MK leaders believed that the Wallmansthal AA [assembly area] was a concentration camp where they were to be cordoned prior to an SADF military onslaught ... living conditions were, at least at the outset, sufficiently poor to justify some of the worst MK suspicions. Adequate tents, bedding, and clothing were in short supply for much of 1994 and each delay tended to confirm NSF suspicions. Food was initially poor and unvaried, except for that provided to SADF personnel.' (p.74) Hence, there was more than once valid reason for 'serious unrest in Wallmansthal' in October 1994 (p.78). However, it is unfortunate that the author does not describe these developments and the way they were handled by the two sides.

All in all, the process of integration of various forces, often former adversaries, can be called successful. However, in this reviewer's opinion a political compromise, worked out in the negotiations prior to the 1994 general election, contained a serious (and painful) handicap for MK soldiers: they had to ask for amnesty for their very membership of the armed liberation movement, as if the struggle against the apartheid regime was a crime, while actions in defence of the regime in the ranks of the SADF, SAP, etc. were regarded as 'legitimate'.

Moreover, belonging to MK is sometimes still regarded as a 'stigma' in certain spheres, such as the 'mainstream' press in post-apartheid South Africa, resulting in the fact that not every MK member reported his or her involvement. A striking example of this is the well-known journalist Peter Wellman, whose underground work for MK for many years became known only at his funeral in early 2001.

The third chapter is devoted to the next stage - the process of transformation of the South African Armed Forces and the difficulties encountered. It becomes clear that if, on the one hand, some MK cadres needed 'bridging' courses, especially in technical and administrative

fields, on the other hand former SADF personnel and especially their commanders should also have had a kind of 'bridging courses' to gain at least some knowledge of the true history of Southern Africa and the place of the apartheid regime within the framework of international law. The lack of such courses for the SADF resulted in such scandals as the decision of then SANDF Head General Meiring to hold a 'commemorative parade' in May 1996, (two years after the change of government in South Africa!) on the anniversary of the old Army 'operation' in Angola which resulted in the massacre of hundreds of Namibians, mostly civilians in Kassinga. (p.124)

Unfortunately, from time to time it appears as if the author unconsciously shares something of the 'old guard' bias against MK cadres, provoked, possibly by a lack of contacts with them. For example, he writes about the 'accelerated career' of the first SANDF female general, Jackie Sedibe, forgetting (or not being aware) that she held the important post of Head of MK Communications 13 years before her promotion to this rank.

The fourth chapter, 'Guns or Butter,' is devoted to the controversial issue of balancing social reconstruction and rearmament in South Africa. After the collapse of the apartheid regime, a rather strong feeling developed in South Africa that arms were 'toys for boys' and that instead of buying or producing weapons, money should be spend on solving social problems. The proponents of this view substantiate their position by saying that there is no threat to a new South Africa from outside its borders. Frankel quotes from the draft White Paper on Defence (one wonders why not also from the final document, adopted in 1996?) which stated that South Africa 'is not confronted by an immediate conventional threat to national security and doesn't anticipate military aggression in the short-term future' (p.153). However, developments of the last decade, and especially the NATO aggression against Yugoslavia, show how quickly the situation can change and how suddenly a threat can emerge. In the case of Yugoslavia, the pretext for intervention was 'ethnic conflict'; but a similar pretext could be easily found in Southern Africa where state borders divide many ethnic groups.

Frankel regards the 'enormous concentration of weapons' in Southern Africa as 'left over from the Cold War' (p.165). However, the main feature of developments in the region in the previous decades was not the 'Cold War' but the liberation struggle, and the main reason for accumulation of those weapons was resistance of the racist and colonial regimes (and their overt or covert sup-

porters in the West) to the inevitable change.

Elsewhere, Frankel writes about 'the failure of South Africa to determine a foreign policy' (p.166), not bothering to present much evidence. He does not hesitate to call Joe Modise an 'unknown quantity' (p.212) (Unknown to whom? For those who participated in the struggle or supported it the 'quantity' or, rather, the quality of 'Cde J M,' aka 'Cde Thabo More' was well known). Frankel does not hesitate to put en par military commanders of the apartheid regime and of the ANC when he writes that 'the old leaders of the SADF and MK, for better or for worse, have escaped being brought to justice for their behaviour during the pre-transition years' (p.196), again, not bothering to explain what 'behaviour' he has in mind.

Finally, in The Epilogue ('Beyond the Millennium') Frankel seeks to measure the success of the integration and transformation of the Armed Forces in South Africa. He tries to be objective but, probably unconsciously, sometimes appears to look at matters from the position of an 'apolitical' white South African prior to 1990. In particular, he claims that 'a career in the military, relative to other public service, has already ceased to be seen as a promising path for the socially mobile, the seekers of technological skills, and those who quite simply seek to serve their country' (p.214) as if before the elimination of the apartheid system all those 'paths' were not blocked for the African majority unless they regarded bantustans as 'their countries'.

Perhaps the flaws of this book can be explained by the fact that it is based mostly on documents provided by the SADF or BMATT. Documents of 'the other side' might not have been accessible to the author but it is pity that Frankel could not (or had no time to) interview members of MK (and APLA for that matter). For example, he could have discovered that the 'historical absence of ranking in MK' (p.59) was not absolute, at least one could meet some MK members in the uniforms of major in Moscow in 1990-1991.

One can point to other weaknesses in the book. It appears that different parts of the book were written at different times, and the author did not always manage to update the old ones. Among the missing points in Frankel's research is the so-called 'coup plot': three years ago General Meiring accused former MK Chief of Staff General Sphiwe Nyanda, and the then Deputy Minister Ronnie Kasrils, and other 'lefties' of nothing short of an attempt to overthrow Mandela! This clumsy attempt to discredit them boomeranged and speeded up the resignation of General Meiring and some of his lieutenants. An-

other weakness is the 'facelessness' of many of the historical actors. Frankel writes about 'senior black officers' or 'parliamentarians', without naming them, just as he does not mention the name of a new Deputy Minister of Defence, Nozizwe Routledge-Madlala, the first woman to take such a post in South Africa. Neither is the book free from some minor 'slips of the pen,' such as calling Codesa 'Congress' and not 'Convention' for a Democratic South Africa' (p.2) or saying that MK was legalised in 1991 and not in 1990. It is also not clear what Frankel really means when he writes that (in 1993!) 'Sincere' international observers from the Eastern bloc would be welcome to oversee the process' (p.11) of concentrating MK person-

nel in assembly areas, since the 'Eastern block' had disintegrated several years earlier.

All these comments and critique notwithstanding, Frankel's book is an extremely valuable, in fact unique, contribution to the study of the developments whose importance goes far beyond the borders of South Africa, which makes it is a must for every scholar of Africa.

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