

Review article

Jacob Dlamini (2014) *Askari: a story of collaboration and betrayal in the anti-apartheid struggle*. Auckland Park: Jacana

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With the publication of Jacob Dlamini's *Askari* the historiography of the South African post-apartheid transition has – in its own good time – come of age. Building on Dlamini's first book, *Native Nostalgia* (2009),¹ it also announces the arrival of perhaps our first major post-apartheid historian.

The post-apartheid transition has not lacked for chroniclers and analysts of various kinds. Unsurprisingly the political drama of the anti-apartheid struggle and the 'miraculous' (and inherently contested) achievement of a negotiated settlement generated a profusion of diverse historical accounts and assessments: investigative journalists such as Patti Waldmeir and Allister Sparks sought to unravel the 'inside stories' of the constitutional negotiations; in edited collections like Steven Friedman's *The Long Journey* and *The Small Miracle* political analysts, social scientists and constitutional lawyers provided detailed analyses and case studies of key events and aspects of the transition; a range of leading participants – from Mandela and de Klerk to Mac Maharaj and Niël Barnard – published their political memoirs or were the subjects of (authorised) biographies; commentators and analysts located the political transition in relation to the underlying structures and available options for the political economy. However, the post-apartheid transition still awaited its historians. There certainly were many and sustained attempts to elaborate and celebrate the master narrative of apartheid oppression and liberation struggle though more as a political and ideological project than as a critical interrogation of the historical evidence. By and large, historians have also tended to keep their distance from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) ambitious enterprise of 'dealing with

the past' focusing on victims and perpetrators of gross violations of human rights as an exercise of transitional justice and 'reconciliation'. But if they are no longer as committed to the 'radical' or 'liberal' frameworks which invigorated historical research and debates through the 1970s and 1980s, and sceptical of quasi-official attempts to recast history in the service of post-apartheid nation-building, historians have also not yet taken on the challenge of conceptualising alternative approaches which might open up new historical perspectives on the post-apartheid transition itself.

In this connection Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia* (2009), provided an intriguing and provocative exception. On the face of it, *Native Nostalgia* might appear a relatively slight and somewhat idiosyncratic work. By exploring the unlikely paradox that, without in any way denying the grim realities of oppression and exploitation, black South Africans do in fact also remember their lives in townships under apartheid with a certain fondness Dlamini posed a provocative challenge to the master narrative of black dispossession. His implicit and explicit target was the distorting fiction of 'homogeneous black suffering', ie that 'black South Africans lived, suffered and struggled the same way against apartheid' (2009:18, 21, 113, etc). As against the conventional struggle narrative he asserted both that 'black South African life is shot through with gender, class, ethnic, age and regional differences' (2009:18) and also that 'there were bonds of reciprocity and mutual obligation, social capital that made it possible for millions to imagine a world without apartheid'. On both counts the moral was that 'the freedom of black South Africans did not come courtesy of a liberation movement' (2009:13). Already in *Native Notalgia* Dlamini noted that his revisionist account challenged the conventional binary of heroic resistance to apartheid as opposed to dastardly collaboration: 'There was a fine line between resistance and collaboration. It was never simply a case of resisters on this side and collaborators on the other. Sometimes, the two were one and the same person' (2009:8). However, at this stage he did not yet put the phenomenon of collaboration centre stage. The monstrous figure of Joe Mamasela, who figured so prominently in the TRC hearings on apartheid death squads, got only a passing mention: 'Mamasela represents the spectacular side of apartheid. He represents police brutality, government death squads and state graft.... The truth is that the majority of black South Africans did not experience apartheid in its spectacular form' (2009:15). But with *Askari*, a more substantial and ambitious work, Dlamini has focused on the ambivalent and elusive phenomenon of collaboration as a central feature

of the post-apartheid transition, so bringing into perspective major neglected dimensions of that deeply contested history.

In the opening pages of *Askari* Dlamini set out the original scholarly approach and general interests of this ambitious new work: 'This then is a story about collaboration in apartheid South Africa.... The book looks at collaboration and complicity to see if such examination might yield new ways of approaching South African history' (2014:1-2). Rather than recounting once again the stark polarities of our history as a story of racial war, Dlamini is concerned to tease out the more elusive complexities and ambiguities of an 'unwanted and fatal intimacy' between black and white South Africans that 'built an insidious complicity into daily life' under apartheid and also informed the very nature of the anti-apartheid struggle (8). But if Dlamini's general topic is a critical analysis of apartheid as a hybrid regime greatly dependent on political collaboration, the book also takes the specific and different form of the biography of Glory Sedibe, a prominent MK commander and his 'conversion' from freedom fighter ('Comrade September') to apartheid agent, an archetypal 'Askari' who figured as state witness ('Mr X1') in a series of political trials against his former comrades during the late 1980s.

It must be said that as the biography of Glory Sedibe *Askari* it is not entirely successful; its strengths lie rather in the critical analysis and comparative discussions of the more general phenomenon of political collaboration and the moral ambiguities and tragic dilemmas of those who were caught up in the personal conflicts of a 'dirty war'. Certainly Dlamini has done a remarkable job in tracking down and assembling a rich array of detailed biographical material on Sedibe, rescuing him from historical obscurity. Sedibe is not a familiar or celebrated figure in the pantheon of ANC struggle history; while in exile he did not operate on the main stages of Lusaka or London but across the border in Swaziland and once he had defected to the South African security forces he was shunned as a pariah. Dlamini meticulously reconstructed his tortuous personal trajectory, both before and after his defection to the South African Police (SAP) in August 1986. It is certainly a dramatic and significant story. Growing up in the remote asbestos mining village of Penge, Sedibe had been one of the at that stage still tiny elite of Africans who completed their secondary education, matriculating in Pietersburg in 1973 and qualifying for university admission. His older brother, Kaborone, was a Black Consciousness activist, SRC president at Turfloop University and in 1976 incarcerated on Robben Island. Sedibe, though, did not proceed to university nor did he remain within the

folds of the BC movement. Instead he, like many others in the aftermath of the 1976 Soweto youth rebellion, went into exile and joined the resurgent ANC. As Comrade September he rapidly rose to take a leading position in MK; in 1978 he was sent for specialised intelligence training to East Germany and in 1983 for additional security training to the Soviet Union. In 1984, aged 31, the ANC appointed him head of military intelligence for the Transvaal, based in Swaziland where he had responsibility for cross-border operations. The great turning point in his life came in August 1986 when he was shopped by the Swazi police to the South African security forces, abducted and tortured by a death squad under Eugene de Kock, and defected to work for the SAP based at Vlakplaas from February 1987 as an Askari. Notoriously he appeared as an anonymous witness for the prosecution ('Mr X1') in a series of show trials including the Bethal trial. Along with other Askaris Sedibe and his wife and daughter settled in the new township Letlhabile near Brits and then, after he began working for Military Intelligence in 1990, in The Reeds, a neighbourhood in Verwoerdburg. This is where Sedibe died in March 1994, depressed and a confirmed alcoholic but in middle class comfort.

In reconstructing the obscure byways of Sedibe's life and times Dlamini tracked down a diverse range of official and other primary source material which had somehow survived the great 1993 purge of official security documentation. Incredibly these include the actual Security Police timeline and file on Sedibe beginning with the records of his interrogation and 'debriefing' following his abduction from Swaziland in August 1986. (Curiously Dlamini does not provide conventional archival references to this file, but merely lists it as 'a confidential source'). They also include the verbatim transcripts of Sedibe's testimonies as witness for the prosecution, 'Mr X1', in various political trials; transcripts of relevant TRC victims' and amnesty hearings (including that of the TRC hearing on Eugene de Kock's amnesty application for Sedibe's abduction); personal interviews with key ANC and MK members who worked with Sedibe as 'Comrade September' prior to his 1986 defection, as well as personal interviews with a number of those who knew him as a member of the Vlakplaas death squads and/or as an Askari in the service of the Security Police and later of Military Intelligence (including the notorious figures of Joe Mamasela, Albert Nofomela and Eugene de Kock); as well as biographical interviews with close family members, comrades and associates on different periods of his life from its rural origins in Penge to his final days in Verwoerdburg. Taken together this

constitutes a surprisingly extensive and detailed biographical data-set on what had previously been an obscure, if not entirely unknown, figure. Yet in Dlamini's treatment they do not really come together as a coherent and effective biography. One reason for this is structural: Dlamini does not recount Sedibe's life in proper chronological order. Thus chapter 1: 'The insurgent' deals with Sedibe's youth and the early period of his exile and trajectory within the ANC and MK, but we only get back to his hometown background in chapter 7: 'The village'. Instead the book is organised in terms of a series of thematic chapters. Chapter 2: 'The Askari' provides a general account of Askaris, mentioning Sedibe himself only briefly in its final pages; chapter 3: 'The farm' gives a background account of the origins of Vlakplaas and the major sources of South African counter-insurgency approaches; chapter 4: 'The choice' deals more specifically with Sedibe's 1986 abduction, torture and defection to the SAP. But chapter 5: 'The inferno' then provides a general and comparative discussion of the moral and psychological traumas of collaborators who were 'turned'; while chapter 6: 'The file' does not so much deal with Sedibe's security file on its own but considers it as a template for security files generally. Other chapters are respectively concerned with 'The oaths' (chapter 8), 'The show trial' (chapter 9), 'The archive' (chapter 11), 'The infamy' (chapter 12), 'The psychology' (chapter 13) in an admixture of some biographical references and more general comparative and critical discussions. The explanation for this hybrid approach evidently is that Dlamini is as much and more concerned with the moral and political dilemmas of collaboration as a general and comparative phenomenon than with the particularities of Sedibe's biography.

Considered as a biography, then, *Askari* is uneven and oddly unfocused. Above all, what is missing from it is any real sense of the voice and personal perspective of Sedibe himself. Having closely considered all Sedibe's extant utterances as well as a wide range of testimonies concerning him, Sedibe remains something of an empty cipher, an unknown quantity. Dlamini himself observes that Sedibe/Comrade September/Mr X1's voice can only be heard 'in snippets' throughout the book, but that is not just because he 'told so many lies that he cannot be trusted' (2). It is also because the historian Dlamini is not primarily concerned with the particularities of Sedibe's personality and narrative, but with the more general phenomenon of political collaboration. This is best illustrated when he comes to what he considered to be the core issue posed by and for Sedibe's biography: *why* did he switch sides? (4). How can we understand and explain that the

committed freedom fighter and MK cadre not only confessed under torture, providing vital information leading to the capture and/or elimination of his comrades, but actually defected to the enemy and in short order was prepared to give testimony as a witness for the prosecution in a series of high profile political trials? Evidently this must be a major issue for any biographical treatment of Sedibe. But it does not remain an unresolved mystery. In effect Dlamini provides a detailed and perceptive answer to his own 'core question' regarding Sedibe's defection, carefully setting out the circumstances of his capture and interrogation, the psychological mechanisms of intimidation and deception employed by de Kock, and the strategic dynamics underlying the interrogation process which constrained whatever 'choice' he might have had in the matter. Strangely, though, he does not recognise that he has answered his 'core question' as well as might be expected. Instead he repeatedly comes back to this question, terming it the familiar social science problem of 'agency and structure' (2) and insisting that 'human beings never stop being moral agents' (221, 234). But this amounts to a category mistake: these are general theoretical questions and normative principles which a particular biographical investigation cannot be expected to answer.

However, precisely these features which the biographical format struggles to accommodate actually turn out to be among the major strengths of this work. Considered not primarily as a biography of Glory Sedibe, but also and more generally as a critical and comparative investigation of the phenomenon of political collaboration under apartheid and in the context of the anti-apartheid struggle, *Askari* provides a wealth of perceptive insights and opens up important new perspectives amplifying and extending the prevailing narratives of the post-apartheid transition in significant ways. By recounting the history of apartheid and the anti-apartheid struggle as in key respects a story about collaboration and complicity, Dlamini effectively challenges the prevailing master narrative of a heroic struggle against apartheid oppression, and its counterpart of homogeneous black suffering, under the aegis of a hegemonic liberation movement. He achieves this in two complementary ways: on the one hand by a close and fine-grained analysis of the murky backwaters and obscure byways where the 'fatal intimacy' of guerrilla actions and counter-insurgency measures of South Africa's particular 'dirty war' were played out, and on the other hand by well-informed thematic references to a wide range of other comparative cases. Let us briefly consider these in turn.

First, the close-up investigation of the dubious netherworld of the

Askaris in its various local settings of the *Farm* (ie Vlakplaas, operating base for Eugene de Kock's death squads), the *Show Trial* (where they served as state witnesses against their former comrades) and the *Location* (ie Letlhabile, the new township where the Askaris resided and socialised). Apart from detailing the professional career of Sedibe himself as a bounty hunter, intelligence analyst and assassin within the National Security Management System (NSMS) (127), *Askari* offers a telling series of vignettes, 'a significant depository of voices from the "wrong" side of history, demonstrating that the men and women who first fought against apartheid – and then fought on its behalf – were all too human' (217). On Dlamini's account South Africa produced 'a wide range of collaborators, double agents, *izimpimpi* and turncoats throughout its history' (9) while the different ways in which they dealt with the 'broader context' of the political conflict force us to come to terms with the idea of complexity (221). A striking example was that of Francis Meli, one-time editor of the ANC journal *Sechaba*. At the time when Sedibe joined the ANC, the organisation was about to resume military operations inside South Africa with a campaign targeting collaborators. In the pages of *Sechaba* Meli played up reports of ANC assassinations of collaborators. Ironically it subsequently transpired that Meli had himself been an apartheid agent (135). A more tragic case is the story of Phila Portia Ndwandwe which came to light with a TRC exhumation in 1997. Ndwandwe was an MK insurgent who – when given the choice to collaborate and live, or refuse and die – 'chose' death. Ndwandwe's heroic choice has been celebrated, eg by artist Judith Mason in her triptych, 'The man who sang and the woman who kept silent', which was subsequently acquired by Albie Sachs for the Constitutional Court. However, Dlamini adds, the Ndwandwe's story was actually more complicated: 'it appears that the widely circulated story of Ndwandwe's final days is not entirely true. Ndwandwe did not die in silence.... Ndwandwe gave the police new information about MK operations and confirmed details already known to the police. But when asked to become an informer (she refused).... She collaborated but refused to become a collaborator' (228). Phila Portia Ndwandwe did not entirely fit the template of being a heroic martyr to the cause of the liberations struggle, but she was also not an *Askari*. Dlamini explores the psychological complexities and moral ambiguities of a range of other figures with whom Sedibe interacted in this *Askari* milieu: Tlhomedi Ephraim Mfalapitsa, Oscar Linda Moni, Chris Mosiane, Judas Mpho Tladi, Steven Mbanda, Goodman Twala, TF Makuleni, etc, as well as the better

known Albert Nofomela. He fleshes this out with accounts from previous generations such as that of Bruno Mtolo, who had been the state's star witness in the 1963-64 Rivonia trial against Mandela and other leaders of MK, and Daluxolo Luthuli. In the post-apartheid aftermath he recounts the case of Peter Mokaba, charismatic leader of the ANC Youth Congress, who had been internally exposed to the ANC leadership as an apartheid agent, detained and probably tortured, but retained in his public ANC positions (254-5). A high profile case was that of the allegations against Bulelani Ngcuka, the director of National Prosecutions, that he had been an apartheid spy which surfaced in the Hefer Commission's inquiry during 2002 (253). Such cases raise the issue of the unresolved legacies of a history of collaboration as part and parcel of the post-apartheid settlement: 'Instead of allowing for a full reckoning with the messy business of collaboration, South Africans have allowed the secrets of the past to gain an afterlife. Instead of the nation using the secrets of the past to come to grips with the pervasiveness of complicity, some are using these secrets to fight contemporary political battles' (250).

In the second place, Dlamini regularly steps back from the particular South African cases to provide a more general and comparative perspective on the political murder and mayhem wrought by the Askaris. As a historian he has not only made excellent use of the rich archive generated by the TRC process, but he has also mastered the comparative literature on counterinsurgency, 'dirty wars', and transitional justice. This allows him to place the South African version of 'total war' against the 'total onslaught', including Magnus Malan's 'oilspot' policy and Eugene de Kock's appropriation of Rhodesian counterinsurgency techniques, in the context of security theorists like Huntington, Beaufre, McCuen and Kitson (65, 103f). He locates Sedibe and other Askaris in the context of Argentinian activists turned by the junta into collaborators such as Munu Actis (*That Inferno*, 2006),² Chilean socialists-turned-DINA-collaborators like Luz Arce and Marcia Merino (*The inferno* 2001)³ as well as Stasi collaborators in East Germany and even Afrikaner *hensoppers* and *joiners* during the South African war, or Arab Harkis who fought with the French against Algerian independence (99-102, 228-34). As the titles of the testimonies of these collaborators indicate they share an experience of moral and personal purgatory, a contemporary approximation of Dante's inferno. More generally Dlamini makes good use of a diverse range of philosophical analyses and relevant social research: Sartre's theoretical analysis of French complicity

with the Nazi occupation, Tina Rosenberg's distinction between 'criminal regimes' and 'regimes of criminals', Elaine Scarry's account of the phenomenology and dynamics of torture, Milgram's disturbing experiments on obedience to authority as an explanation for political atrocities, etc. This enables him to provide an incisive account of, eg, the different levels of collaboration involved in Adrian Leftwich's betrayal of his African Resistance Movement comrades to the South African security police in 1964: Leftwich had not merely caved in all too soon when confronted with threats of torture in detention; astonishingly he had actually participated in prior experiments by the social psychologist Kurt Danziger which exposed his own vulnerability to just such pressures – and had then persisted with covert insurrectionary activities, predictably betraying his comrades when apprehended (240-6).

This comparative perspective on collaboration also results in a critical re-appraisal of the South African TRC process. Significantly the TRC largely by-passed the many and crucial roles of collaborators and informers in its investigations of gross violations of human rights under apartheid and in the course of the anti-apartheid struggle. Historically this was a remarkable and even inexplicable oversight: in post-World War II retributive justice processes, and again in more recent post-Communist transitions in Eastern Europe, collaborators and informers figured prominently as a central issue in 'dealing with the past'. But the TRC's primary, and often exclusive, focus was on the victims and perpetrators of human rights abuses, not on collaborators or informers. In Sedibe's case, too, the TRC Amnesty Committee 'treated him as nothing more than a victim of state-sanctioned apartheid violence' (15) ignoring both his major role as an MK commander prior to 1986 and his actions as an Askari after he was turned. At best the TRC flagged the issue of collaboration 'but could not face it, locked as the Commission was into a moral framework in which the story of apartheid was one of victims and perpetrators' (253). For Dlamini this raises the unresolved issue of lustration. Apartheid South Africa had been served by a vast network of collaborators and informers but somehow the figures of the collaborator and/or informer did not become a comparable symbol for the criminality of apartheid as they did in the case of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. The TRC even managed to pass over the phenomenon of the Askaris as beyond its mandate. Dlamini concludes by raising both the issue of political collaboration as part of the post-apartheid settlement: 'Should South Africans push for disclosure about collaboration? Should we be asking who, besides the Askaris, collaborated with the apartheid state and in what ways? Should

we be purging our public life of known and suspected collaborators? ... Together with the “sunset clause” which guaranteed public servants their jobs and pensions in return for supporting reform, South Africans seem to have let apartheid collaborators slip seamlessly into the new order’ (258-9).

But if Dlamini is critical of the TRC and its limitations in dealing with the issues of collaboration in general, and with the role of the Askaris in particular, *Askari* is nevertheless an effective demonstration of the value of the TRC-generated historical archive itself. In terms of its mandate the TRC may have been too narrowly focused in its definition of gross human rights violations so that it could not do proper justice to major dimensions of apartheid rule and/or anti-apartheid resistance, including the role of collaborators and informers, but even so the TRC hearings and amnesty process generated a wealth of material relevant to these. Often reading against the TRC grain, Dlamini has demonstrated how this archive can be made to yield significant answers to questions which the TRC itself did not set out to ask. More recently he has extended this perspective to underlying issues in the historical process of Zulu ‘nation-building’ and the current politics of president Zuma and the Nkandla scandal (‘Collaboration and the riven truth behind Zuma’s Nkandla’, *Business Day*, July 27, 2015). Evidently this post-apartheid historian has found his subject and we may confidently expect the development of a significant oeuvre taking that forward.

Notes

1. Jacob Dlamini (2009) *Native Nostalgia*. Auckland Park: Jacana.
2. Munu Actis, Christina Aldini, Liliana Gardella, Miriam Lewin and Elisa Tokar (2006) *That Inferno: conversations with five women survivors of an Argentine torture camp*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP.
3. Luz Arce and Stacey Alba D Skar (2001) *The Inferno: a story of terror and survival in Chile*. Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press.