

REVIEW of

Matthew Krentz, *An Unofficial War: inside the conflict in Pietermaritzburg* (Cape Town & Johannesburg: David Philip, 1990)

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The war which has swept over much of the Natal Midlands since August 1987 has generated tens of thousands of reports in newspapers round the world, and, on a recent count, over a hundred articles in various periodicals. This work by Matthew Krentz, who is an academically trained political analyst, is the first book to be produced on the subject.

The author's stated purpose in writing the book is to try to capture in detail the impact which the war has had on the lives of the people caught up in it. He deliberately chooses to avoid the broader political issues. 'There is more to this fight than politics', he declares early on. For this reason his aim is 'to seek out the specific characteristics which together constitute the unique personality of this unofficial war' (1990:2).

So his book is explicitly concerned with description rather than analysis. In a series of short and usually pithy chapters, it covers a lot of ground and a lot of subjects. The reader is whisked at rapid pace from the streets of Pietermaritzburg's townships to the Taylor's Halt bus depot to Shongweni to Trust Food to Retief Street; from the comrades to the education crisis to funerals to the position of women to the role of the police.

The author is a sharp observer, and in many respects an informed one. His style is that of an alert journalist-cum-academic who has been into the field and who has also done a lot of homework on his subject. He writes lucidly, if at times irritatingly, as when he tries too hard for effect, or when the first person 'I' obtrudes too much into his account. He provides useful documentation of the behind-the-scenes work done by COSATU to bring court interdicts against Inkatha warlords; of interviews with several local Inkatha leaders; and of an interview with the head of the Pietermaritzburg security police. Overall, he succeeds in conveying to an outside readership something of the way in which the fabric of individual and community life in the Midlands has been destroyed by the war.

But the book leaves the reader - this one anyway - bemused and frustrated. Bemused because it is chronologically fragmented, and does very little to help the reader make historical sense of the series of verbal snapshots of which it essentially consists. The author writes of his own reactions when faced with a massive pile of documents on the war: '...reading it was a process of learning and forgetting simultaneously. Each incident super-imposed itself on the one

before, saturating the memory and numbing the senses' (1990:133). His own work - ahistorical and non-analytical as it is - produces the same kind of effect.

And frustrated because, in spite of being well aware of the broader political issues which have given shape to the scenes which he describes, the author avoids directly confronting them. At this point in the historiography of the war, and in the historiography of current Natal politics, for the writer of a book-length commentary on the vicious conflict in the Midlands to avoid analysis of the political forces which have caused and sustained it amounts to an abdication of responsibility. The business of explaining the war - its original causes, why it has persisted for so long, why it has reached such a pitch of violence - has become ideologically too important a matter to be ignored by any serious writer on the subject. In a revealing statement near the beginning of the book, the author tells his readers that he took up work on it in preference to working on the PhD which he had planned. One cannot help feeling that he was more interested in doing a New Journalism job on the war than in making an intervention in the crucially important - and heavily contested - process of explaining why it has taken place at all.

To be fair to the author, he does not set out merely to exploit the sensational side of the war. Implicit in his account is the argument - which in this reviewer's opinion undoubtedly reflects the historical realities - that the war in the Midlands is primarily a conflict caused by the aggressions of Inkatha, backed by the South African state, against non-Inkatha communities. But this argument is made explicit only in the brief conclusion. Nowhere in the body of the text does the author attempt to use it to make some sort of meaningful pattern from the anecdotes and vignettes which follow one after the other. Readers can work through the book, shake their heads over the horrors which it touches on, and put it down without having been forced to engage with the broader issues which cry out for attention. In focussing on description and eschewing analysis, the book compounds the confusion about the causes of the war which has been created, deliberately or otherwise, by three years of newspaper reportage. In important respects it thus serves - even if unwittingly - to lend support to the ideological projects of the forces of conservatism and reaction in whose interests the war was started and in whose interests it continues to be fought.