

Kasrils, Ronnie. 'Armed and Dangerous': My Underground Struggle Against Apartheid. Oxford. UK: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1993.

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In an earlier article in *Conflict Quarterly*, (Winter 1993, p. 75), I noted that it seemed unlikely that senior security commanders on either side of South Africa's clandestine struggle would be writing their personal histories "at least in the foreseeable future." But, even at that point, one of the key figures in the African National Congress (ANC)'s underground struggle, Ronnie Kasrils — since appointed South African deputy defence minister by President Nelson Mandela in July 1994 — was doing just that.

For readers looking for a first-time "behind the scenes" view of the efforts and sacrifices made in the underground struggle against apartheid, Kasrils' memoirs are an interesting and well written read. He had been one of the original members of the ANC's MK underground guerrilla force when it was formed in 1961, rising to be head of its Military Intelligence in 1984, as well as being a member of the secretive South African Communist Party — "the Party" — since 1961. For researchers and observers more knowledgeable on South African affairs, there will be considerable interest in the intriguing "Party" spins given to a variety of issues and events — and often with a "red herring" thrown in as well — which Kasrils repeatedly offers up. Even so, it is his background of separate but associated memberships in the various ANC, MK and SACP structures that make this book informative, and provides at least two levels at which this "personal history"¹ can be read.

First, there is the level of personal recollections of his own, his family's and his friends' long and sometimes fatal struggle against the South African apartheid regime and its repressive security forces. While he writes of "so many deaths of lovable friends" (p. 233) in the underground struggle, Kasrils also writes from the perspective of one who had a "good war" — in that he had exciting adventures "in the shadows" and lived to tell of them. In fact, his recollections and constant referrals to press headline labels attached to his name, such as the "Red Pimpernel," might lead readers to compare his memoirs to Charles Dickens' hero in *A Tale of Two Cities* — perhaps intentionally.

In Part I, Kasrils traces his early years in Johannesburg and his steps in joining the ANC's MK underground propaganda/sabotage cells in the early 1960s, leading to his escape into exile in 1963. He goes on to describe in Part II his years in exile from 1963 to 1989, which included his clandestine activities in London and military training in Odessa (USSR), conducting clandestine operations from ANC headquarters in Lusaka (Zambia) and the MK camps in Angola, undertaking repeated infiltration missions into South Africa via Botswana and Swaziland in the 1980s, and helping set up the Operation VULA "internal structures" project within South Africa in the late 1980s. Part III discusses his open return to South Africa in 1990, when talks about a political transformation in the country began in earnest, and his subsequent "hide-and-seek" activities with the government security police until 1993.

Despite the number of years, the variety of countries and the huge number of people involved, Kasrils quotes detailed and lengthy conversations held years and decades before as if he was "relying as yesterday." (p. 352) While some parts of his book read like "diary entries" and letters to his wife, other parts tend to jump from topic to topic within a few lines. These detailed "recollections" and "topic jumps" in effect amount to a checklist for rebuking criticisms and condemnations of the ANC/SACP exile leadership's actions. Another disingenuous aspect of this "personal history" level is his habit of suggesting that he was distrustful of future ANC "traitors" (such as Bruno Mtsholo) and even successful government spies and infiltrators (such as Craig Williamson) even *prior* to them being discovered by the ANC security structures.

With the sense that his many anecdotes are "carefully" chosen to project a specific perspective or spin on a situation or event, the book appears less as a "personal history" and more as a "Party" history and justification of its underground activities. At this second level, Kasrils deals with a great number of issues and events over which the ANC's exiled leadership have been criticized — by those whom Kasrils refers to as "armchair critics," (p. 165) a label that could be quickly extended to any critical observer. While there is not the space to highlight the spin he places on various issues and events, it is possible to cite some of the key ones for readers to look for.

For example, while the armed struggle was necessary, Kasrils slides over the fact that it did not get

beyond the stage of "armed propaganda," (p. 206) despite years of talking about a "people's war." While he outlines the military training and strategy received from various communist states regarding a protracted guerrilla struggle (e.g., Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, Algeria, etc.), he notes in another section that the major mobilization of the population took place in the urban townships and *not* in the rural black areas or even along the border infiltration routes, (p. 244) He repeatedly mentions spectacular MK bombing operations, while providing little context. For example, he refers to the MK bombing of the SADF Air Force headquarters (p. 226) with no mention that the MK car bomb went off in downtown Pretoria on Klerk Street (a main street outside the HQ building) and resulted in the deaths of several blacks. He offers a brief discussion of the debate regarding soft (civilian) and hard (military) targets, then vaguely concludes that "we stress the need for disciplined operations against clearly defined targets." (p. 248) He points out that the ANC's National Executive Committee (NEC) called on South Africans in 1985 to "[m]ake apartheid unworkable and the country ungovernable," (p. 227) then during the townships revolt "unreservedly condemned the practice of 'necklacing' (execution by petrol-filled tire), (p. 247) Although a particularly brutal form of street execution, fear of it eliminated the security police's infamous informer networks and the lack of grass-roots intelligence was a major factor in making the black townships into "no-go zones."

In the area of ANC intelligence operations, he cites a number of successes in establishing ANC/MK military intelligence gathering structures, including recruiting a dozen "moles" and "sleepers" amongst the government's SADF Permanent Force members (pp. 261-67) and some Europeans and North Americans for intelligence operations within South Africa itself. And he goes on to discuss how the MK provided invaluable intelligence to "our allies in the Frontline States" on the strength and movements of SADF conventional ground and air forces, (p. 266-68) This intelligence sharing presumably included neighboring FLS governments, other African liberation movements, Cuban combat forces, Soviet Bloc advisors, etc.

Regarding the SACP's relationship with the Soviet Union, Kasrils states that "the Soviet Union did not control or direct us." (p. 273) Yet the vast majority of the funding, military equipment and training came from the Soviet Union, even to the extent of completely paying for the Party's Sixth Congress in Moscow in November 1984. (p. 227) And, with the hindsight of the demise of the Soviet and Eastern European communist regimes, he does acknowledge that SACP members had done no critiques of those socialist countries and their internal contradictions, (pp. 37 and 134) Similarly, he down-played the SACP's relationship with the ANC and the MK when, for example, he suggests that Operation VULA was an ANC project rather than a SACP project — when it made little difference since almost all of the principal figures were SACP members in addition to having separate ANC memberships.

While this book is *not* a "Party" history of the armed struggle, it will fill that slot until one is written. And, though it is detailed in parts, it is surprisingly vague in others — even including positions that Kasrils held and events (with their places and dates) where he was involved. As I have suggested previously, "personal histories" of clandestine operations in Southern Africa need to be read in conjunction with a well-detailed book. In the case of Kasrils's ANC/MK/SACP clandestine background, readers should have a copy of Stephen Ellis and Tsepo Sechaba's *Comrades against Apartheid: The ANC and the South African Communist Party in Exile* (1992) close at hand. In the end, Kasrils' book should be judged in the same way that he himself argued "a person should be judged according to the cause which they serve." (p. 290)

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