

12 *Waking the Dead: Civilian Casualties in the Namibian Liberation Struggle*

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Prelude

One day in early January 1984, an old Ford truck set out from Ruacana. Twenty-five workers stood crowded in the back. After travelling just five kilometres from the small town the truck drove over a double landmine. The explosion left a huge crater in the ground and immediately killed ten of the people in the truck, whilst another six were severely injured, losing hands, arms and legs. None of the names of those who had died were provided in the press coverage of the incident.¹

On 23 January 1988, four young people were driving a Toyota Hilux van near their home when a unit of the Koevoet paramilitary police unit opened fire on their vehicle riddling it with bullets and totally destroying it. Cornelius Nghipukuula, aged 27, was killed immediately and two of the other occupants were wounded. The three survivors were told to report to the police station the next day to pay a R100 fine as an ‘admission of guilt’ for driving during a curfew.²

These were just two incidents amongst many that occurred during the Namibian war of independence in which the casualties were not soldiers, but civilians. Yet the absence of the names of those killed in one of the largest landmine explosions that took place during the war seems symptomatic of the way in which civilian victims of the war remain unrecognised in accounts of the liberation struggle.

Introduction: War Monuments and Peace Memorials

It is generally argued that there is a simple difference between monuments and memorials: monuments celebrate victory, whilst memorials are more concerned with reflection and remembrance and are, therefore, more likely to encourage reconciliation. However, war memorials tend to focus on remembering the sacrifice of soldiers, rather than the other victims of war, civilians – the ‘collateral damage’ as it is termed in the language of the twenty-first century that dehumanises and falsely sanitises the horror of war.

Throughout the world the focus of the heritage that commemorates war is on the military. However, Michael Rowlands has argued that ‘one of the features of nationalist

1 ‘Landmine Blast That Killed Ten’, *Windhoek Observer*, 14 January 1984, p. 7.

2 Chris Shipanga, ‘Curfew Claims More Lives in the Far North’, *The Namibian*, 29 January 1988, p. 5.

war memorials has been their capacity to turn traumatic individual deaths into acts of national celebration and heroic assertions of collective values' (Rowlands, 1999, p. 129). In Namibia, a massive heritage project, for a small country, has been the construction of Heroes Acre (essentially a memorial graveyard containing the virtual graves of early leaders of anti-colonial resistance and the actual graves of selected leaders who have passed away since Heroes Acre was opened in 2002). The dominant figure at the site is a huge statue of a soldier, carrying an AK-47 and throwing a hand grenade. Funerals provide an opportunity to celebrate the lives of individuals and use the eulogies on their lives to assert collective values and a national identity. Heroes Acre not only contains military leaders, but also civilians who are considered to have contributed to the struggle for independence.

Critics have contrasted the focus at Heroes Acre on a few individuals with the 'democracy of death' planned in the South African equivalent, Freedom Park, in Pretoria which will attempt to name and remember, as far as possible, all those who have been killed as a result of past conflicts in the country. It can be argued that a monument such as Heroes Acre located, as it is, in Windhoek, far from the regions where much of the fighting took place does not provide an adequate site of remembrance for the thousands of people who lived in the war zone in Namibia and were killed during the conflict.

In defence of Heroes Acre, it might be argued that this is not its intended purpose, but that in the pursuit of nation-building there is a conscious effort to forget the suffering of the past and to celebrate the triumph of the liberation movement. Michael Rowlands has argued that 'Triumphalism . . . achieves this through the assertion of collective omnipotence and by banishing from memory those acts of humiliation when the nation failed to protect its own young' (1999, p. 131). Memories of the feared knock on the door at midnight, the horrific images of cars and bodies randomly ripped apart by landmine explosions, the cries of the children caught in the crossfire of war. These are the memories that most people would probably want to banish from their minds, but they are also the reality of a war which has left profound physical and mental scars on Namibia and Namibians. Indeed the absence of a detailed account of the impact of the war on the civilian population of Namibia may result in a version of the war that downplays the terrible impact of the conflict inside Namibia.

At present it is not even known how many civilians died during the war. Efforts have been made to document the names of those who suffered in the struggle but, to date, it has only been the names of the soldiers on both sides that have been remembered and memorialised. SWAPO published a book in 1996 entitled *Their Blood Waters Our Freedom*, which contains the names (or combat names) of 7,792 members of PLAN (the People's Liberation Army of Namibia) who died during the liberation struggle. The memorial list not only includes those who died in combat, but also those who died in car crashes and other accidents.

On the other side in the liberation war, the South Africans were able to more publicly acknowledge their military dead during the war itself. A monument was erected in Tsumeb in July 1981, with the following inscription in Afrikaans 'Tsumeb commemorates its fallen whites who died as a result of terrorism'.³ White SADF soldiers

3 Engel Nawatiseb, 'Shrine Causes Stir in Tsumeb', *New Era*, 27 January 2006.

were often flown to South Africa for burial, but the deaths of black soldiers fighting in SWATF and Koevoet were not so publicly commemorated or buried. Indeed there were reports that in some instances Koevoet and PLAN fighters were anonymously buried together in mass graves.⁴ Today the South Africa War Graves Project has created a web site that lists the names of each and every South African soldier who died during what is dubbed the ‘South West Africa Border War’ – a total of 2,365 names. It is interesting to note that the figure contrasts significantly with the 715 members of the security forces that Willem Steenkamp claims were killed during the ‘Border War’ in a book published towards the end of the war (1989, p. 185). Furthermore it seems that whilst this list includes those who died in the South African army from all races (and clearly includes those from 32 ‘Buffalo Battalion’), it may not include the considerable number of people who served in the South West Africa Territorial Force (SWATF), the notorious counter-insurgency police unit (*Koevoet*) or those who served in various paramilitary organisations such as the Ovamboland Home Guard or as bodyguards.⁵

In contrast to these military lists no list has yet been compiled bearing the names of civilians who died during the war. Indeed the only figure that has been suggested can be found in Steenkamp’s book where he claims that 1,087 civilians died between 1981 and 1988. His book was published in 1989 and so does not include figures from the final months of the war and he claims that the statistics for the period 1966-1980 were not available. Steenkamp also claims that his, unreferenced, statistics demonstrate that the majority of civilian deaths were ‘... killed by mines PLAN had laid’ (1989, p. 235). It is in this context that the ‘Civilian Casualties Project’ has been conceived and initiated.

An Overview of the Civilian Casualty Project

The Civilian Casualties project had very limited objectives, mainly because it had very limited resources. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission spent three years gathering information and had dozens of researchers. In our project two researchers, Dr Jeremy Silvester of the Museums Association of Namibia and Dr Martha Akawa of the History Department at the University of Namibia, spent just 18 working days. We also benefitted from the hard work of two student assistants, Ms Romie Nghikulwa and Ms Helena Showa.

Most of the time was spent conducting an initial survey of newspaper coverage of the war, although we were also able to consult some official inquest files. We have been able to cover the period 10 December 1959 to 30 April 1989. The newspaper coverage and inquests have enabled us to identify 1,278 individual war-related civilian deaths to date. The project has produced two products. Firstly, we have compiled five files listing, in alphabetical order, individual cases. Each case consists of an information cover

4 Oswald Shivute, ‘11 More Graves Found’, *The Namibian*, 25 November 2005.

5 One of the few remaining traces of those who died fighting on the South African side during the war that remains in Namibia is the derelict graveyard at the old ‘Buffalo’ base of the 32nd Battalion in the Kavango East Region, which contains a large number of unnamed graves. Isaaskar Haikaere, Kletus Likuwa, Shampapi Shiremo and Jeremy Silvester, *Heritage Hunt Report for the Kavango Region*, 3rd Edition (unpublished report), Windhoek: Museums Association of Namibia and National Heritage Council, 2010, pp. 122-126.