Death and dismemberment: the body and counter-revolutionary warfare in apartheid South Africa¹

Nicky Rousseau

As resistance intensified in what would turn out to be apartheid's final decade, security forces in South Africa began covertly to execute opponents extra-judicially, despite a formidable arsenal of security legislation and a state of emergency from 1985 to 1990.² A noteworthy aspect of these executions is that the modes of killing varied, sometimes along regional lines, or according to the particular security unit involved. Disposal of the bodies was similarly varied.

This chapter traces these different methods of killing and pays particular attention to the disposal of bodies, which signalled a new frontier of hostility, namely the 'war on the corpse'.³ Of course, instances of extra-judicial killing are not especially noteworthy in the annals of counter-revolutionary warfare, documented across a variety of global settings. However, contrary to the state's oft-repeated intention to annihilate the enemy – an intention seemingly realized in the common depiction of the apartheid state as exercising an untrammelled sovereignty – extra-judicial killings by state security forces occurred on a relatively limited scale, running into the hundreds, rather than the thousands. Despite close ties with various South American juntas, security police were unable to translate intent into anything like the mass disappearances perpetrated by those regimes. This scale, it is argued, arises less from a sense of *restraint* than one of *constraint*, suggesting a need for more nuanced understandings of what facilitates or hinders large-scale executions.

The war comes home

Among the many omissions laid at the door of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is the absence of statistics indicating the number of persons killed as a result of political violence during the thirty-four-year period covered by its remit (1 March 1960 to 10 May 1994). This seems surprising for a commission specifically mandated to discover the 'nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights'⁴ – of which killing was one such violation – and to determine the identity of both victims and perpetrators. Yet this was no lapse of memory. Firstly, determining what constituted a politically motivated killing proved a tricky enterprise, especially for the period 1990–94, which accounted for a significant majority of deaths. Secondly, determining the identity of perpetrators proved even more intractable: in numerous instances the killer's hand was either hidden, or misconstrued; in other instances, violence between opposing groups formed part of a deliberate strategy of counter-mobilization by the South African state. Instead of hard numbers, then, the TRC offered instead a categorization of killings: judicial executions, assassinations, elimination during arrest, enforced disappearances followed by elimination, ambushes, entrapment operations, killing of own forces.⁵

Apartheid legislation allowed for the killing of political suspects through judicial execution when found guilty of offences of terrorism, sabotage, or treason.⁶ Additionally, generous indemnity regulations protected police officers responsible for shooting 'rioters' in civil unrest.⁷ If apartheid is understood as a regime that relied on coercion with respect to its black subjects, then the legislative right to kill in certain circumstances would seem to represent its ultimate sanction. Yet increasingly during the 1980s, funerals in particular were transformed into occasions of defiance, often resulting in further shootings and deaths at the hands of the police. Townships, both in urban centres and rural towns, designed spatially as locations of control, had become instead centres of concentrated insurgency, in which the body was central to mobilization. Images of coffins draped in flags, and surrounded by young activists dressed in khaki with fists or wooden replicas of AK47s aloft, became a common sight in townships and, via the media, abroad. Thus, the enactment of apartheid's ultimate sanction – to kill – visibly demonstrated not its power but its illegitimacy.

This crisis was reflected in state security documents in the mid-1980s, as the dual strategy of keeping the line of defence well beyond South Africa's border through a policy of regional destabilization and internal reform unravelled under the impact of resistance. As returning to rule by force had the effect only of increasing resistance, the regime turned instead to acting outside of its own legal framework. Bodies that had produced illegitimacy and impotence thus produced as well a move to secret killings.⁸ The TRC tracked a movement through which South Africa's internal security situation was increasingly seen and enacted through the lens of war, and security policy and practice begin to mirror those of the external regional wars in which liberation movement figures had been assassinated or attacked.⁹

The authorization of 'extraordinary measures' did not, however, mean setting aside the legalism of the apartheid state, even despite majority support by the white electorate for tough security measures.¹⁰ Alongside calls to annihilate the enemy, therefore, security sub-committees debated at length about how to restrict internal opposition movements within the framework of a legally enacted state of emergency, and parliament passed successive amendments to existing security legislation.¹¹

While the military played a key role in formulating security strategy,¹² it was primarily police structures that engaged in extra-judicial eliminations inside South Africa.¹³ Sometimes, such killings were conducted by official police units; in other instances, security commanders deployed trusted operatives to conduct such operations, or units emerged which, although not officially authorized, included such senior personnel that they can be regarded as 'unofficial-official'. A large number of security police involved in these actions had prior experience of deployment in South Africa's own direct theatres of war, namely Zimbabwe and Namibia,¹⁴ 'location[s] par excellence ... where violence of the state of exception [was] deemed to operate in the service of "civilization"'.¹⁵

A common political and scholarly depiction of this period has been of a militarized state, where parliamentary government acted as a mere rubber stamp for a highly centralized State Security Council (SSC) led by the state President, which, through a network of structures, reached from the pinnacle of government to the smallest locality in South Africa and back again. In this view, the SSC decided, authorized, and oversaw all security operations, both lawful and unlawful.¹⁶ This view is challenged by the work

of the TRC, which suggests instead that, although extra-judicial killing represents a wider authorization and sanction, it took place in a more contingent and haphazard way.¹⁷ Unlike the external theatre where the right to self-defence could be called upon (even if illegitimately), the move to eliminating political suspects inside South Africa was unlawful. Consequently, no standing rules of engagement or operating procedures could be specified, except for what has been termed the unwritten eleventh commandment, 'Thou shalt not be found out'.¹⁸

Modes of killing

Modes of killing were multiple and varied. As one tactic, security forces used the cover of lawful killings to conduct executions. Thus, for instance, a security policy document suggests that during 'riots', police should target 'ringleaders'.¹⁹ Another was to shoot rather than arrest suspects, on the pretext of acting in self-defence against armed combatants, or to prevent a suspect from escaping.²⁰

Enforced disappearances followed by killing accounted for a number of other covert murders. Security police based in the major cities of Johannesburg, Pretoria (including security police headquarters), Durban, and Port Elizabeth all later applied for amnesty for 'disappearing' combatants and/or activists in their region, including several abductions from neighbouring states such as Lesotho or Swaziland. The pattern was similar – activists would be taken into informal custody or lured into traps by agents, and then transported to rural areas. Here the rural functioned as a 'safe zone'.²¹ Abductees would be interrogated (sometimes tortured) for varying periods of time and then executed unless they agreed to collaborate. Here the exact form of execution varied – Pretoria security police strangled several captives, three were slowly electrocuted using an electric generator, others were sedated before being blown up; Durban police seemed to prefer death by a single shot to the back of the head; Port Elizabeth security police shot or stabbed several activists as well as killing four of their own (black) colleagues in a car bomb.²²

Aside from ambushes, which sometimes targeted groups of six to seven, most of the above were directed at individuals or very small groups of mainly guerrilla suspects. In several entrapment operations, security police targeted young political activists who were 'recruited' by undercover agents purporting to be guerrilla

commanders and then killed. For example, in 1985, in an operation code-named Zero Zero approved by the minister of police, young men from the townships of Duduza and Tsakane near Johannesburg were 'recruited' and trained before being supplied with hand-grenades for the purpose of a simultaneous attack on identified collaborators in their communities. Seven youths were killed and a further eight seriously injured when the zero-timed devices exploded in their hands. In another, jointly run with military special forces, 'recruits' were driven to an ambush site, injected with sedatives, and placed back in their vehicle together with an AK47 and a limpet mine. The vehicle was then crashed into a tree and set alight, killing and burning the ten young men. Such operations were replicated in several regions.²³

The war on the corpse

If the move to extra-judicial elimination is one in which the strategies and tactics of a wider regional war were adopted, then the variety of means and modes of killing outlined above speak to difficulties and constraints in relocating this war internally. For example, Koevoet, the police unit in which many security police officers had served in counter-insurgency operations in Namibia, shot dead guerrilla suspects and displayed their bodies openly, 'tied onto spare tyres, bumpers, mudguards and were left there until [they] got back to the base camp'.²⁴ Veteran photographer of the Namibian war, John Liebenberg, describes one such incident:

Under the baobab close to the shop of Johannes Andjamba, Guy Tillim and I stopped for a coke [i.e. Coca-Cola] and a little shade. Excited voices pointed to a Koevoet patrol returning to the base. 'Look,' murmured Guy. On the side of the vehicle lay slumped the body of man. The Casspirs stopped outside a *cuca* shop and the occupants disappeared inside. I cannot recall how we got to the vehicles. All I remember was the deathly silence. We both took some frames....²⁵

Kill ratios were carefully recorded by individual units, as their members received bounties accordingly. Reputedly, the taking of trophies or fetishes, body parts such as ears, was not uncommon.²⁶ In contrast to this, inside South Africa killing was forced to happen under cover of secrecy, or to masquerade in other forms, or to be conducted in ways that seemed little different from criminal murder. The resulting 'difficult' corpses could not be left on the side of the road like road kill nor displayed publicly strapped to the

front or rear bumper of military or police vehicles, nor captured in photographs that mimicked the big-game safari shot, which also circulated semi-surreptitiously in regional war zones.²⁷

Again, there were no standing rules regarding the disposal of corpses, and so each team was had to develop its own *modus operandi*. As with killing, a range of methods emerged, and although certain patterns or preferences can be discerned, sometimes crossing regions, they retain a sense of improvisation and of being driven by opportunity. A number of bodies were concealed. For example, police in the Natal region threw a body over a densely wooded cliff, one was buried in a sugar-cane field, some were dumped in the territory of opposing political groups, while several more were buried, covered with limestone to hasten decomposition, in secret graves.²⁸ Such bodies remained available for possible discovery at a later stage, presenting perhaps some degree of risk. Other security police units attempted to ensure the complete obliteration of the corpse by different methods. In one case, the body of an activist killed in custody was allegedly thrown into a crocodile-infested river, while in at least three known separate cases the bodies of abductees were repeatedly blown up.²⁹

Other security police burnt their dead bodies. These cases narrated at public TRC amnesty hearings have achieved iconic notoriety. A commander of one unit provided a cavalier description in which he detailed the burning process, as well as describing how the unit barbecued (in South African parlance, *braaied*) meat on an adjacent fire.³⁰ Another unit attempted a more clinical register, seemingly at pains to dispel the image that had been conjured up of beer-swilling men eating barbecued meat while their victims burnt alongside them. Nonetheless, they recounted taking bodies to a farm, dousing them with diesel, and placing them on a fire which had to be fed all night. Even then, not all the remains were incinerated, demonstrating the difficulty of burning adult human bodies on an open pyre. According to the testimony, the remaining pieces of burnt flesh and bone were gathered into plastic bags and thrown into a river.³¹ However, some twenty-five years later, exhumations on the farm discovered 6 kg of diesel-coated burnt human bone fragments in two septic tanks, just metres from where the bodies had been burnt.³²

By contrast, Pretoria security police chose not to conceal the bodies of those whom they had abducted and killed. Taking the 'war on the corpse' to new levels, bodies were displayed openly but their very publicity acted to obfuscate. In one case involving a victim

who had been strangled to death, a tyre was placed around the victim's neck and then set alight to suggest a death by 'necklacing'; in several other cases, bodies were transported from the city to outlying rural areas, and placed on a landmine or several limpet mines which were then detonated.³³ As this coincided with a period in which the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC) was engaged in a landmine campaign, these incidents passed off as cases where 'terrorists' had accidentally blown themselves up. In a few instances, the victim was still alive at the time of detonation, having allegedly been sedated; thus the explosion served both to kill and to dispose of the corpse. A similar *modus operandi* was used in at least two other regions, although here bodies were placed on railway lines (a frequent target of guerrilla attacks, aimed at disrupting transport systems).³⁴

Ironically in these cases, the mode of disposal converted the bodies of 'black operations' to those able to enter the normal bureaucracy of death, as it did for other bodies resulting from executions which masqueraded as legitimate killings, such as those of people in 'combat' or 'escaping' from custody. Here, bodies would be processed in the usual manner for unnatural deaths: after the crime scene had been marked out, photographed, and sketched, and, where possible, fingerprints taken, the body would be removed to the nearest police mortuary.

Mortuary records tell their own story of unnatural and violent death of Africans under apartheid. In one region's records, listings for the bodies resulting from counter-revolutionary warfare operations interrupt the columns of numerous stillborn and infant deaths, homicides, winter deaths of the elderly, suicides, and untimely deaths in motor vehicle or mining accidents. In almost all cases, the bodies resulting from counter-revolutionary warfare were recorded among the extraordinarily high number of 'Unknown black males' recorded in death registers across South Africa, reflecting the historical legacies of migrant labour, which resulted in high numbers of unidentified and unclaimed bodies; sometimes they were distinguished from the rest by the appellation *terroris*.³⁵

Criminal investigations in South Africa do not require forensic pathologists to examine the crime scene. With no state pathologists outside of the main urban areas, post-mortems were conducted by the closest district surgeon – 'state employed doctors whose work combined medico-legal duties with caring for indigent patients *pro bono*' – as well as certain categories of civil servants.³⁶ District surgeons had the most rudimentary of forensic training from

medical school, were rarely willing to risk a confrontation with security police, and squeezed in post-mortem duties between their routine medical duties. Post-mortems could take place days, in some cases even weeks, after the death, and many noted little more than race, cause of death, and a rudimentary marking up of injuries on a diagrammatic representation of the body. Thereafter, the corpse (or remains thereof) would be released to the undertaker responsible for indigent burials, placed in a coffin, and buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in the local cemetery.

Much has been written of the human impulse to rescue dead and decaying matter from its material and animal origins through various rituals. Posel and Gupta suggest that 'exceptional and demeaning' defilement of human remains, or burial as unknown and unclaimed, may reflect an opposite and 'symbolically potent' intent – to reduce the victim to mere dead meat.³⁷ This resonates with the accounts above, especially those accounts of burning accompanied by the cooking and consumption of animal meat, blurring the boundaries of human and animal, and conjuring the taboo of cannibalism.

In his meditation on the tensions between justice and mourning, Laqueur argues that precisely because victims of mass genocide and killing die like dogs or beasts, the work of identifying and naming is an important re-humanizing gesture.³⁸ But were the bodies of those claimed to be terrorists reduced to mere animal matter or dead meat? Here, perhaps ironically, by staging such incidents as the deaths of 'terrorists' who had blown themselves up, the security police attached an identity that remained essentially human, part of a political community, even if, for some, they may have been regarded as inhumane. Indeed, what has been termed here as the routine bureaucracy of death served only to reinforce the fact that these were humans. Thus, for instance, the pieces of flesh from blown-up bodies near the village of Buanja, which led a villager to investigate why 'carnivorous birds' were in the area, set in motion a process that is indisputably a human one. The remains (two feet, fragmented parts of a skull, vertebrae, ribcage segments, a left shoulder joint, as well as a portion of the lower abdomen) were not left for the vultures to pick over and consume, or incinerated, but were ultimately placed in a coffin, and buried in a cemetery as a human body.³⁹ At the same time, apartheid did not end with death, and the often cursory and demeaning treatment of the dead body served to 'reaffirm racial hierarchies of personal worth in death as much as in life'.⁴⁰

These cases point to how the human may in certain circumstances unexpectedly return, even if in ways that remain ideologically circumscribed. Similarly, in the public recounting of these incidents, public revulsion functioned perhaps to reveal the perpetrators not only to be inhumane but to be inhuman, and, in this move, enabling those bodies reduced and burnt like dead meat to be re-humanized.⁴¹

The tactical invasion of the body⁴²

Scholars warn against seeking to explain violence through examining its causes or functions and the instrumentalization thereof. To do so may reduce violence 'to a practical tool used by opposing social actors in pursuit of conflicting ends. Whether treated as a cause, function, or instrument, violence is generally assumed rather than examined in its concreteness.'⁴³ While mindful of this warning, the concern here is not to explain violence but to explore an aspect of necropolitics,⁴⁴ namely the corpse as 'thing' and how, even after its separation from a prior self, it remains available as a 'medium for searing assertions of power'.⁴⁵ This interest intersects with certain aspects regarding the agency of the dead body as well as the 'return to materiality' in conditions of violence.⁴⁶

If, as has been argued, the move to extra-judicial elimination suggests not unfettered power of the apartheid state but rather its limits, nonetheless the above account demonstrates how this constraint became generative of new forms of power over the body. While bodies buried or obliterated had no further value (except perhaps as a boast), other approaches to disposal seemed to suggest that a corpse, although lifeless, had not yet escaped the binds of counter-revolutionary warfare.

At a most basic and passive level, bodies produced by ambushes or entrapment operations functioned to conceal intent, or the identity of the killers. Thus, for example, where a forensic examination of the scene of an ambush might identify a police officer as the trigger-puller, the scene and the corpses would be restaged to suggest a combat or escape scenario. On the other hand, those killed in entrapment operations or blown up by landmines spoke not to 'murder most foul' but to death 'by their own hands'. In such circumstances, the security police acted as creative director, landmines or limpet mines were the active agents, while bodies, sometimes alive, were mere matter to be acted upon. More than

concealing authorship, these were acts where the very display of bodies was intended to convey a message. As the commander of the Pretoria security police put it:

These [bodies] would be destroyed by means of explosives, so that firstly, the identity could not be established and secondly so that the South African public would be brought under the impression that they [the insurgents] were so badly trained that they would blow themselves up.⁴⁷

In several instances, a parallel scene rolled: the sole purpose of the collection of statements, and of the filling and filing of forms and documents (post-mortem reports, photographs, and maps of the crime scene, fingerprints) was to make visible and fix a particular version of the incident, namely one that sought to whiten the blackest of operations.

The bodies and possessions of those killed in ambushes produced information. Through the 'tactile invasion' of the body or, more aptly here, dismemberment, a visual archive of fingerprint cards, crime scene photographs, and post-mortem body shots worked 'to "arrest" and "capture" the criminal-[terrorist]'.⁴⁸ Bodies yielded fingerprints used to identify individuals and connect them to biographies of resistance; photographs of suspects, matched to earlier mug shots, or even of the dead body, were routinely used in interrogations of other terror suspects. Indeed, in some documented cases, detainees were literally taken to the scene or the mortuary or shown photographs of the deceased both to inculcate fear as well as to collect information.⁴⁹ Weaponry, clothing, and possessions, possibly notes or documents, could provide further information. This kind of information, forwarded to security headquarters and entered into a database, would become available, sometimes for years afterwards, in further investigations, and in possible future court cases, as well as operationally.

Bodies could also function as faulty intelligence, able to disrupt the fabric of trust that is always critical to resistance in repressive regimes. Several of the disappeared were rumoured to have 'sold out' or 'crossed sides'. In one instance, a young activist was necklaced at the funeral of the young militants killed in Operation Zero Zero, after suspicion fell on her because she had been a passenger in the car of the security police agent who had posed as the guerrilla commander and supplied the young men with the zero-timed devices. In such instances, one could say that the body served to function in a more active and pernicious way – to disrupt

its own forces.⁵⁰ The same can be said where those killed by security police officers were staged as victims of inter- or intra-party conflict between rival resistance movements, or as 'accidental deaths' of an incompetent guerrilla army whose poorly trained combatants had 'blown themselves up'.

While the resort to killing may be understood as a register of the failure to turn the resister into a compliant subject – in other words, marking a certain kind of limit – then these instrumental displays by the security police functioned to turn back this failure onto the enemy itself. Here, where the tactics (or imagined tactics) of the enemy are returned to that enemy, we have the classic move of what J. J. McCuen refers to as 'the art of counter-revolutionary warfare', a move made more potent by turning the body itself into a weapon.⁵¹ This 'weaponization' of the dead body as an active agent of the war against its own comrades marked a new frontier of the 'war on the corpse'.

At the same time, the capacity thus to conscript and to deploy the corpse in the service of counter-insurgency remained risky, and the efficacy of such carefully staged performances could not be guaranteed. Multiple explosions, for example, could unnerve the white electorate; for supporters of the liberation movements, those killed could retain the status of heroic resister, the good comrade who had sacrificed all; organizations and their members could reject attempts to ascribe killings to rival groups or bungled operations.

In this regard, nowhere was the power of corpse to call forth multitudes more evident than the killing of four men in the Eastern Cape. The Cradock Four,⁵² as they are colloquially referred to, were abducted in June 1985, just weeks after one of the incidents described above involving the burning of three bodies. In this instance, however, the victims were variously stabbed or shot, their bodies mutilated and set alight in bushes alongside a road. Despite attempts by security police to lay the blame at the door of a rival political movement, by leaving a pamphlet of that organization next to the victims' burnt-out car, their killings produced one of the largest political funerals in the history of apartheid South Africa.⁵³

Perhaps here one should note both the power of the body to generate resistance, and the use of the body as a weapon of counter-revolutionary warfare. Does this require some rethinking of the notion of the agency of the dead body (and, as things/objects, of the return to the material itself)? While this debate is far wider than mere questions of human intent or instrumentalization, it

nonetheless calls attention to more limited concerns posed by the notion of 'bodies of evidence' or the 'unsettled body' that calls for justice or recovery.⁵⁴ Where bodies have acted as weapons of counter-revolutionary warfare, they have done so not with their own but another's agency, challenging the claim that the dead body can be a 'witness beyond the grave', capable of providing an 'alternative form of testimony'.⁵⁵ Without confessions from the killers, these bodies would most likely have remained as the bodies of guerrillas who had accidentally fallen victim to their own explosives. In these cases, as Domanska suggests, the bodies served 'the living, becoming the space of conflict between different interests of power ... [and] knowledge'.⁵⁶ In a similar vein, Crossland warns that the 'mediating interpretants' of 'the body of evidence' – including those who research and study dead bodies – may act to endow 'the dead with an agency that is carefully channelled and constrained'.⁵⁷ Thus, while the confessional text may not provide the truth, the material body may mislead.

Indeed, the bodies themselves seem to obfuscate. Thus the body fragments scattered across the landscape following the detonation of a landmine call in multiple ways – as prey to vultures, as possibly human to local villagers, and as terrorist to police – suggesting a movement of the body from unhuman to human, or human-but-inhumane, yet nonetheless one that cannot be left as prey and must be returned to the category of racialized human subject through burial as an unknown pauper or terrorist. In turn, the post-apartheid era has enabled a further movement to named beloved through exhumation, or named hero, via the state's memorial practices.⁵⁸ If agency is understood as the capacity of the body (thing) to affect or 'perform a socializing function',⁵⁹ then it demonstrates here the power to do so. In a different context, Gaston Gordillo suggests that 'What makes corpses affectively unpredictable is that their power to affect is liberated from the capacity to be affected. This gives corpses ... a potent political afterlife'.⁶⁰ The body that enables a misreading and misleading produces as well a site of contestation.

Hundreds rather than thousands

And yet. These killings, as noted at the outset, number not in the thousands, but amount to a few hundred. They are on the same scale, possibly even less, than the sum of the victims of South Africa's most notorious serial killers – even if we were to add an extra few hundred

on the grounds that any existing statistic represents only those whose fate is known, and for whom apartheid security forces are the indisputable killers. One could hypothesize that more combat deaths were in fact killings. And the security forces must have been responsible for the deaths of some of the close to 500 persons the TRC noted as 'still missing'; in the latter group, just over 100 were classified as probable enforced disappearances, 64 of whom were last seen in the company of members of the security forces, and a further 117 as having disappeared during periods of unrest.⁶¹ This would certainly increase, possibly even double, the total, but would not substantially alter the overall picture. Occasional rumours of mass graves, and proliferating bodies, that surface from time to time are regarded as improbable by investigators responsible for post-TRC investigations.⁶² These rather small numbers seem at odds with the general depiction of apartheid, not only as cruel and evil, but as a highly militarized police state. They are contrary to apartheid's self-representation of itself at the time when it vowed to annihilate the enemy, as well as to how it is remembered and depicted in memorialization initiatives, which appear to share much of that self-representation.

There are different ways of answering this puzzle. One is to point to the fact that the vast majority of those killed by the apartheid state were not murdered by its security forces, but rather by forms of deliberately engineered and enforced structural violence, such as the restrictions on movement that garrisoned the majority of black South Africans away from the cities in so-called 'homelands', where mortuary registers would be filled with records of premature deaths. Thus South Africa's mass graves would be in the cemeteries of resettlement camps such as Dimbaza, or the hundreds of migrant workers buried anonymously as paupers in city cemeteries.⁶³ In other words, following a well worn critique, a focus on bodies of mass killing is in danger of obscuring colonial or apartheid pasts in its failure to recognize that, in certain parts of the world, mass killing is invisible and a consequence of the slow attrition of structural violence.

A further argument may be that other security strategies were found to be more effective and indeed account for considerably more deaths. Thus, the policy of keeping the line of defence as far as possible beyond South Africa's borders was directly responsible for thousands upon thousands of deaths of non-South Africans mainly in South Africa's own theatre of war, Namibia and southern Angola, and at least partially accountable for many thousands

more in a proxy war in Mozambique, as well as lower numbers of deaths in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland.⁶⁴ Then, too, within South Africa, civilian protest played a far more significant role than the armed struggle, and deaths arising from civilian protest are certainly higher than these security police killings. However, by far the highest number of deaths arising from direct political violence inside South Africa is of those killed in inter-civilian conflict between liberation movements and Inkatha, an ethnically mobilized movement primarily based in the KwaZulu-Natal region of South Africa and the migrant hostels of Johannesburg.⁶⁵ Certainly political violence in these areas most closely approximates the description Mbembe provides of 'zones in which war and disorder, internal and external figures of the political, stand side by side or alternate with each other ... the location par excellence where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended'.⁶⁶

But here we are returned to the conundrum faced by the TRC. As with the proxy wars in Angola and Mozambique, apportioning responsibility for such deaths is no easy matter. Certainly, counter-mobilization, including the deliberate fomenting of violence, was a key component of the apartheid government's counter-revolutionary warfare strategy, and the TRC tracked overall support from the apartheid government for Inkatha, including political support, the training and arming of a covert hit squad, as well as the supply of arms during the early 1990s.⁶⁷ As a former member of a covert military unit put it:

The emphasis was more placed on disruption by ... indirect means of getting the enemy to kill itself, to detain itself and to disrupt itself. And physically killing them was placed more or less ... [a]s a last resort, sort of method. But emphasis ... was placed on sowing confusion and distrust between these different organisations.⁶⁸

Yet this conflict is not reducible to a simple state project, but has a more muddled authorship, and it is impossible, for example, to disaggregate deaths arising from a hit squad trained by the security forces from the wider cycle of killing and revenge killing that the actions of the hit squad may have encouraged. Counter-mobilization's success relied on the capacity to mobilize along pre-existing fault-lines; despite efforts to replicate their success in KwaZulu-Natal and Johannesburg, the security forces were unable to do so elsewhere in any significant way, despite the considerable resources of the military, which largely drove this strategy.⁶⁹

What, then, is the significance of the killings outlined earlier? Likening the violence that accompanied the partition of India and Pakistan to that in Rwanda, Ashis Nandy notes that killing did 'not come easy', as those engaged in the violence were 'ordinary people' rather than the 'centralized killing machine' of the state.⁷⁰ While Nandy clearly refers here to the will or psychological capacity of 'ordinary people' to kill, for state agents, trained less to protect than to kill (or to protect by killing), who may have the will to kill and are in fact authorized to do so, killing may still not 'come easy'.

If, following Mbembe, sovereignty is 'the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die',⁷¹ how does one account for the seeming difficulty the late apartheid state had in exercising this sovereign right, even while at the same time his outline of sovereign power mirrors that of the apartheid state? A key argument here has been that this difficulty points to a form of constraint, a limit. While 'the sovereign right to kill' may not have been 'subject to legal and institutional rule', the sovereign's capacity to 'kill at any time or in any manner'⁷² was nonetheless considerably constrained. Whites were (and are) vastly outnumbered in South Africa, and were never able to effect mass killing or genocide (notwithstanding certain fantasies and research by some sectors of the military and civilian society).⁷³ Beyond this, a series of factors – international condemnation of apartheid, a political system that represented itself as a political democracy hitched to the West's 'war against communism', the huge financial cost attached to external and internal wars in the context of a serious economic crisis – disabled its capacity to embark on the open slaughter of political opponents or the kind of mass disappearance programmes of the Latin American dictatorships such as those in Argentina and Chile with which it had close relationships.

Provided only with the political and institutional endorsement to kill political opponents, each security police unit had to devise its own *modus operandi* and rules of engagement, while seeking to remain undetected. Killing one by one in covert conditions was logistically difficult, and required not just time and planning resources, but the devising of a means and method each time. In this regard, killing operations were in fact not dissimilar from serial killing – each operation had to be imagined, planned, and executed.⁷⁴ Thus, although the security police acted with seeming impunity with regard to individual cases and operations, they did not have the capacity to engage in mass disappearances or mass killings. Indeed, it is possible that 'the engorged gaze over the

politically prone body⁷⁵ was the effect of failure and impotence on the part of a once powerful security police system, rather than that of untrammelled power. Exercising the power to kill may have aimed more to shore up a (fading) sense of power and control rather than demonstrating a capacity to contain, let alone end, insurgency.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is based on research conducted as part of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and an uncountable number of discussions with my former TRC colleague, Madeleine Fullard. It also draws on some of the arguments developed in an earlier paper – Nicky Rousseau, ‘The farm, the river and the picnic spot: topographies of terror’, *African Studies*, 68:3 (2009), 351–69. Thanks to Patricia Hayes and Riedwaan Moosage for their valuable comments.
- 2 For details see www.sahistory.org.za/topic/state-emergency-south-africa-1960-and-1980s (accessed 1 December 2012).
- 3 Deborah Posel & Pamila Gupta, ‘The life of the corpse: framing questions and reflections’, *African Studies*, 68:3 (2009), 299–309, at p. 305.
- 4 Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995, available at www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/acts_full.html (accessed 1 December 2012).
- 5 Although the TRC database coded killings according to method as well, much of the ‘perpetrator volume’ of the seven-volume final report of the TRC is organized according to these listed categories. TRC, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 2 (Cape Town: Jutas, 1998–2003), vol. 2.
- 6 Definitions of terrorism, sabotage, and treason were extremely wide, enabling prosecution for acts of political opposition regarded as lawful in most democracies. A. S. Matthews, *Law, Order and Liberty in South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 175–7.
- 7 TRC, *Report*, vol. 2, p. 181.
- 8 The intention is not to suggest that resistance was responsible for the move to extra-judicial killing; rather, what is indexed here is Foucault’s notion of power as productive. Michel Foucault, ‘The subject and power’, in H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (eds), *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 208–26.
- 9 TRC, *Report*, vol. 2, pp. 14–40.
- 10 This refers to the way in which apartheid was carefully codified into a myriad of laws, and the manner in which the then government ‘placed a premium on law and order; on rule based formal legalism’. Dikgang Moseneke, ‘A journey from the heart of apartheid darkness towards a just society’, Philip Hart Memorial Lecture, Georgetown University, 4 April 2012, available at <http://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/>

- cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=hartlecture (accessed 20 January 2013).
- 11 For a discussion of the contestation around the meaning of words such as 'annihilate' and 'eliminate', see TRC, *Report*, vol. 5, pp. 214–18.
  - 12 Annette Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996).
  - 13 'Analysis of security force perpetrators', document extracted from TRC database and amnesty hearings in the author's possession.
  - 14 'Analysis of security force perpetrators'; Rousseau, 'The farm, the river', p. 363.
  - 15 Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15:1 (2003), 11–40, at p. 24.
  - 16 Phillip Frankel, Noam Pines & Mark Swilling (eds), *State, Resistance and Change in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1988); Jacklyn Cock & Laurie Nathan (eds), *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989).
  - 17 Madeleine Fullard & Nicky Rousseau, 'Who gave the orders?', unpublished paper, pp. 8–9.
  - 18 TRC, *Report*, vol. 1, p. 43.
  - 19 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 176.
  - 20 Ibid., pp. 250–7.
  - 21 In devising a *modus operandi*, security police drew on what was familiar and often personal. The rural was a key aspect of certain operatives' 'imaginary of violence'. Rousseau, 'The farm, the river'.
  - 22 'Analysis of security force perpetrators'.
  - 23 TRC, *Report*, vol. 2, pp. 257–67, vol. 6, pp. 198–203.
  - 24 Sean Callaghan, TRC Health Sector Hearing, available at www.justice.gov.za/trc/special/health/health01.htm (accessed 1 December 2012).
  - 25 John Liebenberg & Patricia Hayes, *Bush of Ghosts: Life and War in Namibia, 1986–1990* (Fernwood: Umuzi/Random House, 2010), p. 247.
  - 26 Etienne van Heerden, 'My Cuban', in *Mad Dog and Other Stories* (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 1992), p. 74.
  - 27 Jacque Pauw, *Into the Heart of Darkness: Confessions of Apartheid's Assassins* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1997), p. 82; SWAPO, 'SWATF/Koevoets not war veterans', available at www.swapoparty.org/swatf_koevoets_not_war_veterans.html (accessed 7 December 2012).
  - 28 TRC, *Report*, vol 2, pp. 240–2, 269, 545, 547, 549.
  - 29 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 623, vol. 2, p. 240; TRC Amnesty Committee, 'AC 2001/241', available at www.justice.gov.za/trc/decisions/2001/ac21241.htm (accessed 1 December 2012).
  - 30 TRC Amnesty Hearing, available at www.justice.gov.za/trc/amntrans/durban/coetzee1.htm (accessed 1 December 2012); D. Coetzee, 'Hitsquads. Testimony of a South African security policeman: the full story', unpublished manuscript, section 5.4.8.3.
  - 31 TRC Amnesty Hearing, 15–19 September 1997, 22–26 September 1997, 3–13 November 1997, available at www.justice.gov.za/trc/amntrans/am1997.htm (accessed 1 December 2012).

- 32 Missing Persons Task Team, *Report: The Search for Missing Activists at Post Chalmers near Cradock, Eastern Cape* (August 2009). The author was part of the team responsible for exhuming the remains.
- 33 'Necklacing' describes a method used to kill so-called collaborators whereby a petrol-soaked tyre is placed around the victim's neck and set alight. For the disposal of bodies, see TRC, *Report*, vol. 6, pp. 236–40; Rousseau, 'The farm, the river', pp. 357–9.
- 34 TRC, *Report*, vol. 2, pp. 242–3.
- 35 An Afrikaans word meaning terrorist.
- 36 Paul Gready, 'Medical complicity in human rights abuses: a case study of district surgeons in apartheid South Africa', *Journal of Human Rights*, 6:1 (2007), 415–32, at p. 416.
- 37 Posel & Gupta, 'The life of the corpse', p. 301.
- 38 Thomas Laqueur, 'The dead body and human rights', in S. Sweeney & I. Hodder (eds), *The Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 75–93; see also B. Honig, 'The other is dead: mourning, justice and the politics of burial', in Alexander Keller Hirsch (ed.), *Theorizing Post-conflict Reconciliation: Agonism, Restitution and Repair* (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), pp. 149–50.
- 39 Rousseau, 'The farm, the river', p. 353.
- 40 Posel & Gupta, 'The life of the corpse', p. 304.
- 41 This effect may also account for a phenomenon noticed by some TRC staff members, that the more brutal an account provided by perpetrators was, the more believable it seemed to be for victims' families and a wider public. Perhaps this was valued not for its evidentiary value but because it reasserted what was properly regarded as human and inhuman.
- 42 This plays on Allen Feldman's formulation of the 'tactile invasion' of the body, in 'Violence and vision: the aesthetics and prosthetics of terror', *Public Culture*, 10:1 (1997), 24–60, at p. 27.
- 43 Fernando Coronil & Julie Skurski, 'Dismembering and remembering the nation: the semantics of political violence in Venezuela', *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, 33:2 (1991), 288–337, at p. 289.
- 44 Mbembe, 'Necropolitics'.
- 45 Coronil & Skurski, 'Dismembering and remembering', p. 289.
- 46 Joost Fontein, 'Between tortured bodies and resurfacing bones: the politics of the dead in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Material Culture*, 15:4 (2010), 423–48; Cara Krmpotich, Joost Fontein & John Harries, 'The substance of bones: the materiality and affective presence of human remains', *Journal of Material Culture*, 15:4 (2010), 371–84; Zoë Crossland, 'Of clues and signs: the dead body and its evidential traces', *American Anthropologist*, 111:1 (2009), 69–80; Ewa Domanska, 'The material presence of the past', *History and Theory*, 45:3 (2006), 337–48; Bruno Latour, 'How to talk about the body: the normative dimensions of science study', *Body and Society*, 10:2–3 (2004), 205–29; Ciraj Rassool, 'Bone memory and the disciplines of the dead: human remains, transitional justice and heritage transformation', available at www.worlddocx.com (accessed 1 December 2012).

- 47 'Jack' Cronje, TRC Amnesty Hearing, Pretoria, 21 October 1999, testimony available at www.justice.gov.za/trc/amntrans/1999/99101228_pre_991021.htm (accessed 1 December 2012).
- 48 Allan Sekula, cited in Crossland, 'Of clues and signs', p. 72.
- 49 Telephone interview with FMR, 3 November 1999; and LWM statement, both in the exhumation notes of Nicky Rousseau & Madeleine Fullard.
- 50 TRC, *Report*, vol. 3, pp. 628–31, 667–8.
- 51 J. J. McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary Warfare* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966).
- 52 So-named after the small town from which they came, and which had become an important centre of rural resistance.
- 53 TRC, *Report*, vol. 2, pp. 227–8.
- 54 Domanska, 'The material presence of the past'; Crossland, 'Of clues and signs'; Fontein, 'Between tortured bodies and the resurfacing of bones'.
- 55 Domanska, 'The material presence of the past', p. 344.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Crossland, 'Of clues and signs', p. 75.
- 58 Rousseau, 'The farm, the river'.
- 59 Damanska, 'The material presence of the past', p. 340.
- 60 Gaston Gordillo, 'The afterlife of a sovereign corpse: Gaddafi', *Critical Legal Thinking*, 28 October 2011, available at <http://criticallegalthinking.com/2011/10/28/the-afterlife-of-a-sovereign-corpse-gaddafi> (accessed 1 December 2012).
- 61 TRC, *Report*, vol. 6, pp. 512–49. These figures are contested by the victim organization Khulumani, which – using a far wider definition of 'political' than prescribed in the TRC mandate requiring the act to be politically motivated and carried out by members or supporters of a bona fide political structure – has 6,800 people on its database of missing persons from the apartheid era. See www.khulumani.net/truth-a-memory/item/718-a-story-of-a-disappearance-resolved-mr-buti-mqakelana.htm (accessed January 2014).
- 62 Personal communication with Madeleine Fullard, head of the Missing Persons Task Team, a governmental, post-TRC unit responsible for investigations into unsolved TRC cases.
- 63 Such a point is part of a wider critique of initiatives, such as the TRC, that focused on a narrowly conceived understanding of political violence, ignoring the more systemic violence of apartheid.
- 64 TRC, *Report*, vol. 2, pp. 93–7, 144–54. South Africa's military forces were engaged in both a direct and a proxy war in Angola.
- 65 CASE, *The Role of Political Violence in South Africa's Democratisation* (Johannesburg: Community Agency for Social Enquiry, 2003); TRC, *Report*, vol. 3, ch. 2; Anthony Minnaar, *Conflict and Violence in Natal/Kwazulu: Historical Perspectives* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1990).
- 66 Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', p. 24.
- 67 TRC, *Report*, vol. 2, pp. 463–9, 605–10.
- 68 Ibid., p. 222.

- 69 Louise Flannagan, 'Covert operations in the Eastern Cape', in C. Schutte, I. Liebenberg & A. Minnaar (eds), *The Hidden Hand: Covert Operations in South Africa* (Pretoria: HSRC, 1998), pp. 213–22.
- 70 Ashis Nandy, 'Coming home: religion, mass violence and the exiled and secret selves of a citizen-killer', *Public Culture*, 22:1 (2010), 127–47, at pp. 144–5.
- 71 Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', p. 11.
- 72 Ibid., p. 25.
- 73 Included in documents associated with South Africa's chemical and biological warfare (CBW) programme were records of experiments into restricting the fertility of black people, as well as of contact with a British scientist regarding the development of a toxin that would target black people only. Also see Marlene Burger & Chandre Gould, *Secrets and Lies* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2002).
- 74 See Rousseau, 'The farm, the river', pp. 359–63, for elaboration of this point.
- 75 Feldman, 'Violence and vision', p. 27.

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