

*Section Three:*  
*Firearms and a Culture of Violence*  
*in South Africa*

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*Chapter 5*

*Weaponry and the Culture of Violence*  
*in South Africa*

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*Introduction*

**I**t is the main contention of this chapter that violence in Southern Africa is identity-based. The situation is aggravated by the legacy of thirty years' war in the region, a legacy which has three elements. The first, the ideological legacy of war, embodies a culture of violence that legitimates violence as a solution to conflict and a crucial means of obtaining and defending power. The second, the material legacy of war, involves a proliferation of small arms. The third, the social legacy of war, encompasses a disruption of social relations and the creation of antagonistic social identities. Together these three elements form a lethal mix; small arms provide the power to express social antagonisms in violent ways.

The implication of these processes is that the problem of violence has a social dimension; it is connected to social relations, values, beliefs, practices, and – most importantly – to different social identities. The demand for weaponry is socially constructed and embedded in a 'gun culture'; the supply is socially organised. The solution goes beyond state policy: it includes the alteration of the meanings, allegiances and identities which underlie acts of gun violence.

*The Culture of Violence*

Among South Africans, both young and old, white and black, there seems to be a widespread conviction that violence in some form or another is

ineluctably present in human affairs. There is a tendency to see violence as either biologically determined, in the sense of being intrinsic to the human condition, or socially determined, in the sense of being an inevitable aspect of social change. In this connection, Lenin's dictum, "violence is always the midwife of the old society,"<sup>1</sup> is often quoted, or Bukharin's statement (quoted by Lenin) that "a revolution cannot be accomplished without terror, disorganization, and even wanton destruction, any more than an omelette can be made without breaking the eggs."<sup>2</sup> In line with this is the intellectual trend to romanticise violence stretching from Sorel through to Sartre and Fanon, who stress the liberating and cathartic impact for colonial subjects of exercising violence, a notion echoed in the Pan Africanist Congress slogan: "One settler one bullet."

The view of violence as inevitable feeds into a world view which regards violence as a legitimate solution to conflict and problems. This normative framework is termed a 'culture of violence'. It shapes social life and is embedded in social interactions. Many young South Africans have been so exposed to violence that it has become accepted or 'routinised'. Common incidents of extreme violence include experiencing or witnessing assault, murder, police shootings and forced removals. For this reason, it has been argued that the term 'post-traumatic stress disorder' (PTSD) is a misnomer in the South African context. People living in Gauteng townships during the 1980s were subjected to continuous traumatic stress and manifest many of the PTSD symptoms.<sup>3</sup> Thus the culture of violence is connected to deep psychological processes which will be very difficult to dislodge.

Focus group discussions with young people from various communities in the Southern African region suggest that this culture of violence has five main characteristics. Firstly, 'violence' is extremely loosely defined; it is not limited to direct damage to persons or property; on the contrary, it is very broadly defined to include structural violence, meaning the injustice of exploitative laws and practices. Forced removals and the high infant mortality rate among African children in rural areas during the apartheid era have been cited as examples of such structural violence. Secondly, there is an emphasis on the repressive violence of the apartheid state. Extensive police shootings, assassinations and detention without trial have been cited as examples of how the apartheid state relied on repressive violence to maintain its authority. It has often been noted that many of the agents of

such repressive violence are still active in the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). Thirdly, resistance against the repressive violence of the state is viewed as legitimate. From 1961 onwards the armed struggle was an important part of the African National Congress (ANC) strategy for bringing about change in South Africa. Among many young people, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) soldiers and leaders, such as Chris Hani, are heroised, and the episodic military actions of this group are eulogised. Fourthly, the distinction between ‘criminal’ and ‘political’ violence is blurred. To several young black informants, theft from whites is defined as ‘repossession’ and viewed as totally legitimate, especially if the criminal act is motivated by poverty. White informants have stressed the incidence of gratuitous violence in such criminal acts more than black informants have, and are more condemnatory.

This points to the fifth element of the culture of violence: the linkage to various elements of identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender and nationalism. Violence is legitimate when used against those defined as ‘outside’ the boundaries of group identity. This link between identity and violence is crucial.

### *The Link between Violence and Identity*

In this chapter, the concept of ‘identity’ is grounded in social relations. It is argued that identity is neither fixed and essentialist, nor completely fluid and shifting, but rather historically and socially constructed in changing processes of social interaction. Identity depends on a sense of difference which distinguishes ‘us’ from ‘them’. All identities operate through exclusion. The lines of ‘difference’ imply the boundaries of identity. It follows that collective identities are defined negatively; that is to say against others. But, as Hobsbawm has written, “most collective identities are like shirts rather than skin, namely they are ... optional, not inescapable. Most identity groups are not based on objective physical similarities or differences, although all of them would like to claim that they are ‘natural’ rather than socially constructed.”<sup>4</sup>

Discussions of collective identities and difference need to be linked to an analysis of power relations; of how some social categories have the power

to define difference as deficiency or threat. Ignoring difference perpetuates these unequal power relations. A crucial related question is how difference and identity are transformed into antagonism. Freud once suggested that the smaller the real difference between two peoples, the larger it loomed in their imaginations. According to Ignatieff, “[i]ts corollary must be that enemies need each other to remind themselves of who they really are.”<sup>5</sup> A dehumanisation or demonisation is sometimes employed to make outsiders properly hateful or despicable so as to legitimate violence against them.

The process of identity formation in modern society has been linked directly to violence. Edward Said writes, “One belongs either to one group or to another ... one acts principally in support of a triumphalist identity or to protect an endangered one.”<sup>6</sup> He concludes, “while it would be a mistake to ascribe all ... violence to ... identity-demands, it would be an even graver mistake to ignore the process altogether.”<sup>7</sup>

This chapter will demonstrate that much violence in the Southern African region is linked to identity. Many different identities are impregnated with violence, for example, that of soldier or ‘freedom fighter’. Other identities legitimate the possibility of violence, as in ethnic mobilisation or in patriarchal definitions of a man as ‘protector’ and ‘defender’. Violence has been used to strip individuals of alternative identities; for example, it has been documented how Renamo sometimes forced its conscripts to kill family members – in particularly horrific ways in Mozambique – to strengthen their attachment to the guerrilla group.<sup>8</sup> Further, the chapter will argue that part of the solution to gun violence involves recasting the relation between guns and social identity. The logic of this will be demonstrated in relation to a particular weapon – the Kalashnikov assault rifle, known as the ‘AK’.

### *The AK-47 – Contested Social Meanings and Identities*

The Kalashnikov assault rifle is not just a gun; it is “the most potent symbol of conflict and violence in the closing years of the 20th century.”<sup>9</sup> Since the AK first went into production in 1947, some seventy million have been manufactured. Described as the most effective assault weapon in the world, it has changed the way wars are fought forever. What requires emphasis is

that the AK is invested with powerful symbolic force. This is true, too, of other types of weaponry, for example, the tank is one of the century's most potent global symbols – a symbol of the repressive power of the authoritarian state – a point illustrated by events in Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968 and Tiananmen Square in 1989. Similarly, the machine gun represented the power of the imperial armies. The AK is an icon of the anti-establishment insurgent, the symbol of revolutionary resistance.

Especially during the apartheid era, for many young black South Africans, the AK became a mythic icon, a marker of group identity; a kind of code for asserting one's political allegiance that carried great significance for individuals. At this time, the AK was an important ingredient in the state's portrayal of the ANC as a demonic force. The extent of this demonisation is suggested in a quotation from a police source warning of an ANC action that would involve "7 000 local saboteurs and gorilla [sic] fighters."<sup>10</sup> Part of this process of demonisation involved stressing the relationship between the ANC and the USSR – and the AK provided the link. The AK was the bearer, the material evidence of the 'communist onslaught'; it was constantly described as "a Russian made" weapon, and there were frequent references to "Russian arms and ammunition" in the state-controlled media, as well as in media displays of captured weapons. This was the evidence to support the apartheid regime's assertion that resistance to apartheid was not indigenous, but inspired and supplied by the USSR. Thus, the identity of this gun marked the identity of the Russian demon-terrorist.

Ironically, supplies of thousands of AKs were an important part of the undeclared war of destabilisation that was directed against neighbouring states externally, and against the ANC internally, by the apartheid regime itself. They were included among weapons which were supplied to Unita in Angola, and Renamo, as well as to Inkatha in South Africa. Almost 40 000 AKs, for instance, were purchased by the apartheid state from Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary and China between 1976 and 1986 specifically to be given to Unita.<sup>11</sup>

Informants stressed that the AK is attractive for a number of reasons: firstly, it is relatively cheap. In Namibia, Angola and Mozambique one can be bought for less than US \$15, or for a blanket or a bag of maize, or even some second-hand clothes. In South Africa, the going price can be as high as

R1 500, so there are substantial profits to be made.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, the AK is extremely robust; it has only sixteen moving parts, is easy to maintain, durable and rarely breaks down. It is also easy to operate, which makes it particularly suitable for the numbers of child soldiers in the world. For all these reasons, the AK has an appeal for criminals and has become a powerful symbol of criminal lawlessness. Criminals and terrorists or revolutionaries and freedom fighters – these are the contested political identities that are condensed in the image of the AK-47. And these contestations run deep. South Africa is not a consensual society; there are no shared maps of meaning.

Current media accounts of gun violence involve fragments, what Gramsci termed ‘traces’ of knowledge that have acquired the status of ordinary ‘commonsense’ and are part of the attempt to impose order and meaning on our experience. In these media accounts, the reaction to gun violence reflects a number of distortions concerning the AK. Despite the popular view, the AK, when compared to pistols and revolvers, is not the most commonly used weapon in violent crime. For instance, in 1995, high-calibre automatic weapons, such as AKs, were used in only 6% of the murders reported in that year. Admittedly, this represents an increase from 1992, when less than 3% of all murders were perpetrated with such guns. However, these figures would suggest that the obsessional focus on AKs in the contemporary South African media is an ideological hangover from the demonisation of MK guerrillas during the apartheid era.

This discussion of AKs treats gun violence not as a uniform, undifferentiated phenomenon but as a relation, the relation between gun violence and the response to gun violence. In other words, this chapter is concerned with both the incidence of gun violence and the social reactions to it. These reactions reflect how the transition from authoritarian rule in South Africa has created a deep well of social anxiety, as the familiar social identities and traditional practices have been disrupted and breached. One consequence of this social anxiety is, as Stuart Hall has written (albeit in a different context), the “emergence of a predisposition to the use of ‘scapegoats’ into which all disturbing experiences are condensed ...”<sup>13</sup> In the South African context, two categories of such scapegoats occur: the former combatant and the illegal immigrant. Much press coverage of gun violence reflects a sense of blame and indignation towards these social

categories. In the vocabulary of social anxiety, former combatants and illegal immigrants are easy symbols of menace, social dislocation and threat.

The policy solution generated by this anxiety – the tightening up of border security to block illegal immigration and prevent the smuggling of guns by Mozambican former combatants – is inadequate. Effective policy solutions have to include an understanding of how guns are invested with powerful social meanings and linked to contested social identities. The present romanticisation of the AK and other firearms is, in part, the historical legacy of colonial conquest and revolutionary struggle in Southern Africa. This legacy includes antagonistic social identities and a culture which regards violence as a legitimate solution to conflict and a crucial means of both obtaining and defending power. The material legacy of war includes a proliferation of small arms.

### ***Gun Violence and the Crisis in the South African Social Order***

Gun violence, as Hall argued about the social phenomenon of ‘mugging’ in British society in the early 1970s,<sup>14</sup> serves as the articulator of the crisis in the South African social order in the 1990s. The gun is a symbol of our failure to build a secure society, as is indicated by the facts listed below:

- Twenty-eight people are, at present, killed with firearms every day in South Africa.
- Guns were used in approximately 40% of all murders in 1995.
- Guns were used in 79% of all robberies in 1995 (representing an increase of 160% over 1994).
- A total of 15 778 guns were reported stolen or lost from private individuals in 1995.

In 1996, this figure rose to 17 400 – and this refers to only private licenced individuals. Reliable information on the numbers stolen from the SAPS and SANDF is still difficult to access.<sup>15</sup> Many of these figures are contested, since they are the products of a very flawed process of official data collection.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the level of violent crime and conflict linked to the proliferation of guns in South Africa threatens the consolidation of

democracy. However, many policy solutions are flawed by the absence of a sociological analysis of these issues.

The proliferation of the means of violence is one of the most distinctive features of contemporary South African society. This ‘diffusion’ of arms suggests the dispersion and recirculation of arms through multiple channels to all levels of society. The social categories involved with small arms include not only criminal networks and political groupings with paramilitary formations, but also sportsmen, including hunters, mercenaries, self-defence units, the security forces, citizens and private security firms. These overlapping social categories include very different people; no homogeneous category of gun owners. What is argued here, however, is that small arms are often the basis of a militarised identity that is lethally connected to culture, gender, ethnicity, race and nationality.

### *The Socially Constructed Demand for Small Arms*

The research on which this chapter draws includes in-depth interviews with informants from the diverse and overlapping social categories that create a demand for small arms. But analysing gun violence as a social phenomenon involves more than exploring individual biographies, motives and meanings; exploring gun violence as a social phenomenon also involves examining the diverse social practices built up around guns. Collectively, these constitute a robust ‘gun culture’ in contemporary South Africa. This gun culture feeds into and reinforces the culture of violence. It is not a fixed, an historical, essentialist entity, but a set of highly heterogeneous resources which are used selectively by members of different social groups. Overall, this culture operates to provide a social sanction for the possession of guns, with much gun violence following culturally defined repertoires of behaviour.

The values, social practices and institutions which together constitute this gun culture include what Raymond Williams calls ‘consumerist militarism’.<sup>17</sup> It involves the normalisation – and even glorification – of war, weaponry, military force and violence, through television, films, books, songs, dances, games, sports and toys. Toy guns are a significant

component of this culture – a total of forty-eight different varieties of toy guns were on offer at a Johannesburg outlet in December 1996; for R120 you could buy a model of the American automatic assault rifle, the M-16. Significantly for the argument about difference and identity, this toy was advertised as an ‘alien blaster’.

This gun culture is exemplified in war games, such as paintball, which has become increasingly popular among white South Africans since 1985. “At its core paintball simulates killing. The fundamental sequence of play involves hunting other men, aiming a gun at them, pulling the trigger, and making the kill.”<sup>18</sup> During the eighties in Johannesburg, one of the paintball ‘battlegrounds’ which the predominantly white, male players could choose was called ‘Soweto’.

All of these cultural forms constitute a kind of ‘banal militarism’ which operates near the surface of social life. Embedded in everyday activities, it works through prosaic routines and rituals for making war, weaponry and violence appear natural and inevitable. One informant involved in this ‘gun culture’ spent much of his leisure time playing paintball, practising at shooting ranges, and cleaning and ‘stroking’ (his word) the twelve guns which he owned. This behaviour is chillingly reminiscent of that of the killer responsible for the Dunblane massacre. However, as stated earlier, this gun culture contains a highly heterogeneous set of resources; it does not only operate to glamorise war and weaponry, but also to ‘normalise’ these social practices. Part of this normalisation is the notion that private gun ownership is legitimate; it is a right, not a privilege.

A key institution which promotes this notion is the South African Gunowners Association (SAGA). In 1995, SAGA organised 14 410 petitions to the Constitutional Assembly stating that the *Constitution* should be amended to recognise the right to own firearms and to place a limitation on government’s power to disarm the civilian population. SAGA maintains that the anti-gun lobby’s emphasis should not be on guns; it should be on people. Guns are to crime as cameras are to pornography, yet they do not ban cameras.

This notion that private gun ownership is legitimate is linked to the belief that guns are an effective and necessary form of protection. Yet, the gun

combines two contradictory images – it is a means both of order and of violence; paradoxically, it is believed to provide protection from violence through the potential threat of violence. This belief has become part of a wider social process: since the 1980s, in South Africa there has been a privatisation of security, as increasing numbers of citizens have lost confidence in the capacity of the state to protect them, and have come to rely on individual gun ownership, diverse forms of vigilantism and private security arrangements. A common theme articulated by many informants who had purchased guns for self-protection was a sense of being powerless; of being victims of social forces beyond their control. But the psychodynamic power of the gun as protection is largely illusory – legally owned weapons contribute to the problem of violent crime.

The great majority of crimes committed with firearms are committed with either legally owned weapons used for an illicit purpose, or weapons that have been stolen from their legal owners. It follows that the distinction between legal and illegal weapons is a dubious one: guns are long-life commodities and their change in legal status does not affect their lethal power. The legal supply of small arms is generally the seedbed of illegal flows. The fact that over 20 000 licenced firearms may have fallen into criminal hands last year dramatises the dangerously self-contradictory potential of guns as a means of individual protection.

This paradoxical nature of guns as protection is illustrated in the case of one source who was attacked and had his own gun held to his head. Now he is paying R600 a month to an armed response company, is erecting an electric fence around his house and is buying more guns: “I am upgrading my weaponry. I used to carry a .38 revolver, but I am now awaiting a light and reliable automatic handgun to wear all the time.” Evidence exists – ironically from the US – that people are safer without guns. Epidemiological research there has established that a gun in the home is forty-three times more likely to kill a member of the household than to kill an intruder.<sup>19</sup>

While the gun culture here is extraordinarily resistant to such evidence on the illusory nature of guns as protection, it has not yet reached the depths of the US experience, though there are disturbing parallels.

## *The Connection between Gun Violence and Gender Identity*

The sociologist, James Gibson, has identified a highly energised, new paramilitary culture in contemporary America which he relates to a crisis of identity among American men.<sup>20</sup> Many South African white male informants articulated their own lack of confidence in the government and the economy, and seemed uncertain of their future, in relation to political change generally and affirmative action policies specifically.

Both white and black male informants are also troubled by changing gender relations. In South African society, there has been a reconfiguration of the discourse on gender since 1990 and women are presenting a challenge to customary male behaviour. Among diverse categories of men there seem to be different versions of a ‘crisis of masculinity’, which reflects a social dislocation and confusion about their gender identity. Such a ‘crisis of masculinity’ was identified by Campbell in her analysis of Natal violence. She relates increasing violence to an erosion of traditional male identity. In explaining how working-class African men “learned to kill”, she pointed to factors such as unemployment, low wages and the marginalisation of older men in political struggles and community decision-making. These were all factors which they felt had eroded their masculinity, fostering a gender identity which legitimated violence.<sup>21</sup>

Men, as William Beinart has written, are “the primary agents of violence in most societies.”<sup>22</sup> Of course, violence is not an exclusively male practice, but for men, in particular, it is bound up with their identity. Guns are part of the dominant masculine code in many different cultures in the region, underscoring qualities of dominance, aggression, toughness and strength.

There are many different institutional sites which construct gender identities, including the family and the school. One of the most important institutions in which masculinity is formed and linked to violent behaviour is the army. Both the conventional army of the SADF and the guerrilla army of Umkhonto we Sizwe were crucial in shaping the identities of many young South African men. Many of them were mobilised in terms of a militaristic nationalism; they were taught a competence with small arms and other weaponry, and an ideology which views violence as a legitimate solution to conflict and a means of both obtaining and defending power.

The SADF was an important source of ideas about the behaviour appropriate to white South African men. A number of SADF conscripts have emphasised that the core of military training was to inculcate aggression and equate it with masculinity. They report that the army cultivated a form of masculinity that involved insensitivity, aggression, competitiveness, violence and the censure of emotional expression.<sup>23</sup> Many thousands of white South African youths were exposed to such messages about their gender identity.

Not only SADF and MK soldiers articulated a gender identity that engendered a militarised masculinity. Many young South Africans understand weaponry as emblematic of manliness; this militarised masculinity cuts across diverse cultures as the following statements illustrate:

- “A Zulu man without a traditional weapon will be regarded as a half man. In my village a man has to carry a weapon even if he goes to the shop, so that everybody should see that it is a man that is walking” (Zulu migrant).
- “The call to ban the bearing of weapons is an insult to my manhood. It is an insult to the manhood of every Zulu man” (King of the Zulus).
- “The Boer and his gun are inseparable” (Afrikaans resistance leader, Eugene Terreblanche).
- “I joined the SAP [police] so that I could get a gun and feel like a proper man” (white former SADF conscript).

To a diverse number of young South African men, guns are a sign of status, and signal a particular style. For example, many members of organised crime syndicates in Soweto ostentatiously displayed firearms to indicate the status of being a ‘big man’.<sup>24</sup> However, the style that guns signal is not restricted to political allegiance or criminal defiance. Guns are also a form of social display which can signal male affluence. As one informant from the Indian community of Lenasia expressed it, “If you have a BMW, a cell phone and a glamorous woman, you’ve got a lot; if you’ve got a gun as well, you’ve got everything.”

This militarised masculinity evokes an ambiguous response from women. In South Africa, increasing numbers of women are purchasing guns which could indicate that a male style is being homogenised and spreading more

widely. To some informants, gun ownership among women represents an assertion of a feminist identity. A South African female firearm trainer argues that “we have come through the sexual revolution to be regarded as equals. We have lost the male protector. Women have to take responsibility for their own protection.”<sup>25</sup> She advises on how “women can carry guns for self-defence and still look feminine, sexy and demure.”<sup>26</sup>

This kind of thinking is partly a response to an increasing tendency for women – in both the United States and South Africa – to be the victims of gun violence. Of the 36 000 rapes reported last year, increasing numbers involved firearms, as did domestic violence generally. (Unfortunately, however, there is no official police data to support this.<sup>27</sup>) One of the female informants linked gun ownership directly to her feminist identity as an independent woman. She maintained that owning a gun (which she wore tucked into the back of her jeans) made her feel powerful, self-reliant and independent. To a number of female informants, guns are invested with a sense of power and strength. A working class woman who lived with her mother and sister in Soweto maintained that she had to have a gun (which cost over R 1 000) because “we don’t have a father. I am the one who has to make sure that everything is all right at home.”

The gendered nature of gun violence is significant; but gender, class, race and ethnic identities are inseparable; they construct and reinforce each other. Much gun violence relates to deep-seated fears and insecurities that are grounded in racial and ethnic identities which are antagonistically defined.

### ***The Connection between Gun Violence and Ethnic Identity***

Ethnicity is neither immutably ascribed (the primordialist logic), nor is it susceptible to unfettered manipulation by human agents (the instrumentalist logic). Ethnic identities are social constructs which emerge in a process of social interaction. Ethnic identity is not inherently conflictful; it is politicised ethnicity, the mobilisation of ethnicity to secure economic and political goals, that is divisive. At present, for many South Africans, ethnic identities are, however, the strongest source of social cohesion and deep cleavages and ethnic antagonisms remain. The mobilisation of ethnicity to

secure economic and political goals by Inkatha, for instance, has deepened animosities along ethnic lines, and the supply of weaponry enables these animosities to be expressed in particularly lethal ways.

During the 1990-1994 period, violence between hostel and township residents on the Reef, south of Johannesburg, involved a crystallisation of ethnic identities. This was the result of the deprived and socially precarious lives lived by hostel residents. These residents obviously had multiple identities such as migrants, workers, men, family members, blacks and, mostly, Inkatha members – in addition to being Zulus. Under the impact of a deep-rooted insecurity and sense of threat, however, ethnicity became a ‘defensive, survivalistic identity’.<sup>28</sup> The manipulation of these ethnic identities by the apartheid state only deepened animosities along ethnic lines. This process became linked to the culture of violence and the availability of small arms, as many Reef hostels became both armouries where weapons were stored, and ‘factories’ where they were manufactured.<sup>29</sup> The same relation between insecurity and ethnic mobilisation became evident in right-wing Afrikaner groups during this period, some of whom formed armed paramilitary organisations. In the case of both Afrikaners and Zulus, ethnic identities stressed community and continuity.

Each of these different collectivities manifests an ethnic identity that is both militarist and masculinist. For example, the appeal made by King Goodwill Zwelethini was to “brothers born of warrior stock.” Mare points out that this militarist idea of manhood defines the essence of Zuluness.<sup>30</sup> And access to weaponry gives this definition a lethal potential.

### *The Connection between Gun Violence and Political Identity*

The availability of guns encourages militant political groups to engage in violent rather than democratic opposition. In 1996, for the first time, guns, rather than any other weapon, were used to kill people in political conflict between ANC and Inkatha supporters in Natal.

The proliferation of small arms has made smaller scale political conflicts, such as that between different student groupings, lethal. For instance, between 1993 and 1996, the PAC-aligned Pan Africanist Student

Organisation (PASCO) and the ANC-aligned Congress of South African Students (COSAS) engaged in violent conflict which left at least twenty high school pupils dead and scores of others injured.<sup>31</sup>

### ***The Connection between Gun Violence and Racial Identity***

Political, ethnic and racial identities are closely connected. Race has been the foundationalist concept in South African history. The notion of maintaining white minority rule mobilised a racial identity which has legitimised the majority of killings in South African history.

Some of the worst gun violence in history, such as the random killing of twenty-three black people by Barend Strydom in 1988, is explicable partly in terms of this lethal mix of access to weaponry, gender identity and racial antagonism. Barend Strydom maintained that racial difference defined the boundaries of human identity and humane treatment.

The contested notion of non-racialism offers an alternative interpretation of difference and identity and has been linked to an inclusive ANC nationalism. Yet, nationalism also involves identities which may legitimise violence made potentially lethal by guns.

### ***The Connection between Gun Violence and National Identity***

Nationalism as an ideology involves two claims: firstly that, while men and women have many different identities, it is the imagined political community of the nation which provides them with a primary, fixed and categorical form of belonging that trumps all other sorts of identities; secondly, that violence is justified in defence of one's nation against enemies. Of course, there is another paradoxical relation here: nationalism is persuasive because it both legitimates violence and offers protection from violence. This connects to nationalism's two faces: the one of group identity, solidarity and inclusion; the other of exclusion.

Until very recently, the nation was the main vehicle of warfare. National identity involved the gender-specific obligation of military service and was

the chief justification for participation in lethal combat. However, today, as Ignatieff has argued, an ethnic nationalism is the main source of contemporary violence; it is what he calls “a language of belonging and blood.”<sup>32</sup> He distinguishes it from civic nationalism, meaning a shared attachment to certain political institutions and laws.<sup>33</sup> In contemporary South Africa this ethnic-nationalist identity is being contested in the name of a more inclusive civic national identity which defines a common citizenship.

Less often contested is the connection between this civic nationalism and militarism. Even the most inclusive statement of a common South African identity – that of Thabo Mbeki marking the adoption of the *Constitution* in May 1996 – involved his invoking the militarist image of his identity as, “a foot soldier of a titanic African army, the ANC.”<sup>34</sup> This is partly a legacy of the apartheid era, when citizenship involved national military service for white males, and blacks were denied access to weaponry, a denial which was articulated by Z K Matthews to involve both a denial of African manhood and of citizenship.<sup>35</sup> The outcome of this historical legacy is a militarised citizenship and militarised masculinity which will be very difficult to dislodge. However, this is not as extreme as the ideology expressed in the American bumper sticker: “An armed man is a citizen, an unarmed man is a subject.”

The purchase of small arms by increasing numbers of black South Africans is thus a perverse indicator of changing power relations. Given that many of these guns are extremely expensive, the changing racial nature of legal gun ownership also points to the rise of a new, black middle class.

Despite the highly gendered and racialised nature of gun ownership, a statement by a former member of the Self-Defence Unit points us to a crucial aspect of the solution to gun violence in South Africa – the creation of new, demilitarised social identities that are sources of affirmation. Now part of the Daveyton Peace Corps, this young man commented, “I was really disappointed at not getting a gun when I first joined the Peace Corps in 1994.” But, he went on to say, “after a while I realised that I did not need a gun ... I now know that the community needs ... and values us.”<sup>36</sup>

## *Solutions to the Problem of Gun Violence: The Creation of New Social Identities*

To reiterate, the argument presented here is that the demand for small arms is socially constructed and embedded in various social practices and cultural forms. Guns are connected to various overlapping social identities, particularly those defined by gender, race, class, age, political affiliation, nationality and ethnicity. All of these are strong representations of common interests and bear within them powerful mobilising sentiments. They are all relational identities: they involve boundaries demarcating ‘us’ from ‘them’; they mark lines of exclusion and difference which perceptions of external threat and access to weaponry make potentially lethal.

In political terms, gun violence is ultimately about the contestation of power invested in these identities. The relation between power and violence is another ambiguous one. “Political power”, claimed Mao, “grows out of the barrel of a gun.”<sup>37</sup> Often, however, this means the obverse of moral authority and political legitimacy. Paradoxically, the perpetrators of much criminal violence, such as robbery and carjacking, belong to marginalised and powerless social groups to whom guns represent the power to enforce compliance.

The core of the argument propounded here is that any solution to the proliferation of guns has to deal with these social relations and contested identities. At present, the state has established a number of structures to come up with policy proposals for reducing the number of firearms available to the general public. But a control policy that ignores the historically and socially constructed meanings attached to firearms will not be effective; we need to alter the allegiances and identities which underlie acts of gun violence. Contemporary social relations and identities have been centrally shaped by the legacy of war in the region. The proliferation of small arms is one material legacy of war; antagonistic social identities and a culture of violence are part of its ideological legacy.

Former combatants are often perceived as the direct bearers of both these material and ideological legacies: they are marked by their experience of war, their training in the means of violence, lack of marketable skills and access to weaponry. Demobilisation has rarely involved either effective

disarmament or effective social integration, in the sense of restoring former combatants to their communities with demilitarised social identities that involve access to employment and supportive social networks. Instead, many former combatants throughout the region have reported a sense of marginalisation and social dislocation. The incidence of banditry means that they have become the scapegoats for much contemporary social anxiety about gun violence. This stigmatised social identity creates a dangerous vicious circle. Of a sample of 180 former combatants surveyed, 72% reported suffering from severe personal problems of either an emotional, physical or social kind, while only 11% reported receiving any kind of help with these problems.<sup>38</sup> Frelimo former combatants in impoverished Mozambique admit that “guns can mean food [and] a way to survive.” This points to the importance of addressing material factors, of linking disarmament to development.<sup>39</sup>

Former combatants, however, are only part of the problem. The failure to provide for the effective social integration of such former combatants, in the sense of restoring them to their communities with demilitarised social identities which involve access to employment and supportive social networks, is only one symptom of the broader failure to create a common society and a new collective identity for South Africans. To do so requires confronting the legacy of war through an indigenous demilitarisation movement. At present, this exists in embryonic form, in organisations such as Gun Free South Africa (GFSA) and Cease-fire. However, the movement is marked by a social shallowness, being extremely small, fragmented and mainly white and middle-class. This movement is demanding a shift of power and resources away from the military and is challenging militarist values and social practices, especially the notion that guns are socially acceptable.

A limited process of state demilitarisation has been under way in South Africa for some years. However, policy solutions that are overtly statist ignore the plurality of institutions and social relations with which the state must engage. The process of demilitarisation needs to go beyond the restructuring of state institutions, forming a much broader project of social transformation. This transformation involves confronting the antagonistic social identities that are part of the legacy of war and armed conflict in the region, and delinking guns from ethnic, racial, political, national and gender

identities. Uncoupling militarism from masculinity, for instance, is a challenge Virginia Woolf posed, sixty years ago, when she asked: “[h]ow can we alter the crest and spur of the fighting cock?”<sup>40</sup> There is an urgent need to create new, fresh identities that overturn the present relation between different social identities, small arms and violence. There is also an urgent need to uncouple ‘difference’ from a sense of threat; to replace intolerance with an appreciation of difference and diversity. Finally, new sources of morality and normative controls are required, to replace the culture of violence with a world view that emphasises tolerance, respect and the peaceful resolution of conflict.

The social category that the culture of violence is most deeply rooted in is the youth. In the past, many young people were deeply invested with the identity of ‘comrade’, involving intense moral commitment on their part. As Jeremy Seekings has written, “the identity of a ‘comrade’ in the struggle against apartheid widely involved a particular sense of morality, of a selfless commitment to the empowerment and improvement of the ‘community’.”<sup>41</sup> This points to a tradition which could be mobilised to create an active, non-violent, democratic citizenship, a new civic identity that couples rights to responsibilities.

Without the creation of these new identities which are embedded in the cultures of peace and human rights, the control of small arms will not eliminate violence – the use of the ‘necklace’ in the South African liberation struggle has illustrated only too well what may be done by people whose sole weapons are petrol and matches.

### *Endnotes*

The main source of data for this chapter comprises eighty semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key informants involved in the supply and demand for small arms in the Southern African region. This research strategy was adopted to avoid the tendency of questionnaires to fracture experience, as respondents are encouraged to reduce their experiences and understandings to fragments which can be captured in a question-and-answer format. The interviews were conducted in South Africa and Mozambique between 1994 and 1997. Since they are referred to throughout this chapter, they will not be noted again in the endnotes. The chapter also draws on primary material obtained in three focus groups conducted with students at the University of the Witwatersrand during 1996.

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