

# Winning the Hearts and Minds

Legitimacy in the Namibian border war

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

Since counterinsurgency theories agree that the objective in an insurgency war is the support of the population, a focus on winning their hearts and minds (WHAM) makes intuitive good sense. The British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya continues to serve as an example of how an insurgency may be defeated by winning the hearts and minds of the people. However, a reinterpretation of the British Malaya campaign by Paul Dixon (2009:368) showed that it was in fact highly coercive and sparked my interest in the subject of WHAM. Specifically my question was: does WHAM work at all? It proved to be the starting point for the research for this thesis.

The reasons for choosing the Namibian<sup>1</sup> border war as a case study were twofold. The first one being that it was an example of a recent counterinsurgency (1966 - 1989) where great effort was put into winning the hearts and minds of the people. The second reason was personal. Having grown up in South Africa and therefore being a native speaker of Afrikaans, this would facilitate my access to those who were involved in the war. In addition my husband, who served in the South African Defence Force and spent six tours of duty in Namibia, was an instant source of valuable information.

The research was informed by three questions. A first question concerned the purpose and doctrine that underpinned efforts of the South African Defence Force (SADF) to win the support of the people. A second question was how WHAM strategies were implemented, and third, what sort of problems were encountered. During the research it became clear that many former members of the SADF regarded legitimacy, or lack thereof, as a serious problem for the South African authorities. Some of them were of the opinion that South African legitimacy was too compromised for WHAM to make any difference at all, and that the Namibian conflict was a colonial struggle that would not be over until the hated oppressor was thrown out. Others thought that although the SADF efforts at

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of the war Namibia was still known as South-West Africa. The name was changed to Namibia by the UN Security Council in 1968 and officially became the Republic of Namibia in 1990. Throughout this document the name Namibia will be used.

WHAM were comprehensive and sincere, and might well have been successful in the long run, they were hampered by problems that undermined the South African authorities' legitimacy.

Since legitimacy constitutes a belief within members of society that there are adequate reasons to voluntarily cooperate with authorities (Tyler 1997:323), this provided a link to WHAM doctrine, the essence of which is that authorities must provide the population with reasons to voluntarily cooperate. This leads to the premise that legitimacy is central to the long-term success or failure of WHAM. The concept of legitimacy has therefore been employed as an analytic frame by which to analyse and interpret the data gathered during the research. The purpose of this thesis then is to examine the role of legitimacy in winning the hearts and minds of the population during the Namibian border war.

The relevance of the subject lies in the fact that the concept of legitimacy has been largely overlooked in counterinsurgency (COIN) theories and that it may provide a better understanding of the complexities that underlie cooperative behaviour in insurgencies. Of secondary relevance is that the research adds to the body of historical knowledge on the Namibian border war, which to date has focused mainly on details of military strategies and operations, and not on the role of the population in the war. Finally, the South African effort at WHAM may have lessons to teach in contemporary conflicts such as Afghanistan, where the allegiance of the population remains an elusive goal.

### *Chapter outline*

Chapter 2 provides a short overview of the background against which the Namibian border war took place. A description of the territory, specifically the operational zone and its population, is followed by the history leading up to the war and the broad outlines of the conflict.

Chapter 3 examines South African COIN doctrine in regard to the international, political, military and WHAM challenges that faced the South African authorities. As well as the doctrine, this chapter describes its implementation and offers the interviewees' assessment of problems that arose and the success of the WHAM effort. Chapter 4 first examines the theoretical assumptions that underpinned WHAM doctrine and, since the interviews indicated that the problems that were encountered stemmed from a lack of legitimacy, the chapter relates counterinsurgency and WHAM doctrine to different dimensions of legitimacy. It follows with a short discussion on the salience of legitimacy in situations where insurgent coercion prevents the population from cooperating with authorities.

Chapters 5 till 8 delves deeper into the problems that were identified during the interviews. Chapter 5 and 6 rely largely on documentary research to outline a context of historical grievances and South Africa's international lack of good standing. Chapter 7 deals with the lack of unity of effort that was seen to hamper WHAM efforts, especially between the SADF and the political authorities, the administrative authorities and the police force, but also within the SADF itself. Chapter 8 examines how factors like ethnicity, culture and race shaped the preconceptions the South Africans had about the Namibian population, as well as their expectations of the outcome of the elections upon Namibia's independence.

Finally, Chapter 9 offers a conclusion of the findings of the research and examines their relevance to the current conflict in Afghanistan.

### *Methodology*

The field work for this thesis was preceded by exploratory interviews with experts on the background of Namibia, the Namibian border war, and the role of South Africa. Apart from delving into memoirs that have appeared since the end of the war, as well as the historical and military literature, my preliminary research included scrutinizing the known sources of South African doctrine at the time.

Field research was done over a period of three months in South Africa. In the first place I was able to access the archives kept in the Documentation Centre of the SADF in Pretoria, where many documentary sources generated by the SADF during the war were available or could be declassified upon request. This provided important insights into South African doctrine, specifically as it regarded WHAM.

In the second place I recorded in-depth interviews with twenty-nine former members of the SADF. These ranged from military leaders to troops and some of them were interviewed more than once. Where distances were insurmountable, five former SADF members agreed to answer questions by email. I also conducted expert interviews with South African academics and writers who have published on the Namibian border war or the SADF. This included interviews with seven staff members, some of them retired, of the South African Military Academy in Saldanha. In finding candidates for interviews I was assisted by Dr. Abel Esterhuyse,

also of the Military Academy. Further candidates were reached via the ‘snowball’ method, whereby interviewees often suggested candidates of interest and then made the first contact.

Another source of data was the Missing Voices – Oral History Project of the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, where I had access to transcriptions of sixty-three recorded interviews with former SADF members on their wartime experiences. Finally, since virtually every South African man between the ages of forty and sixty served in the SADF, most of them for two years, informal discussions provided a constant source of new angles and information.

Interviews and analysis progressed in a cyclical manner, where typically after about five interviews a first analysis of the data would be done. This helped me to detect patterns, themes and new angles for subsequent interviews. The centrality of legitimacy was discovered in this manner. After completing the field work, the data was coded with Weft QDA, an open source program for qualitative data analysis. This allowed me to categorize the data into overarching themes, and showed up interesting deviations from the general views of the interviewees.

During the interviews the reliability of the data was guarded by frequently affirming my understanding of interviewees’ answers. The validity was protected by sounding out my initial interpretation of the data during the expert interviews. My husband played an important role in this as well. A possibility that I had to reckon with is that the interviewees might be intent on protecting the image of the SADF by avoiding certain topics. I addressed this potential pitfall by introducing sensitive subjects by a short summary of different statements I had heard, and asking the interviewee’s opinion on the matter. This indicated that I already had some knowledge on the subject, and generally succeeded in eliciting frank statements.

Finally, since the interviews and documentary sources were predominantly in Afrikaans, I took care to translate the quotations used in this thesis as accurately as possible. In this regard it must be noted that the concept of ‘winning hearts and minds’ was known by various names, such as *burgersake* (civic action), *komops* (communication operations), *ploeg en plant* (plow and plant) etc. Although the word WHAM does not appear in any document, and was hardly used by the interviewees, I have translated the various Afrikaans terms consistently with WHAM.



## Chapter 2 Background of the Namibian war

This chapter offers a short overview of the background against which the war in Namibia took place. A description of the territory, specifically the operational zone and its population, is followed by the history leading up to the war. Finally the broad outlines of the war are sketched.



(World Map Now 2010)

### *Territory*

Namibia has an area of just under 825.000 km<sup>2</sup>, four times the size of the United Kingdom. The war was almost wholly conducted along its northern border with Angola. Although the central parts of Namibia, where the capital Windhoek and other sizable towns are located, at times suffered bomb attacks or landmine explosions, it was predominantly the northern population who suffered the day to day effects of the war. Geographically speaking this northern region is a vast area, from the western-most point on the Atlantic Ocean to the far eastern point of the Caprivi strip or panhandle, a distance of roughly 1.500 km.

To the far west lies Kaokoland, an inaccessible, mountainous area that is home to nomadic pastoralist tribes. To the east of Kaokoland lies Ovamboland, home to the Ovambo people comprised of seven tribes of which the Oukwanyama are the most populous. The Ovambo people are the largest ethnic group in Namibia. Ovamboland is a semi-arid region of flat plains covered by low shrub and occasional trees. To the east of Ovamboland lies the Kavango, a forested region separated from Angola to the north by the Okavango river. The Kavango people belong to five different tribes. Finally the Caprivi strip, a stretch of 450 kilometres along the border and thirty to one hundred kilometres wide, can be divided in a western and eastern part. In the western part live the San, a nomadic people. The Caprivians living in the eastern part are related to the Lozi people of Zambia. The eastern Caprivi is flat with marshes, dense forests and river vegetation (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2010).

At the time of the war, Namibia's population size was 852.000, corresponding roughly to one person per square kilometer (CS Personnel 1976:11). In 1970, according to a census by the South African Bureau of Statistics, the population figures for ethnic groups directly or indirectly affected by the war were: Kaokoland inhabitants 7.000 (0.8% of the Namibian population), Ovambo 396.000 (46.5%), Kavango 56.000 (6.6%), Caprivi 29.000 (3.4%), San 26.000 (3.0%) (CS Personnel 1976:11). In total they represented 60% of Namibia's population.

### *History*

Namibia was a German colony from 1884 till 1915. The first war of resistance by inhabitants of the territory dates back to this time – the 1904 rebellion of the Nama and Herero tribes against

German colonial rule. During WWI the country was invaded by South Africa under the flag of the British Empire. In 1917 Namibia was classified as C-category mandate, to be administered as an integral portion of the mandatory state (League of Nations Covenant 1924). After Germany's defeat, South Africa was made responsible for the territory under a League of Nations mandate, which in effect meant that Namibia was henceforth administered as a fifth province of South Africa under governorship of an Administrator General.

After World War II South Africa applied for full incorporation of Namibia into the Union of South Africa. The UN instead preferred to place Namibia under its International Trusteeship System with independence as goal. South Africa refused to comply and went ahead with Namibia's integration. The white Namibian population was offered representation in the SA parliament and South Africa's apartheid policy was introduced in Namibia.

### *The war*

Resistance to the contract labour system that heavily exploited the Ovambo work force led to the formation of the Ovambo People's Congress in 1957, which in turn became the Ovambo People's Organization (OPO). In 1960 OPO reconstituted itself as the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO), thus broadening its appeal to all Namibia's inhabitants (Du Pisani 2000:63). SWAPO secretly started preparing for an armed struggle in 1961 and in 1965 its armed wing established a training base at Omgulumbashe in Ovamboland. SWAPO officially took up the armed struggle in July 1966. A month later, on 26 August 1966, the camp at Omgulumbashe was attacked and destroyed by the South African Police (Katjavivi 1988:59). This event is taken as the starting point of the Namibian border.

Initially the South African police was deemed to be able to adequately deal with the insurgency. However, as the SAP was also involved in Rhodesia, and as unrest grew within South Africa's own borders, the police was overtaxed. In 1974 the South African Defence Force formally assumed responsibility for the security of northern Namibia (Steenkamp 2006:11). After neighboring Angola gained its independence from Portugal in 1975, SWAPO was able to use Angola as a base for its military actions, leading to a significant escalation of its military

campaign. The conflict intensified, till at its peak, by the mid-1980s, over 100.000 troops under SA command were deployed in Namibia (Lamb 2006:32).

Under international pressure South Africa agreed to Namibia's independence early on (Kabinetsvoorligting 1981:4), but preferred a state model that would deny majority rule to SWAPO, who were perceived as communist inspired. A proposed solution was based on South Africa's domestic homeland policy of awarding autonomy to ethnic groups in selected regions. This was consistently resisted by SWAPO and the international community (Du Pisani 2000:65). In 1988 South Africa agreed to implement UN Security Council Resolution 435, which led to UN supervised elections in November 1989. The elections were won by SWAPO who took fifty-seven per cent of the vote.

## Chapter 3      Doctrine and Implementation – An assessment

This chapter examines the South African counterinsurgency in northern Namibia. More specifically it deals with the underlying doctrine and its implementation and offers an assessment of difficulties that arose from discordances between doctrine and the realities on the ground, as well as problems that arose from the implementation of the doctrine. The response of the South African authorities to the threats it perceived domestically and regionally drew largely on the work of three authors, Andre Beaufre, 'Pop' Fraser and John McCuen.

The work of author Andre Beaufre (1902-1975), an internationally recognized strategist who served as the director of the French Institute of Strategic Studies, informed the strategy that governed South Africa's response to the international, and especially communist, onslaught that was perceived to threaten the state. The Namibian war cannot be viewed in isolation of this background, since the international community had been closely involved with Namibia since first placing the territory under a South African mandate. The international context will therefore be briefly discussed in the light of Beaufre's writings, in particular his book *Strategy for Tomorrow* (1974).

In devising appropriate responses to the challenges in Namibia, the South African authorities drew on the work of C.A. 'Pop' Fraser and John McCuen. Fraser, a WWII veteran, became Chief of Joint Operations of the South African Defense Force in 1966. In an unpublished study entitled *Lessons learnt from past revolutionary wars*, released in the early sixties, Fraser distilled the basic principles of counterinsurgency warfare from the work of authors such as Galula and Trinquier. McCuen served in staff and command positions in the United States Army in Vietnam, Thailand, Germany and Indonesia. While serving on the U.S. Army General Staff in 1966 his book, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War - The Strategy of Counter-Insurgency*, was published.

The writings by Fraser and McCuen were disseminated to military command and staff at the SADF training institutes. During the interviews they were frequently referred to as a primary

source of South African doctrine<sup>2</sup>. As Gen Chris Thirion, former Deputy Chief of Staff Intelligence, said: 'McCuen was our bible, and then we had Fraser as well', and Lt Gen Jannie Geldenhuys, Chief of the SA Army from 1980-1985 and of the SADF from 1985-1990, relates in his memoirs that he used Fraser's study to develop sound principles and a strategy of counterinsurgency (2007:64).

What then did the South African military learn from these writers? A shared point of departure is their agreement on the importance of winning the sympathy and support of the people upon whom insurgents depend for resources, intelligence, recruits and places of hiding. This is of interest to the topic of this thesis. However, since political and military aspects set the stage for the implementation of WHAM strategies, they will be dealt with first. In order then, a discussion of doctrine, its implementation and their effects as they relate to the international, political and military context and of the WHAM efforts initiated by the SADF.

### **3.1 International**

Beaufre identified the impact of modern mass media on national and international public opinion as a constraint on modern warfare (1974:3). He argued that since military successes of counterinsurgent forces are never decisive, this necessitates a total strategy involving among others the diplomatic domain (1974:39). Indeed, although the South Africans won all their military battles, they eventually lost the war to SWAPO on the world stage. South Africa seems to have neglected Beaufre's counsel on the importance of international public opinion. According to Ian Liebenberg, instead of trying 'to keep the UN out of the picture', South Africa

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<sup>2</sup> Author's interviews with Lt Gen Ian Gleeson (ret.), 9 March 2010, Pringle Bay; Lt Gen Joffel C.P. van der Westhuizen (ret.), 5 May 2010, Silverton; Maj Gen Chris Thirion, 13 May 2010, Pretoria; Maj Gen Chris van Zyl, 4 May 2010, Silverton; Brig Gen Gert Nel (ret.), 5 March 2010, Centurion; Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.) 3 March 2010, Centurion; Brig Gen Gert J.C. van Niekerk SM (ret.), 23 May 2010, Potchefstroom; Prof. Louis du Plessis (ret.), 8 March 2010, Goodwood; Prof. Deon Fourie, retired Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of South Africa (UNISA), 6 May 2010, Pretoria; Lt Col Sarel Karsten (ret.), 11 May 2010, Kimberley; Andre Kruger, 18 March 2010, Langebaan; dr. Ian Liebenberg, 16 March 2010, Saldanha; Col A.W. (Rusty) van Rooyen, 30 March 2010, Parow; dr. J.C. Kriek van der Merwe (Cmdt ret.), 26 May 2010, Centurion.

would have done better to actively pursue good relationships with the UN<sup>3</sup>. The South African response to international involvement is illustrated by a propaganda poster of the time, depicting the UN as a hyena with SWAPO suckling at its teat. By contrast, SWAPO exploited international public opinion to obtain material and diplomatic support from the international community, and to improve its stature in the eyes of the Namibian population.

### 3.2 Political

Fraser and McCuen state that counterinsurgency involves an interlocking system of political, economic, administrative, police and military efforts. Consequently, the overall direction of a counterinsurgency war belongs with the civilian power, and the armed forces are but one of many instruments at its disposal. The war is thus twenty per cent military action and eighty per cent political (Fraser:2-5). In this respect McCuen refers to Mao's dictum that 'the Party commands the gun' and furthermore states that unity of purpose and effort is paramount, so that an action in one of the domains should be carefully coordinated with and weighed against its effects in other domains (1966:71).

According to the interviews, in the Namibian war these principles were not met. Control was nominally in the hands of the South African civilian powers, but they lacked a clear political direction. Deon Fourie, former professor of Strategic Studies at the University of South Africa said: 'I often heard the generals say "we told the government we cannot solve the problem for them. We can only hold the ford, the government must find a solution." They said: "if only the government would tell us what they want."'"<sup>4</sup>

Fraser also writes at length on the importance of establishing a cause that is more attractive than the insurgent cause. Important in the Namibian context, he states that a dilemma arises

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<sup>3</sup> Author's interview with dr. Ian Liebenberg, 16 March 2010, Faculty of Military Science, SA Military Academy, Saldanha.

<sup>4</sup> Author's interview with Prof. Deon Fourie, retired Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of South Africa (UNISA), 6 May 2010, Pretoria.

when the main cause of the insurgents is the overthrow of the current authorities, since the government cannot offer solutions that endanger its own position. The government must therefore offer internal autonomy or a variation of it, and insist on evolution in the calm of a peaceful situation (Fraser:8).

In agreement with these principles, the South African cause focused on offering autonomous rule to Namibia's ethnic groups, and the authorities had started the implementation of self-governing areas within Namibia (Du Pisani 2000:69). Accordingly, Gen Constand Viljoen, former Chief of the SADF, stated the South African cause as: 'self-determination within South Africa's economically beneficial milieu' and 'preservation of identity of all peoples of Namibia in one nation, without domination by the Ovambo majority.'<sup>5</sup> Gen Georg Meiring, also a former Chief of the SADF, summarized South Africa's cause like this: 'We [the SADF] will handle security until you [the population] can make your own decisions.'<sup>6</sup> However, in other interviews the opinion prevailed that compared to SWAPO's message of freedom and self-rule, the South Africans had little to offer. Maj Gen As Kleynhans said: 'South Africa did not nearly have such an attractive cause ... Our cause was: you have your own local government, what more do you want?'<sup>7</sup>

Having established a cause it must be reinforced with reforms that address legitimate grievances, which may rest on a history of colonial exploitation (Fraser:10). However, Prof. Kobus Kotze, formerly of the SA Military Academy, observed that 'it was politically incorrect to talk about the legitimate grievances of black people, for instance land ownership. The National Party did not want to hear about this. But you cannot argue away objective factors.'<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, South Africa did implicitly acknowledge the role of grievances by addressing some of them, for instance by abolishing the contract labour system and apartheid laws, as well as

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<sup>5</sup> Author's correspondence with Gen Constand Viljoen (ret.), 24 May 2010, Ohrigstad.

<sup>6</sup> Author's interview with Gen Georg Meiring (ret.), 12 May 2010, Silverton.

<sup>7</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen As Kleynhans (ret.) 20 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>8</sup> Author's interview with prof. Kobus Kotze, retired Professor of Military History and Military Strategy at the SA Military Academy, 18 March 2010, Saldanha.



instituting and supporting multi-ethnic political alliances (Du Pisani 2000:71). According to dr. Thean Potgieter, of the SA Military Academy, the effect was limited: 'The real problem was not addressed. The fundamental problem is that you need to find a political alternative ... in the end you just want to buy time. Why? Because you do not have political legitimacy.'<sup>9</sup>

Fraser also advises the authorities on dealing with the political arm of the insurgency movement. He states that the insurgent forces must be denied active leadership by banning their organizations, arresting the leaders and restricting their movements, as well as declaring a state of emergency at the earliest opportune moment (Fraser:13). Although SWAPO as a political party was never banned in Namibia, the South African authorities did issue proclamations that allowed repressive measures, such as detention without trial and the prohibition of meetings (König 1983:22-3), which in turn created new grievances and further opposition (Du Pisani 2000:70).

Finally, and of interest to the Namibian context, colonial authorities must convince local leadership to participate in its struggle against the insurgents (McCuen 1966:21). Privileges and power must be awarded to a small, but active core of supporters who remain loyal because they would lose everything, including their lives, if the insurgent wins. The government must rule through them, however disliked they may be (Fraser:4). The South African authorities did apply the principle of indirect rule by supporting local leaders. However, many of these headmen had been appointed by the South African authorities prior to the war, a practice that disrupted traditional rules of succession. In a document issued by the SADF, this was acknowledged to be a source of discontent that SWAPO exploited (CS Personnel 1976:13). The headmen, and their tribal police, that cooperated with the South African authorities were especially opposed by the educated elite: 'In Namibia, and very strongly in Ovamboland, teachers and nurses and churches had status. They were a strong influence that was seen as a negative influence.'<sup>10</sup> Although

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<sup>9</sup> Author's interview with dr. Thean Potgieter, 19 March 2010, SA Military Academy, Saldanha.

<sup>10</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Chris Thirion (ret.), 13 May 2010, Pretoria.

cross-cutting divisions among the Namibian population were acknowledged, there was no serious attempt to address this problem. Furthermore, South African attempts at reforms were consistently opposed by the headmen, who stood to be deprived of their authority and sources of wealth (Berat and Gordon 1991: 643).

From the above it is clear that the political context was not always supportive of the counter-insurgency effort, which was impeded by the lack of political direction and an attractive cause, coupled to inherited and unacknowledged grievances. Although proclamations allowing repressive measures facilitated the struggle against SWAPO, these added new grievances. Finally, the SADF relied on alliances with local leaders that lacked support among the educated elite. In the next paragraph the focus moves to the SADF sphere of responsibility.

### **3.3 Military**

Apart from broad doctrinal principles, McCuen and Fraser offered more specific principles regarding military action against insurgent forces. Accordingly, this involves destroying or expelling insurgent forces from an area, mopping up, preventing their return and providing security for the population. Responsibilities of the police force involve identifying, arresting and interrogating insurgent agents and rehabilitating those who can be won over for the government side (Fraser:22; McCuen 1966:62). The authors emphasize the rule of minimum force and warn that repressive military and police action should be avoided since they will alienate the population. McCuen admonishes that the military should not accept a “few neutral civilian casualties to get a few rebels” and adds that people immediately recognize and resent flagrant disregard of life and property (Fraser:30; McCuen 1966:61).

To detect and hunt down insurgents McCuen advised the use of constant government patrols (1966:147) and highly mobile, specially trained strike forces (1966:121). These tactics proved well suited to Namibian circumstances. While the army relied in main on systematic patrolling of the countryside (Geldenhuis 2006:71), the SA Police unit *Koevoet* (crowbar) developed into a

highly effective search-and-destroy unit. In the words of Brig Gen Wim van der Waals: 'We were trying to stop SWAPO insurgents from coming across the border, and to be honest, Koevoet was more successful than the army at that ... They got the *koppe*<sup>11</sup> and were feared by SWAPO.'<sup>12</sup> Many of the interviewees stated that, although effective, the unit's extreme brutality had a counterproductive effect on WHAM efforts. Maj Anton Bosman said: 'They got their information through coercion, exactly the opposite of what you want ... You cannot have Koevoet operating among people that you are trying to influence, because it will clash.'<sup>13</sup> Interviewees agreed that, by contrast, the SADF strictly forbade violence against the population, although at times it did occur. Lt Col Sarel Karsten said: 'There were many rumours, as well as facts, about wrongful behaviour against the people ... We could not get away from these things, they frustrated us, but I want to say, it was not common ... But it was not just Koevoet.'<sup>14</sup>

Concerning the detrimental effects of coercion on the attitude of the population, Maj Anton Bosman observed: 'If one soldier commits an offence, then it is 'the forces' who did it. Does not matter who the individual was.'<sup>15</sup> Indicating an assumption that repercussions of coercive acts could be contained, Louis du Plessis, who served in Ovamboland, commented: 'Headquarters made two mistakes. One, fear will not generalize, you can limit it to a small group. Two, so what? We can handle the situation, we are strong, we dominate.'<sup>16</sup>

In time, the SADF managed to deny SWAPO insurgents access to the Kavango and Caprivi regions (Geldenhuis 2007:90). This was in part due to the SADF's cooperation with UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola), that had its support base just across the border in southern Angola. In Ovamboland the SADF was not able to isolate the population from the insurgents. Two contributing factors pertain to geography and resources. McCuen prescribes the establishment of a territorial defence, consisting of large numbers of small posts

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<sup>11</sup> *Koppe* was a term for kills (literally: heads).

<sup>12</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 3 March 2010, Centurion.

<sup>13</sup> Author's interview with Maj Anton Bosman, 7 March 2010, Bloubergstrand.

<sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col Sarel Karsten (ret.), 11 May 2010, Kimberley.

<sup>15</sup> Author's interview with Maj Anton Bosman, 7 March 2010, Bloubergstrand.

<sup>16</sup> Author's interview with Prof. Louis du Plessis (Col ret.), 8 March 2010, Goodwood.

throughout the country (1966:119). However, the size of the territory and limited resources prevented this. Brig Gen As Kleynhans observed: 'The area was too big and the border was too long. The terrain made it difficult too, flat with no natural lookout points. We did not have the capacity to close the border, it always remained permeable. There was no money for more people. It was always possible for small groups to come across the border, militarily we could not prevent that.'<sup>17</sup> Instead, the South Africans took the battle to the insurgents with cross-border military operations (Geldenhuis 2006:67-9).

The interviewees agreed that as a result of the lack of control in Ovamboland, the population could not be protected against SWAPO intimidation: 'The insurgents could enter a *kraal*<sup>18</sup> and do whatever they want, and say: we are watching you and we'll be back.'<sup>19</sup> According to Gen Jannie Geldenhuis, in total twenty-six headmen were killed by SWAPO. In an SADF publication for example, the year 1980 saw 95 killings of local people at the hands of SWAPO, 308 kidnappings and 120 cases of intimidation (SA Divers 1982:4). According to Dr. Kriek van der Merwe, SWAPO had established control across the region by way of the chairman system. The chairman was an unidentified member of the population who provided visiting insurgents with information on collaborators: 'A traitor was tried in a kangaroo court. He was killed and his body left there as an example ... The war was a contest for control, who do the people follow. It was compulsory, not voluntary. The population was forced, there was no choice.'<sup>20</sup> SWAPO seems to have made use of selective, rather than indiscriminate violence: 'SWAPO chose their targets to set an example, like the murder of [*headman*] Elifas ... They took out the tribal policemen. They chose their targets well.'<sup>21</sup> The consequences of SWAPO's ability to intimidate the population are illustrated by the words of dr. Francois Vreÿ: 'My impression of the population was that they talked along with whoever arrived at their *kraal*.'<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen As Kleynhans (ret.) 20 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>18</sup> A homestead encircled by fencing

<sup>19</sup> Author's interview with Maj R.B. du Preez (ret.), 14 May 2010, Hartbeespoort.

<sup>20</sup> Author's interview with dr. J.C. Kriek van der Merwe (Cmdt ret.), 26 May 2010, Centurion.

<sup>21</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Chris van Zyl, 4 May 2010, Silverton.

<sup>22</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col [dr.] Francois Vreÿ, 17 March 2010, Saldanha. Served in Ovamboland 1978-1984.

A further complicating factor in Ovamboland, was that by far the greater number of SWAPO recruits were Ovambo, or as Brig Gen van der Waals put it: 'SWAPO is Ovambo and Ovambo is SWAPO.'<sup>23</sup> Brig Gen Gert Nel said: 'You can try to guard the borders, but the moment SWAPO is inside the *kraal*, he is one of them.'<sup>24</sup> And according to Dr. Kriek van der Merwe: 'Some of [the population] cooperated with SWAPO from their convictions, because they had family members with SWAPO.'<sup>25</sup> A major problem for the SADF therefore, was to break the hold of SWAPO on the population.

McCuen states that indirect coercion, in the form of curfews, control of movement, resettlement of people and villages, and forbidden zones, must sometimes be used to break the insurgent grip on the population (1966:57). Early on the SADF sent observers to Rhodesia and four of the interviewees were among those sent.<sup>26</sup> Although valuable lessons were learned at the tactical level, the interviewees were critical of the Rhodesian authorities' highly coercive treatment of the people, especially by alienating them through forced resettlement in protected villages where conditions were atrocious. Extensive resettlement was thus never attempted by the SADF. Lt Gen Ian Gleeson says: 'We were really nervous about the problems it could cause. It could create a mess they could use against us. But it was definitely considered.'<sup>27</sup>

However, *kraals* were forced to move from a 1km wide cordon sanitaire along the Angolan border, also known as the jati strip. Maj Gen van Zyl said on this: 'The mere fact that you had this strip, and that you were saying, if you find anyone there you will shoot him, it created a moral dilemma ... you had to sell the jati to the locals as a valuable contribution to their safety south of the border, but they had family living on the other side.'<sup>28</sup> Ian Liebenberg added that the removal of people from the strip was not well-planned, and many people ended

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<sup>23</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 3 March 2010, Centurion.

<sup>24</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen Gert Nel (ret.), 5 March 2010, Centurion.

<sup>25</sup> Author's interview with dr. J.C. Kriek van der Merwe (Cmdt ret.), 26 May 2010, Centurion.

<sup>26</sup> Author's interviews with Gen Joffel C.P. van der Westhuizen (ret.), 5 May 2010, Silverton; Brig Gen Gert Nel (ret.), 5 March 2010, Centurion; Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 3 March 2010, Centurion; Prof. Louis du Plessis (Col ret.), 8 March 2010, Goodwood.

<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with Lt Gen Ian Gleeson (ret.), 9 March 2010, Pringle Bay.

<sup>28</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Chris van Zyl, 4 May 2010, Silverton.

up in shantytowns close to the military bases.<sup>29</sup> In this respect Annette Seegers, professor of Political Studies at Cape Town university, observed that the dusk-to-dawn curfews and the forbidden zones in the operational area created grievances that counter-balanced WHAM efforts.<sup>30</sup>

Identifying another form of indirect coercion through instilling fear, Annette Seegers writes: “Force and a show of force were valued because they concentrated people’s minds on the cost of resistance” (1996:149). The interviewees agreed that the SADF was concerned with pursuing an image of strength: ‘Sometimes kills are very important, for the strong man image in the eyes of the population.’<sup>31</sup>

We see two main problems that the military had to contend with. The first is that in Ovamboland the population could not be isolated from SWAPO and therefore could not be shielded from SWAPO’s influence or reprisals. This was due to geographical factors and lack of resources, as well as the close ties between SWAPO and the Ovambo people. The second is that the population was directly or indirectly submitted to violence and coercive measures at the hands of the South African security organizations. Against this background, the hearts and minds of the population had to be won.

### **3.4 WHAM**

McCuen insisted that before the authorities implement WHAM, the military must destroy or neutralize the insurgent organization and its influence on the population, and must provide the population with effective and stable security in order to escape reprisals by the insurgents (1966:56-57). Beyond that, WHAM is the responsibility of the administrative authorities, who must establish contact with the population, impose and enforce control measures and win

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<sup>29</sup> Author’s interview with dr. Ian Liebenberg, 16 March 2010, SA Military Academy, Saldanha.

<sup>30</sup> Author’s interview with prof. Annette Seegers, University of Cape Town, 23 March 2010, Cape Town.

<sup>31</sup> Author’s interview with Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 3 March 2010, Centurion.

popular support through constructive work (Fraser: 22). Recognizing that in operational areas civilian control is not always possible, McCuen writes that in such a situation, the military may have to coordinate political, administrative, economic or military endeavours (McCuen 1966:71).

From the interviews and documentary sources it is clear that SADF top commanders like Magnus Malan, Constand Viljoen and Jannie Geldenhuys<sup>32</sup> attached great importance to gaining the cooperation of the population. On Gen Viljoen's orders, a series of publications<sup>33</sup> were distributed among officers and commanders, lectures were held and from 1978 operational staff were required to take a course on the subject.<sup>34</sup> However, according to the interviews, the administrative authorities, who had to implement WHAM, were often unable or unwilling to do so. In Ovamboland, where security had not been established, administrative personnel could not always work safely. In addition, Maj Gen Gert Opperman said: 'The departments did not have a sense of urgency, of how important good governance is ... The SADF had strong leaders who were prepared to take over, they made things happen and had the infrastructure and backing of top command.'<sup>35</sup> The result was that the SADF practically took over WHAM.

The SADF put considerable effort into its attempts to cultivate a positive attitude among the population, which can be divided in two parts. The first focused on socio-economic help and mitigating the hardships of life in a warzone. The second part focused on propaganda campaigns aimed at persuading the population of the SADF's good intentions and undermining SWAPO<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Magnus Malan served as Head of the Army from 1973-1976 and as Chief of the SADF from 1976-1980, Constand Viljoen served as Head of the Army from 1976-1980 and Chief of the SADF from 1980-1985 and Jannie Geldenhuys served as Head of the Army from 1976-1980 and Chief of the SADF 1980-1985.

<sup>33</sup> The 'Burgersake Agtergrondreeks' (Civil Affairs Background series) 1-11. The publications dealt with topics such as 'Civic action and the Soldier' (Sept. 1976), 'Behaviour orientation of the Bantu' (Feb. 1977), 'The role of the Population in Revolutionary War' (Mar. 1978) and 'War of the Flea' (Jul. 1978).

<sup>34</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 3 March 2010, Centurion.

<sup>35</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Gert Opperman (ret.), 18 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>36</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 3 March 2010, Centurion.

Socio-economic development was far more extensive than the development of infrastructure around and between the military bases, which was essentially a byproduct of the SADF presence. For instance, from 212 schools in the operational area in 1962, the number increased to 757 in 1982, while the number of pupils increased from 32.000 to 172.000 (Visser 1984:7). National servicemen were deployed in the education, health, agriculture, forestry and nature preservation fields. In addition to medical services all dentists, veterinarians and psychologists in the operational area were connected with the SADF (1984:27).

Since regular troops might come into contact with the local population while out on patrol, great effort was put into promoting a respectful attitude towards the population. Ethnologists were employed to educate troops on local family structures, living arrangements, agricultural activities and cultural traditions. Troops were advised on proper etiquette and were offered a phrase list, featuring questions such as: “Where is water?” and “Did strangers visit you?”<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the population was encouraged to cooperate by monetary rewards. A poster of the time lists the rewards as R5000 for an RPG launcher, R2000 for information leading to the capture of a SWAPO insurgent, R1000 for a landmine, R500 for a AK47, R100 for a mortar bomb, R100 for a hand grenade and R100 for a jumping-jack anti-personnel mine.<sup>38</sup>

Propaganda efforts were complicated by the fact that a large part of the population was illiterate and had no access to modern media such as television. Cultural differences also played a role. One ill-fated project concerned the distribution of pamphlets depicting a hyena with the head of Sam Njoma, the SWAPO leader. It’s meaning was lost on a population not used to deciphering symbolism conveyed in cartoons. Sky-shout and ground-shout operations were held at night, conveying simple messages like: ‘trust the soldiers’ or in response to SWAPO abductions: ‘look after your children’.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Source: ‘Sektor 10 - Die Soldaat se Handboek oor Owambo’ (Sector 10 – The Soldier’s Hand Book on Ovamboland), a photocopied document distributed among soldiers in the operational area. Copy in author’s possession. According to Sarel Karsten (interviewed by author, 11 May 2010, Kimberley) the document is probably based on work by ethnologists who worked for the SADF: Sarel Karsten, Basjan van Niekerk, Salome Visser.

<sup>38</sup> Private collection of Wim Hofsink (interviewed by author on 13 May 2010, Pretoria).

<sup>39</sup> Author’s interview with Gen Chris van Zyl, 4 May 2010, Silverton.



Psy-ops included discrediting SWAPO. This served a double objective of demoralizing the insurgents and preventing the population from joining them. Rumours were spread about SWAPO's purported internal discord (Burgersake Memorandum 1979a:6) and pamphlets addressed to SWAPO insurgents were distributed in the operational area. An example of such a pamphlet shows a picture of a killed SWAPO cadre and reads:

SWAPO comrades, look at me, Kilimanjaro! The biggest and strongest fighter of us all, and some of my comrades, easily slain by the victorious soldiers of Namibia. Many of our comrades will be sacrificed in vain. Our battle is lost.<sup>40</sup>

The South African WHAM activities were not considered equally effective by all. Keeping in mind that the Kavango and Caprivi regions were under South African control, while in Ovamboland the population could not be isolated from the insurgents, it is probably not surprising that those who considered WHAM a success were all deployed in the Kavango and Caprivi regions.<sup>41</sup> Evaluations on the effectiveness of WHAM in Ovamboland were mixed. Some were of the opinion that there were positive effects, while others, including those from the academic field, were of the opinion that WHAM had not achieved much, if anything at all. These perceptions are supported by the election results of 1989, when Namibia attained independence. In Ovamboland SWAPO captured ninety-two per cent of the vote, in Kavango fifty-two per cent, and in the Caprivi forty per cent (Atwood 1990:130). While differences between Ovamboland and the other regions may explain differences in the evaluation of WHAM, we get a more finely-grained evaluation within Ovamboland by considering perceptions of the ultimate purpose of WHAM.

The purpose of WHAM, as stated in Department of Defence publications, was to cultivate a positive attitude towards the authorities (Burgersake Direktief 5/78 1978:2). The underlying assumption thus was that civic and psychological action could effect a change in attitude. This

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<sup>40</sup> Private collection of Wim Hofsink (interviewed by author on 13 May 2010, Pretoria).

<sup>41</sup> Author's interviews with Brig Gen Gert Nel (ret.), 5 March 2010, Centurion; Maj R.B. du Preez (ret.), 14 May 2010, Hartbeespoort; Cmdt Dirk du Toit (ret.), 18 March 2010, Dwarskersbos and email correspondence with Johann Engelbrecht, 28 May 2010, Port Elizabeth.

raises the question: to what end? That the ultimate objective was by no means very clear in the minds of SADF officers tasked with WHAM, is borne out by the interviews:

Our purpose at the end of the day was to win the elections. But we were the Defence Force, not a political organization. Our purpose more specifically was to isolate the population from SWAPO and their views.<sup>42</sup>

Try to establish good relationships, so that they [the population] will not help SWAPO.<sup>43</sup>

I am not sure how, on the one hand, you can conduct a military operation, while on the other hand trying to 'change' the population, which is ideologically opposed to you, by civic action.<sup>44</sup>

The most important is to get information on the movement of enemy forces.<sup>45</sup>

In my time it was not clearly crystallized [the purpose of WHAM]. No-one knew what to do with us.<sup>46</sup>

SADF documents equally indicate differing objectives. According to Burgersake Agtergrondreeks no.8 (1978:10) the purpose of WHAM was to obtain intelligence and deny the insurgent food, shelter and intelligence. This points to immediate military objectives. A number of interviewees said that in Ovamboland the quantity and quality of information received from the population got better towards the end of the war.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the number of times that information supplied by civilians led to the capture or elimination of SWAPO insurgents, or to the capture of arms caches, rose from sixty-four in 1983, to more than two thousand in 1987 (Kleynhans 1988:22).

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<sup>42</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen As Kleynhans (ret.) 20 May 2010, Pretoria. Senior Staff Officer Komops (WHAM).

<sup>43</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen Gert Nel (ret.), 5 March 2010, Centurion. Former Commander 32 Battalion.

<sup>44</sup> Author's email correspondence with Japie van der Westhuizen, 31 May 2010, Pretoria. WHAM officer in Ovamboland

<sup>45</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col Sarel Karsten (ret.), 11 May 2010, Kimberley.

<sup>46</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Chris van Zyl, 4 May 2010, Silverton. Former General Officer Commanding Regional Joint Task Force West. Komops (WHAM) operations officer in Ovamboland from 1975-1978.

<sup>47</sup> Author's interviews with Gen Georg Meiring (ret.), 12 May 2010, Silverton; Brig Gen As Kleynhans (ret.) 20 May 2010, Pretoria; Brig Gen Gert J.C. van Niekerk SM (ret.), 23 May 2010, Potchefstroom.

Another stated aim was to make the population less susceptible to enemy propaganda and more receptive to psychological action by the SA authorities (White Paper 1979:10). This indicates attempts to influence the ideological mindset of the population, interpreted by some as having the aim of defeating SWAPO at the ballot box. Col Rusty van Rooyen asked: 'Did we think that we would be able to change their thinking through WHAM, so they would vote against SWAPO?'<sup>48</sup> According to the interviews attempts at changing ideological mindsets were unsuccessful and Brig Gen van der Waals said: 'South Africa could never change the attitude of the Ovambo's.'<sup>49</sup> Judging WHAM by electoral results, Lt Gen Ian Gleeson observed: 'It was not systematic enough, we cannot pride ourselves. It was not enough to convince people not to vote for SWAPO.'<sup>50</sup>

In sum, the WHAM efforts of the SADF included extensive socio-economic aid and psychological action. Attaining its stated purpose of cultivating a positive attitude among the population was evaluated positively in regions that were securely under South African control, while in Ovamboland judgments varied according to the perceived ultimate objectives of WHAM. Short term goals like obtaining information on insurgents were better met, while long term goals, like defeating SWAPO at elections, were not.

### 3.5 Conclusion

Initial realities that the SADF had to contend with were lack of international political standing, political direction and an attractive cause and historical grievances. Lack of resources, a difficult terrain and close ties between SWAPO and the Ovambo people made it impossible to establish complete control in Ovamboland. Pertaining to WHAM, the SADF was confronted with an administrative body that was unequal to the task. As a result the SADF largely took responsibility for WHAM, according to the interviews with only partial success. To better understand why this was so, the next chapter examines the assumptions guiding the SADF in WHAM. The main assumption was that WHAM would be able to effect a change in attitude among the population.

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<sup>48</sup> Author's interview with Col A.W. (Rusty) van Rooyen, 30 March 2010, Parow.

<sup>49</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 26 May 2010, Centurion.

<sup>50</sup> Author's interview with Lt Gen Ian Gleeson (ret.), 9 March 2010, Pringle Bay.

## Chapter 4      The relationship between WHAM and legitimacy

The previous chapter discussed the doctrine that underwrote the South African counterinsurgency. This helped to identify a number of problems that were rooted in the realities on the ground, as well as some of the underlying assumptions that guided the WHAM efforts of the SADF. When separating short term goals like providing intelligence, from long term goals like fostering positive attitudes towards the authorities, the interviews indicated that in Ovamboland immediate goals met with some success, but that in the long term attitudes were not affected. When asked how to account for this lack of success, the answers were varied, as three quotations from the interviews illustrate:

South Africa had no legitimacy. We were invaders.<sup>51</sup>

Legitimacy? Look at history. First the Germans came, then the *boere*<sup>52</sup>. They were not the saviours, they brought apartheid.<sup>53</sup>

No people want to be ruled by another people.<sup>54</sup>

These explanations raise two points. In the first place it questions an assumption underlying WHAM doctrine: that satisfying the needs of the population will lead to cooperation with the authorities. The first part of this chapter will therefore take a closer look at the theoretical foundations on which this assumption rests.

In the second place, although the quotations indicate that factors like colonialism, grievances or ethnicity played a role, they also point to a deeper lying dimension of legitimacy. Legitimacy is a concept that is often overlooked in COIN theories. One author that has addressed legitimacy is

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<sup>51</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen As Kleynhans (ret.) 20 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>52</sup> Boer = farmer. In South Africa the word is used as a (derogative) term for white Afrikaners.

<sup>53</sup> Author's interview with dr. J.C. Kriek van der Merwe (Cmdt ret.), 26 May 2010, Centurion.

<sup>54</sup> Author's email correspondence with Prof. Louis du Plessis (Col ret.), 29 July 2010, Goodwood.

Bard O'Neill, who states that in an insurgency the legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics is at stake (1990: 13-17). For instance, insurgencies may constitute a rejection of the authorities, since they may be perceived as illegitimate if their actions depart from existing values and norms by being corrupt, repressive or ineffective. The second part of this chapter will therefore relate counterinsurgency doctrine, and where possible WHAM doctrine, to the concept of legitimacy and will examine whether it is possible to detect a legitimacy dimension to the problems that were outlined in the previous chapter.

Stathis Kalyvas also addresses the concept of legitimacy and questions the oversimplified view that perceived legitimacy will lead to cooperation. He argues that people may choose one side over the other "less because they share its ideals than to save their lives" (2006:93). This has a bearing on the Namibian conflict, since Ovamboland was not securely controlled by the SADF and the population was vulnerable to SWAPO intimidation. The picture will therefore not be complete without a discussion of the effects of coercion, which is the third part of this chapter.

#### **4.1 Winning Hearts and Minds**

The underlying assumptions of WHAM can be said to rest on Rational Choice Theory, which in turn rests on the premise that when faced with alternative options, individuals will choose the one that is most advantageous. This represents the essence of WHAM doctrine, namely that tactical shifts in the mix of benefits and sanctions should result in a shift in popular support (Mason 1996:64). It follows that populations can be induced to withhold support to the insurgent forces by increasing the cost of cooperation with the insurgents, while simultaneously increasing the benefits of cooperation with the authorities. This view corresponds to the thrust of the South African WHAM effort, which relied strongly on offering socio-economic benefits to win over the population.

A noted shortcoming of the Rational Choice theory is that it takes no account of the fact that not all human action can be regarded as narrowly instrumental (Boudon 1998:818). People may forego immediate benefits, such as their own safety or material well-being, in support of an

ideological belief or simply to save the life of a loved one or help a friend. Second, people may elect to support the authorities for the benefits this entails, but this may not reflect their preferences. Since a change in behaviour does not necessarily imply a change in attitude, it is conceivable that WHAM efforts do not prevent or end a rebellion, but merely postpone it (Mason 1996:64). Having established that WHAM doctrine rests on the assumption that the population can be won over by offering benefits, the next question is what sort of benefits these should be.

The practical implementation of WHAM rests on the Human Needs Theory, or the premise that the best sort of benefits are those that alleviate the most urgent needs of the population, all the more since these needs may be intimately linked to the cause of violent conflict. A population's most basic needs can be conceptualized as security needs (nutrition, housing and physical security), access needs (political and economic participation) and acceptance needs (recognition of culture and identity) (Azar in Miall 2004: 6). Azar has argued that when authorities do not address the population's needs, they become grievances that are often expressed collectively and, although not leading to armed rebellion per se, create an opportunity for protracted social conflict (1990:9). According to Gurr, examples of communal grievances that may become incentives for collective action are repression, loss of political autonomy and economic, political and cultural discrimination. To mobilize the population and provide impetus to an insurgency, insurgent leaders employ frames, or narratives that articulate these grievances (2007: 139-140).

In the context of the Namibian border war, Human Needs Theory can be related to the modernization paradigm that dominated thinking in the 1960's, and its emphasis on security, governance and economic development. Since the cause of popular discontent was found in social, political and economic inequality, the solution was found in winning hearts and minds through social reform, some form of political voice and income-raising activities (Leites and Wolf 1966:4) and counterinsurgents thus assumed a role as 'managers of modernization' (Fitzsimmons 2008:346). The means to achieve modernization required a focus on three key areas. The first addresses security by protecting the population from insurgent coercion and influence, the second addresses governance by providing a well-functioning administration and

the third addresses the promotion of socio-economic development (Schafer 1988:62). The underlying assumption of WHAM was thus that addressing basic needs and removing grievances by setting the population on the development ladder would prevent or end rebellion.

A problem with WHAM doctrine resting on Rational Choice and Human Needs theories is that populations are viewed as unproblematic homogeneous groups, in which all members make the same rational choices, have the same needs, and react in the same way to benefits that are offered. Kalyvas has called for disaggregation in the analysis of modern conflicts and observes that wars may activate preexisting local cleavages, or create new ones (2003:480). Although, in striving for more effective management of the population, authorities may employ ethnographic knowledge, thus allowing a finer-tuned 'hearts and minds' effort, the problem remains that local actors may support either side for reasons that are unrelated to the overarching issues of the conflict and may appropriate political causes to use them for their own purposes (Kalyvas 2003:479). The important point is that agency resides at the centre with the political elites, as well as at the periphery with private individuals, and a population is therefore not an entity that can be 'acted upon'. Within 'the population' subgroups may exist or form that ally themselves with either the authorities or the insurgents, and in addition, individuals may opportunistically address preexisting rivalries by articulating them in terms of the larger conflict.

As shown, the purpose or aim of WHAM does not involve increasing the authorities' legitimacy per se. While this may explain the absence of the concept of legitimacy from most counterinsurgent doctrinal writings, including the South African's, this is not to say that there is no relationship between WHAM and legitimacy, a subject to which we now turn.

## **4.2 Legitimacy in counterinsurgencies**

This part of the chapter considers how counterinsurgency theories and WHAM doctrine may relate to legitimacy. Various scholars have theorized on the concept of legitimacy and political

scientists have defined it as: *The belief within members of society that there are adequate reasons to voluntarily obey the commands of authorities* (Tyler 1997:323). Legitimacy is a topic that is seldom delved into by counterinsurgency theory. South African COIN doctrine was no different in this respect. According to dr. Kriek van der Merwe:

Legitimacy is a key aspect, but no-one in the Defence Force understood this. Most of the commanders would have called it nonsense, because the word legitimacy was not part of the doctrine ... Top command should have understood the problem with legitimacy. They had courses in revolutionary warfare; the word legitimacy was not mentioned, but it should have been.<sup>55</sup>

The absence of the concept of legitimacy in the doctrinal writings, directives and publications issued by the SADF is indeed notable. In this respect, prof. Annette Seegers' observation is salient: "Legitimacy is not about efficiency, while WHAM is about, if I solve their problems efficiently, then they will vote for me."<sup>56</sup> This seems to point to a discordance between the concepts of WHAM and legitimacy. However, WHAM and legitimacy share a point of departure in their emphasis on voluntary cooperation as a result of persuasion, as opposed to forced cooperation as a result of coercion. Persuasion is a way of obtaining voluntary obedience, since it can impact on attitude by winning people over to a point of view, and on behaviour by winning them over to a course of action.

Counterinsurgent strategies aimed at winning hearts and minds rely on persuasion to obtain cooperation. In South African COIN doctrine, where WHAM was meant to cultivate a positive attitude towards the authorities through its twin pillars of socio-economic development and psychological action, a short term goal was that in exchange for socio-economic benefits, the population would deny the insurgents food, shelter and intelligence in the absence of the South African authorities. Mark Suchman considers this voluntary cooperation as a function of legitimacy. He refers to the trading of cooperation for benefits as a form of pragmatic legitimacy

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<sup>55</sup> Author's interview with dr. J.C. Kriek van der Merwe (Cmdt ret.), 26 May 2010, Centurion.

<sup>56</sup> Author's interview with prof. Annette Seegers, University of Cape Town, 23 March 2010, Cape Town.



that rests on cost-benefit calculations (1995:578-9). At its simplest level it is an exchange legitimacy: support for the activities of the authorities is based on the expected value of these activities to the individual or his immediate group. This fits neatly with theories of Rational Choice, since these rely on cost-benefit considerations, or the assumption that people will follow the most advantageous course of action when faced with a choice. Equally, this highlights the fact that pragmatic legitimacy is not very robust. If the other side offers stronger incentives, or if authorities do not produce expected outcomes, people may question their legitimacy and withhold or change their allegiance (Dart 2004:41). In short, as long as the authorities are perceived 'to deliver the goods' they may be said to have pragmatic legitimacy.

A number of the problems that were identified in the previous chapter pertained to grievances. These were for instance appointing local leaders in contravention of traditions of succession, instituting repressive measures such as curfews and forbidden zones and brutalities visited upon the population by Koevoet or SADF members. COIN theory recognizes that grievances, while not causing rebellion, create an opportunity for conflict that may be exploited by the insurgents.

According to Tom Tyler (1997:336-7) grievances concern evaluations of treatment at the hand of the authorities and have a bearing on the authorities' perceived legitimacy. We can call this moral legitimacy, since it arises from the norms and values that govern human interaction. Tyler states that research indicates three salient factors. The first one is trustworthiness, or people's judgment that authorities will treat them fairly, are concerned about their needs and will consider their arguments. The second one is interpersonal respect, or people's judgment whether they are treated politely, with respect and dignity, and with respect for their rights and status. The third factor is neutrality in decision making procedures, or people's judgment that the authorities are honest, impartial, and base decisions on fact instead of personal opinions. To this Suchman adds an evaluation of the outcomes of the authorities' activities and what they have accomplished, as well as the perception that, when outcomes of the authorities' actions cannot easily be measured, the authorities are acting in good faith (Suchman 1995: 579-82). In short, when authorities are perceived to 'do the right thing' they can be considered to have moral legitimacy.

As was seen, doctrine held that the authorities should address grievances through reforms. Reforms may thus be seen as a way to increase moral legitimacy. Suchman notes that legitimacy depends on a history of actions that conform to societal norms and values, yet is resilient to occasional departure from these norms and values (1995:574). Evaluations of trustworthiness, neutrality and interpersonal respect by their very nature thus depend on the reinforcement of multiple positive experiences and moral legitimacy takes a long time to establish, but tends to be more durable than pragmatic legitimacy.

An aspect of counterinsurgency theory that has a relation to legitimacy is the recognition that insurgent leaders make use of frames to articulate the cause they are fighting for. These frames are important in the mobilization of the population, but can also be important in attracting international support, thus it may be said that insurgents are marketing 'downstream' as well as 'upstream' (King 2007:123). Upstream, these frames can be linked to international narratives, for instance discourses about self-determination, or human rights (Gurr 2007:141). As was discussed in the previous chapter, Beaufre insisted that counterinsurgents should also pay attention to international public opinion. This South Africa seemingly neglected to do, in contrast to SWAPO, who drew on an internationally sanctioned discourse of national self-determination and anti-colonialism. In addition, South Africa's lack of international good standing was reinforced by the fact that in 1966 the UN had withdrawn South Africa's mandate over Namibia and declared its presence illegal. This pertains to a form of legitimacy that Weber called legal-rational, which rests on the condition that authority has been established in a manner which is recognized to be legal, for instance by democratic elections (Spencer 1970: 124-5). It may thus be said that South Africa lacked legal legitimacy.

Frames are important downstream as well. Fraser advised that counterinsurgents should establish a cause that is more attractive than the insurgent cause. As we saw in the previous chapter, the South African side was not able to do this. SWAPO's cause of national self-determination represented an end to foreign white rule, a powerful message for a population that had lived under apartheid. Hence, the SADF was perceived by the population as an

occupying or colonial force and lacked legitimacy through its very presence in Namibia. Here we find a link to Fitzsimmons concept of identity-based legitimacy. Fitzsimmons argues that identity-based legitimacy may be important in conflicts where ethnic identities are salient, especially since the prominence of group boundaries tends to become amplified during, or as a result of the conflict (2008:355). This is relevant to the Namibian context, since as we have seen, there were strong ties between SWAPO and the Ovambo population. Moreover, Fitzsimmons' observations can be argued to pertain equally to situations where racial boundaries constitute the dominant and polarizing cleavage of society, as was the case in Namibia. Identity-based legitimacy rests on the notion that people may prefer to be ruled by their own kind, and are thus more concerned with *who* governs, than with *how* they govern. The South Africans may be said to have been lacking in identity-based legitimacy.

This part of the chapter has shown that legitimacy can be tied to the doctrine that governs counterinsurgency and WHAM, and that many problems that were faced by the SADF in their WHAM efforts stemmed from a lack of legitimacy. By separating different dimensions of legitimacy, these were conceptualized as pragmatic, moral, legal and identity-based legitimacy. Having stated at the outset that perceptions of legitimacy do not automatically lead to cooperative behaviour, we now turn to the subject of coercion.

### **4.3 Legitimacy and coercion**

The first great dilemma of COIN warfare – if [government authorities] use intimidation, sanctions and dislocation of the people to separate the revolutionaries from the population, they will antagonize and lose the vital support of the people, and if they do not use these pressures, they find that the population reacts to the dictates of the more feared revolutionary terrorism, which they do not have the means to stop (McCuen 1966:34).

We have seen that a lack of legitimacy was at the root of many of the problems that confronted the SADF. The conclusion therefore seems to be that increasing legitimacy would solve these

problems. It may well be so in peaceful times, but during insurgencies opposing forces are at work. In the first place, the opposition is attempting to establish its own legitimacy, and in the second place, the insurgents may use coercion to force the population to cooperate.

Legitimacy can be linked to a positive attitude towards the authorities, because it rests on a perception that the actions of the authorities are desirable, proper, or appropriate (Suchman 1995:574). O'Neill has stated that in an insurgency the legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics is at stake. This *crisis of legitimacy* may indeed be rooted in people's attitudes towards the authorities, but that is not the only possible explanation why people join or support the insurgents (Kalyvas 2006: 93). A problem with attitude is that it cannot be observed, but must be inferred from people's behaviour. However, observing behaviour may lead to wrong conclusions about attitudes, since people may cooperate with the insurgents, not because they approve of them, but because they were coerced, or because of opportunistic economic motives or from security considerations (2006: 98-9).

Kalyvas notes that during long-lasting conflicts the provision of benefits gradually loses out to the effective use of violence (2006:114), that is coercion trumps pragmatic legitimacy. He distinguishes between selective violence, which targets individuals held guilty of collaboration, and indiscriminate reprisals based on guilt by association. People are affected by random violence whether they collaborate with the enemy or not, but they can avoid selective violence by refraining from collaboration (2006:142). It was seen that SWAPO made effective use of violence by targeting selected individuals, and consequently people would have refrained from cooperation with the South African authorities.

It can be taken as axiomatic that sufficient coercion will change passive or oppositional behaviour to compliance or cooperation. This is important in an operational zone where secure control has not been established. We can conclude that in contested zones where opposing forces are at work, legitimacy does not automatically lead to cooperation.

Apart from the opposing forces that authorities and insurgents exert upon the population, the authorities themselves may use both persuasive and coercive measures. Even when military

action is mainly directed at the enemy insurgent, this is not to say that there is no coercion of the population. At the very minimum, measures aimed at the insurgent forces impact on the lives of ordinary people and may be perceived by them as coercive. This we saw in the previous chapter, where curfews and forbidden zones, as well as repressive measures aimed at curtailing SWAPO's political activities, led to grievances that could be employed by SWAPO as a source of discontent. Military force may also target the population directly. It was seen that, although successful at extracting intelligence, the coercive activities of Koevoet served to create fear and resentment among the population. The question now is, when the authorities use coercion, how does this affect their legitimacy?

Research shows that when government is perceived to abuse its authority "the legitimate circle of granting and taking power" is interrupted and as civil disobedience and resistance increase, the authorities need to become successively more repressive (Hoefnagels 1977: 31). This indicates that coercion leads to an escalating spiral of hardening attitudes, more oppositional behaviour and greater coercion. Coercion will thus change a sympathetic or neutral attitude to a hostile one, and since legitimacy relies on a positive attitude, this means a decrease in legitimacy. More specifically, coercion leads to a decrease in moral legitimacy, since this depends on an evaluation of the treatment people receive from the authorities.

Finally, a short comparison on the effects of persuasion and coercion. The effects of persuasion, or WHAM, are much less sure than those of coercion. Persuasion *may* effect a positive change in attitude, and it *may* effect cooperative behaviour. For instance, persuasive WHAM measures would have no influence on the attitudes of those with a "deep and unflinching commitment" (Kalyvas 2006:103). By contrast, it was shown that coercion *will* effect a negative change in attitude and sufficient coercion *will* effect cooperative behaviour.

Not only is there a difference in outcome probabilities, but depending on the type of legitimacy involved, there is also a difference in the durability of the effects of persuasion and coercion. Moral legitimacy, as we have seen, is more durable than pragmatic legitimacy. For authorities therefore, moral legitimacy clearly is to be preferred over pragmatic legitimacy. In this respect an important consideration is that the effects of systematic coercion, which were

seen to affect moral legitimacy, must be considered long term, while the effects of WHAM, which were seen to affect pragmatic legitimacy, must be considered short term.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed how counterinsurgent theories and WHAM doctrine relate to legitimacy. An examination of the problems confronting the South African authorities has shown that four dimensions of legitimacy, that is pragmatic, moral, legal and identity-based legitimacy, were involved. The four types of legitimacy will be employed in subsequent chapters to delve deeper into the problems that were identified during the interviews with former members of the SADF. The power of coercion on attitudes and behaviour was also examined, and provided the perspective that, while legitimacy is a condition for voluntary cooperation, the effects of coercion may have a greater impact on still.

## Chapter 5      Historical context

There was a historic legacy of foreign control and very poor treatment of the black population. It lives in people's minds. South Africa took over the German legacy and nothing changed.<sup>57</sup>

The quotation illustrates two factors that had shaped the situation as the SADF found it when they were formally deployed in Namibia in 1974. These factors can be summarized as South Africa's alien presence and South Africa's alienating policies.

Since South Africa had governed Namibia for less than sixty years when the SADF was deployed, it can be argued that they were viewed as 'alien' rulers. In addition, not only the South African authorities themselves, but also their laws and policies, were alien to large parts of the population.

Conceivably, a monocultural society's governing laws and policies may be generated from within. Such laws and policies would be comprehensible to the population, or even taken for granted, and in harmony with people's belief systems and experienced reality. In a multicultural society, and even more so in one dominated by a culturally alien system, rules and policies tend to originate from the top, whether by coercion or through a process of negotiation. Members of the population may not understand, agree with or accept policies that conflict with local traditions and norms (Hyndman 1995:295). In Namibia this was certainly the case. German colonial rule lasted from 1884 till 1915 and was bitterly contested over issues such as the introduction of private land ownership, which overrode the traditional practice of communal ownership for local communities (Melber 2000:28).

In this sense the South African mandate was a continuation of German rule, as many institutions and policies remained in force (Du Pisani 2000:53-5). As a foreign government that preserved alien laws and policies, the South African government was thus lacking in identity-

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<sup>57</sup> Author's interview with dr. Thean Potgieter, 19 March 2010, SA Military Academy Saldanha.

based legitimacy, which is concerned with *who* rules the country. South African rule was however more than just a continuation of German colonial rule. In fact, many of the policies introduced by South Africa became a source of grievances that could be exploited by SWAPO. We now turn to the question what these grievances entailed.

A first grievance stemmed from the South African policy of 'containment'. This was pursued through the settlement of various ethnic groups in native reserves and the curtailment of their free movement with a variety of proclamations. By 1939 seventeen reserves had been created. These fragmented patches of land offered few prospects of economic development and the residents mainly practiced subsistence farming. The reserves thus became a source of cheap labour for the white farms, fishing factories and the mining sector. In urban areas a policy of containment was similarly pursued by settling black workers in 'locations' on the periphery of town. (Du Pisani 2000:56-58). The policy of segregation along racial lines was in line with South Africa's domestic policy of apartheid, which Mamdani argues was more than a system of institutionalized racial domination, but rather "an attempt to soften racial antagonism by mediating and thereby refracting the impact of racial domination through a range of Native Authorities" (quoted in Du Pisani 2000: 52). This leads to the second source of grievances, that is indirect rule.

Indirect rule was established by placing traditional authorities at local and regional levels under supervision of a white superintendent. For instance in Ovamboland, to ensure that these authorities supported South African rule, the majority of the headmen were made subservient (sub-headmen) to the Council of Senior Headmen, who had been directly appointed by the South African authorities (Kreike 2010:57,61). This disrupted traditional succession, which in the Oukwanyama tribe of the Ovambo people is determined by the matriarchal blood line (CS Personnel 1976:13). The Senior Headmen were granted a monopoly over land allocation, providing them with a lucrative source of income through the 'sale' of villages to headmen (Kreike 2010:62). On condition that they served to the administration's satisfaction, they were appointed for life and ruled with some autonomy. For instance, they had a tribal police and a traditional court that dealt with 'lesser crimes' and could levy fines. Among their obligations to



the South African government was to make sure that an adequate number of contract workers were supplied to the mines, fishing factories and white farms (Berat and Gordon 1991:641).

A third source of grievances was indeed the system of contract labour that heavily exploited the Ovambo people of the north. A government organization, the South West Africa Native Labour Association (SWANLA), served as an employment agency by contracting black workers and placing them with employers. The workers received basic necessities and typically signed up for two years, during which time they could not go home. They were housed in hostels where living conditions and food were notoriously bad. In addition, they had to accept punishment for real or suspected offences as the company saw fit (Cooper 1999:122).

Although the grievances of the Namibian people were deeply felt, they did not lead to systematic resistance until they were articulated, or framed, to mobilize the population in 1957, when the Ovambo People's Congress was formed, later to become the Ovambo People's Organization (OPO) and eventually SWAPO. Initial activities focused on civil disobedience and protest, to which the South African government responded with arrests and exile of the rebellious leaders, which all but crippled the movement. In 1959 the municipality of Windhoek, the Namibian capital, decided to move black residents from a location on the western periphery of town to a more distant new location called Katatura. Demonstrations and protest meetings against the move led to a confrontation with the police at which eleven protesters were shot and killed. This event proved to be a trigger that broadened the appeal of the fledgling resistance organization (Dierks 2005).

Further repressive government measures followed. For instance, after extensive labour strikes in 1971 an emergency proclamation was introduced, allowing detention without trial, severely restricting political freedom and prohibiting meetings of more than five persons (Du Pisani 2000:69), while in Ovamboland and the Kavango the tribal authorities were allowed to use corporal punishment, including public floggings, against SWAPO supporters (Toase 1985:204). In addition the South African government added to previous grievances by starting implementation of the Odendaal plan, or the establishment of independent homelands for Namibia's main ethnic groups. Accordingly, the native reserves were enlarged to accommodate

ten homelands that would take up nearly forty per cent of the total land area of Namibia, leaving the rest to the white population, that made up roughly ten per cent of the population (Du Pisani 2000:65-66). In 1973 Ovamboland and the Kavango became self-governing areas, while the eastern Caprivi strip, renamed Lozi, followed in 1974.

The grievances of the Namibian people thus stemmed from the institutionalization of inequality and impacted on legitimacy in two ways. In the first place it negatively affected the authorities' pragmatic legitimacy, since this rests on people's evaluation of resources they received in the past or expect to receive in the future. In the second place it negatively affected moral legitimacy, which rests on judgments about treatment by the authorities, especially as they pertain to trustworthiness, interpersonal respect and neutrality (Tyler 1997:335). As was seen, popular resistance initially focused on these aspects.

As this chapter explained, South Africa's foreign rule constituted a lack of identity-based legitimacy, while the laws and policies they instituted impacted on both the authorities' pragmatic and moral legitimacy. By the time the SADF entered the Namibian conflict, in 1974, the escalating cycle of protest and repression, as well as the reinforcement of South Africa's segregation policy, had served to strengthen SWAPO's discourse of illegal colonial repression and to call into question, not only South Africa's identity-based, pragmatic and moral legitimacy, but also its legal legitimacy as the next chapter will show.

## Chapter 6            International context

To understand how SWAPO's was able to evolve from a movement that addressed local grievances, to one that elicited international support for its cause of national independence, we need to take a closer look at the international context. As this chapter will show, South Africa's lack of international legal legitimacy facilitated SWAPO's rise as the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people, which greatly increased its domestic power and legitimacy.

After World War II South Africa applied for full incorporation of Namibia into the Union of South Africa, but was refused by the newly formed UN, which in 1966 insisted that Namibia be placed under its International Trusteeship System. South Africa went ahead with Namibia's integration instead, offering the white Namibian population representation in the SA parliament and exporting its apartheid policy of racial segregation to the territory (McDougall 1986: 445-7). SWAPO, for its part, soon abandoned support of the UN Trusteeship policy and changed its goal to national independence for Namibia.

Due to its unique mandatory status, Namibia had been on the agenda of the UN since that organization's inception. This provided SWAPO with an advantage over other liberation movements in Africa. The short overview below is a selection of UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, dating from 1966 to 1976. It illustrates how successful SWAPO was in keeping international interest alive and increasing support for its cause. Conversely, South Africa was renounced in ever stronger terms.

- 1966 Declares that South Africa conducted its administration of Namibia in a manner contrary to its mandate, which was to “promote to the utmost the material and moral well-being and the social progress of the inhabitants”. Therefore terminates the mandate and places Namibia under direct UN responsibility (GA Res 2145, 1966).
- 1969 Declares South Africa’s presence in Namibia illegal, calls for immediate withdrawal (SC Res 264, 1969)
- 1970 Calls on member states to break off diplomatic and economic relations with South Africa (SC Res 283 1970).
- 1971 The International Court of Justice rules that South Africa’s presence in Namibia is illegal (ICJ 1971).
- 1973 SWAPO is acknowledged as an authentic representative of the Namibian people (GA Res 3111, 1973).
- 1973 Allocates \$100.000 to the UN fund for Namibia (GA Res 3112, 1973).
- 1974 Demands that South Africa withdraw from Namibia, release all Namibian political prisoners and abolish all racially discriminative and politically repressive laws and practices, in particular Bantustans and homelands (SC Res 366, 1974).
- 1976 Calls for free elections under UN supervision (SC Res 385, 1976).
- 1976 SWAPO is acknowledged as the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people. Condemns South Africa for holding constitutional talks that seek to perpetuate homeland policies and apartheid as well as colonial suppression and exploitation of the Namibian people (GA Res 146, 1976).

As can be seen, South Africa’s legal legitimacy was compromised in every sense. The UN ruled that South Africa had not ensured the well-being of the Namibian population and had in fact repressed and exploited them. This resulted in suspicion of South Africa’s motivations for instituting constitutional reforms. Although South Africa’s authority had initially been established in a manner which was recognized to be legal, its continued presence in Namibia was now ruled to be an illegal occupation. From the overview above, it is also clear that SWAPO’s legal standing had become virtually unassailable. From having been designated an authentic representative of the Namibian people, it was eventually acknowledged as their *sole* and authentic representative. This begs the question whether SWAPO was able to capitalize on its international good standing and how this impacted on the SADF’s WHAM efforts.

SWAPO benefited from international recognition in different ways. In the first place it facilitated the expansion of SWAPO's goals from an initial focus on grievances such as discriminatory policies, to a focus on national self-determination. This development corresponds to O'Neill's assertion that in an insurgency the legitimacy of different aspects of politics is at stake. He identified these as the political community, the political system, authorities and policies. In fact, the focus of SWAPO resistance followed O'Neill's aspects in reverse order, although the aspect of political community was not addressed. As shown in the previous chapter, the initial formation of SWAPO was in response to discriminatory *policies* of the South African government. Next, the legitimacy of the South African *authorities* became salient when their legal presence within Namibia was challenged. Finally, by rejecting UN Trusteeship, SWAPO advanced to the rejection of a *political system* of foreign rule and a struggle for national independence. Importantly, as the above overview illustrates, every step along this path was underpinned by international endorsement and support.

A second benefit of official recognition by the UN was that it provided SWAPO with a forum for its political goals. Its strategy thus focused on a campaign of intense petitioning and lobbying of sympathetic countries and organizations. As a result, diplomatic missions and offices were established in Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Senegal, Zambia, Britain, East Germany, France, Romania, Sweden, West Germany and Yugoslavia (Vigne 1987: 91).

Third, international endorsement effected help in procuring resources, safe havens and training. Although the Soviet Union and its client states were major contributors, aid was also received from the west, notably the Scandinavian countries (Vigne 1987:91; Saul and Leys 1995:45). International aid thus enabled SWAPO to dispatch its forces on infiltration operations into Namibia. Gen Constand Viljoen stated that indeed one of the main problems facing the SADF was that WHAM efforts were undermined by the support of the international community for SWAPO.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Author's correspondence with Gen Constand Viljoen (ret.), 24 May 2010, Ohrigstad.

Finally, within Namibia international recognition allowed SWAPO to strengthen its own legitimacy, while challenging that of the South African authorities. Corresponding to the evolution of its political goals, SWAPO presented itself at first as a movement that addressed the people's grievances, and was subsequently able to profile itself successfully as the champion of the Namibian people's freedom from South African occupation, while international endorsement of SWAPO as the sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people provided the movement with powerful backing. Denying that South Africa's cause could not compete with SWAPO's message, Gen Jannie Geldenhuys insisted that SWAPO's cause lacked serious support and wide-spread appeal. He said: 'there was no natural strong desire [for national independence], only when the international community started meddling was this urge born ... The Ovambo are not even fifty per cent of the population. The hate against South Africa was stirred up among relatively few people.'<sup>59</sup> According to Gen Ian Gleeson however, 'good or bad, they knew only one speaker, SWAPO, and they said, these people are going to bring us self-government.'<sup>60</sup> In addition, the international legal ruling that South Africa was an illegal occupying force buttressed SWAPO's efforts at the delegitimization of the South African authorities. Its success is indicated by opinions expressed on the main problems encountered in WHAM:

That it was carried out by a power, that according to international decisions and according to the local population was illegal, made it even more difficult.<sup>61</sup>

If the insurgency is aimed at an occupying force, the hearts and minds effort is immaterial.<sup>62</sup>

WHAM efforts, focusing mainly on socio-economic upliftment, thus may have been of little relevance in a conflict where South Africa's very presence was the fundamental issue at stake.

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<sup>59</sup> Author's interview with Gen Jannie Geldenhuys (ret.), 24 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>60</sup> Author's interview with Lt Gen Ian Gleeson (ret.), 9 March 2010, Pringle Bay.

<sup>61</sup> Author's email correspondence with Japie van der Westhuizen, 31 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>62</sup> Author's interview with dr. Ian Liebenberg, 16 March 2010, SA Military Academy, Saldanha.

In this respect Annette Seegers points out that: 'If legitimacy were irrelevant, you would still have colonialism. So WHAM is mission impossible in this context.'<sup>63</sup>

As was shown, the international context strengthened SWAPO's legitimacy, while simultaneously supporting SWAPO in challenging the legal legitimacy of the South African authorities. SWAPO was thus able to successfully awaken the Namibian population's aspirations for political freedom and self-determination. This presented the South African authorities with the difficult task of convincing the Namibian population that its presence was in their best interests<sup>64</sup>. The problem of articulating and 'selling' an adequate political cause belonged with the South African political authorities, and is deliberated on in the next chapter.

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<sup>63</sup> Author's interview with prof. Annette Seegers, 23 March 2010, University of Cape Town.

<sup>64</sup> Author's interview with dr Francois Vreÿ, 17 March 2010, SA Military Academy, Saldanha.

## **Chapter 7          Unity of effort**

South African doctrine acknowledged that a counterinsurgency involves an interlocking system of political, economic, administrative, police and military endeavours that should be guided by unity of purpose and effort. The interviews indicated that this unity was often lacking. Problems that confronted the South Africans in their efforts at winning the hearts and minds of the population pertained to a lack of unity between the SADF and the political authorities, the administration, the police force and also within the SADF.

### **7.1    The Politicians**

The South African counterinsurgency effort was hampered by inherited and unacknowledged grievances that served as a source of discontent that SWAPO could draw upon, in addition, as was shown earlier, the political context was not always supportive of the counter-insurgency effort, impeding it by lack of political direction and an attractive cause. This chapter examines these drawbacks in greater detail. Two factors were especially salient. The first was that the South African authorities had to be extremely careful that its policies in Namibia should not upset the domestic South African situation or support for the war. In the second place the South African outlook was dominated by a conviction that South Africa was under threat of a communist onslaught.

Like any government embroiled in foreign military ventures, the South African authorities had to be extremely aware of domestic public opinion. Support for the Namibian war could not be taken for granted. According to Cas Bakkes, who served as commandant in the armed forces, there had been criticism from the public that their young sons were sent to war, while older officers stayed safely behind their desks in faraway Windhoek or Pretoria. Consequently any



losses on the South African side were taken extremely seriously, and losses due to friendly fire or accidents were routinely reported as combat deaths.<sup>65</sup>

It was also recognized that success, or lack thereof, in Namibia would have direct repercussions on the credibility of the South African authorities. In the first place, a SWAPO victory would inspire domestic insurgent organizations, like the ANC, and might influence their future strategies. In the second place it would have a negative effect on white morale and it was expected that a SWAPO victory in Namibia would be more traumatic for white South Africans than the end of white minority rule in Rhodesia, precisely because the SADF had been involved in Namibia. It was thus imperative that the SADF retain the trust of the South African population (Burgersake Direktief 5/78 1978:9). To this end monthly themes were laid down that were to be disseminated through speeches and interviews by senior SADF officials and their wives, and were reinforced through publications like *Paratus*<sup>66</sup> (Civic Action Directive 1/78 1978:1-2). An example of such a theme, for the month May 1979, reads: “The SADF is a tough well-trained and well-equipped force. It is willing and able to strike at our enemies. Neighbouring states will serve their own best interests by refraining from antagonizing the RSA<sup>67</sup>” (Civic Action Directive 3/79 1979:2). Promoting the image of the SADF was important, but not enough. Even more important, the public had to be convinced of the need for military intervention in Namibia.

Soviet expansionist aspirations were consistently presented as the threat that necessitated intervention in Namibia. The take-over of Namibia by a communist inspired regime would mean ‘Russians on the Orange river.’<sup>68</sup> Another propaganda theme thus read: “The loss of [Namibia] to Marxist rule will irreversibly turn the balance of power in Southern Africa against the RSA” (Civic Action Directive 3/79 1979:2). Western powers and organizations like the UN and the World Council of Churches, who objected to South Africa’s racial policies and continued occupation of Namibia, were portrayed as playing into the hands of the communists:

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<sup>65</sup> Author’s interview with Cmdt Cas Bakkes (ret.), 7 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>66</sup> The SADF magazine for family members of serving SADF members.

<sup>67</sup> The Republic of South Africa

<sup>68</sup> The Orange river in southern Namibia forms the border with South Africa.

The RSA and other moderate states that are actively threatened by the expansion of Marxist influence are being prejudiced to an increasing degree by changed Western policies. Western powers are resorting to a great extent to a selective policy on human rights in order to ingratiate themselves with the Third World, while the Marxist threat is being underestimated (White Paper 1979:1)

Not only was the communist threat ‘the cause that was sold in-house’<sup>69</sup>, South Africa’s staunch message of defending western values was also the only way by which it could hope to achieve at least some backing, albeit covertly, from the international community. In Namibia, since it was predicted that a SWAPO victory would result in a Marxist regime, SWAPO had to be consistently portrayed as “Marxist, anti-Christian, corrupt, unrepresentative and a minority of activists” (Burgersake Direktief 5/78 1978:9).

The threat of a communist-inspired regime in Namibia may have been part of the rhetoric that justified the SADF’s military intervention and ensured support of the home constituency, but according to the interviewees it was real, or at least at the time believed to be real. This shaped the terms in which the conflict was perceived, that is as a revolutionary war instead of a national liberation or anti-colonial struggle. Indeed a number of the interviewees took issue with the notion that South Africa was involved in a revolutionary war by arguing that the conflict cannot be described in Maoist terms, since Mao’s doctrine deals with a monolithic society where one class revolts against another.<sup>70</sup> Instead, the war should be seen as a national liberation struggle, or put differently: ‘We were dealing with a simple anti-colonial struggle. The people deeply disliked us, and would like to get us out.’<sup>71</sup> Since South African COIN doctrine took no account of the distinctions between a revolutionary and national independence struggle, the problem of being regarded as an illegitimate occupying foreign force was neglected.

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<sup>69</sup> Author’s interview with Maj Gen Chris van Zyl, 4 May 2010, Silverton.

<sup>70</sup> Author’s interview with prof. Louis du Plessis (ret.), 8 March 2010, Goodwood.

<sup>71</sup> Author’s interview with dr. Ian Liebenberg, 16 March 2010, SA Military Academy, Saldanha.

In the second place, the exclusive focus on the communist threat also shaped the terms in which the conflict could be discussed. Brig Gen van der Waals said on this: 'If, at the time, you said, there may be a communist threat, but there are also legitimate grievances, then you were actually pointing a finger at the government or the departments that were not doing their job properly. That was not accepted.'<sup>72</sup> According to the interviewees political correctness dominated: 'Our motto was, we serve the government of the day, but in reality we served the National Party.'<sup>73</sup> Certain things could not be said publicly, bad news was not well received and the prevailing practice was to tell political leaders like P.W. Botha what they wanted to hear.<sup>74</sup> Thus, once a course was set, it was hard to change direction. However, the SADF did warn the politicians that a solution had to be found for Namibia. From the interview with Lt Gen Gleeson:

We knew our days were numbered. The military always knew, sooner or later, there would be a black government ... The military serve the government of the day, but for the politicians to accept that they will have to give over control, that is quite different ... I can remember briefings, before the full Cabinet, in which we continuously warned them that our presence was temporary. Constand Viljoen said: You have to take the sting out of the revolution. And there is only one way to do it, it has to be done by political means. You have to decide how you will do this, we cannot make that decision for you, but it has to be a political solution for the black masses. If you can't find one, we cannot hold on forever.<sup>75</sup>

The political solution was not forthcoming. Instead, according to cmdt Frans van der Merwe, the politicians (including the State President), as well as senior military commanders clung to the hope that military action would lead to a political settlement.<sup>76</sup> Gen Constand Viljoen listed as the first problem confronting the WHAM effort of the SADF: 'The political impotence of the National Party of South Africa. An insurgency is not 'won' by military means. The final battlefield

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<sup>72</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 26 May 2010, Centurion.

<sup>73</sup> Author's interview with Lt Gen Joffel C.P. van der Westhuizen (ret.), 5 May 2010, Silverton.

<sup>74</sup> Author's interview with Prof. Deon Fourie, retired Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of South Africa (UNISA), 6 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>75</sup> Author's interview with Lt Gen Ian Gleeson (ret.), 9 March 2010, Pringle Bay.

<sup>76</sup> Author's email correspondence with Cmdt Frans van der Merwe (ret.), 25 May 2010, White River.

is a political one.<sup>77</sup> The lack of a clear political direction may have been responsible for the confusion on what the ultimate purpose of WHAM was. As was shown earlier, SADF documents articulated this purpose variously as short-term objectives in aid of the military effort, and as long-term objectives aimed at influencing the ideological mindset of the people.

The focus on a communist threat also shaped the reasons that were presented to the Namibian population for South Africa's intervention. However, in the operational zone the communist danger was not a cause that resonated with the people: 'To tell people that you were protecting them against international communist expansionism, it did not mean much to them.'<sup>78</sup> An alternative cause of ethnic autonomy, which would prevent domination by the majority Ovambo group, was rejected by the population and the international community. Thus, although as early as 1975 the South African authorities had declared that Namibians would determine their own political and constitutional future, which in principle opened the door to independence, this was perceived to be an offer on South African terms.<sup>79</sup> According to the interviewees the lack of a credible cause was a major drawback for the WHAM effort. By contrast SWAPO's cause of freedom and self-determination had great appeal: 'The moment you have an emotional cause like freedom? No school, no clinic, no tarred roads, no electricity, no shiny car can compete with that.'<sup>80</sup>

Finally, and pointing to a deep-seated division between the military and the political authorities, it was clear from the interviews that senior SADF members had a low opinion on South African politicians. Although this state of affairs will certainly not be unique to South Africa, the following example by Maj Gen Gert van Niekerk is a telling example how lacking the South African politicians were in providing clear directives:

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<sup>77</sup> Author's correspondence with Gen Constand Viljoen (ret.), 24 May 2010, Ohrigstad.

<sup>78</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen As Kleynhans (ret.) 20 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>79</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Chris Thirion (ret.), 13 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>80</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Chris van Zyl, 4 May 2010, Silverton.

We saw it time and again in Angola. Then we would say, we want to take such and such a place, we want to take out the MPLA.<sup>81</sup> Then Pik Botha<sup>82</sup> would say, 'under no circumstances will you go an inch further than where you are now.' I'm talking about conversations that took place in the western Caprivi, where military top command would discuss the war with the politicians. Then Gen Malan says: 'Colleague, first wait and listen to what these guys have to tell you.' Then we show him how we can do it, when we can do it. Then he says: 'Guys, do it tomorrow!'<sup>83</sup>

In sum, the South African political authorities presented the Namibian conflict in terms that would ensure support of its domestic constituency, and did this by consistently framing the war in terms of a communist threat. As a result underlying factors that contributed to the conflict were not acknowledged or addressed. South Africa's own presence in Namibia was the fundamental issue under contest, and when SWAPO refused to settle the conflict on South African terms the political authorities were unable to provide an alternative solution.

## 7.2 The Administration

According to doctrine, before WHAM can be implemented in an area, it must be stabilized, that is, insurgent forces must be permanently expelled so that the population can cooperate with the authorities without fear of reprisals. After stabilization, WHAM would in the first instance mean normalization, that is reinstating services that may have been disrupted by the conflict. This is the responsibility of the civil authorities, in the case of Namibia: 'the administration'.

To talk about disruption of services in the operational zone of northern Namibia may not be quite accurate, since there were few services to start with. During the South African mandate, Namibia was administered as a fifth province of South Africa under the rule of an Administrator

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<sup>81</sup> The military were required to obtain permission from the political authorities for cross-border operations that went beyond a certain distance into Angola. The MPLA (The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) had ruled Angola since 1975 and backed SWAPO.

<sup>82</sup> Then South African minister of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>83</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen Gert J.C. van Niekerk SM (ret.), 23 May 2010, Potchefstroom.

who functioned as a 'diplomat-in-residence'. Outlying regions were in essence governed by white administrators, who were derisively known as 'the bush god'. An SADF publication, *The South African Defence Forces contribution to the development of South West Africa* (Visser 1984:1) states that community services "left much to be desired". According to Col Rusty van Rooyen: 'although the administration had been there for a long time, and thought they had the necessary experience, they had actually never done much for the population ... They did not care much, they would transfer anyway after three years or so.'<sup>84</sup>

From the 1970s onwards, when it had been accepted that Namibia would eventually become independent, South Africa adopted a policy that meant to control the process of decolonisation. It included the implementation of self-governing ethnic areas and in 1985 of a transitional government (Du Pisani 2000:68-73). The South African authorities launched efforts to prepare and train regional authorities and their administrative personnel for their bureaucratic responsibilities. In Ovamboland for instance, an Ovambo minister would be assisted by an appointed white Namibian or South African civil servant. According to Gen Constand Viljoen, the administrative support by South African civil servants was inadequate and did not succeed in sufficiently developing the capabilities of local Namibian officials.<sup>85</sup> Brig Gen Gert van Niekerk, who served as commander of Ovamboland, said:

The white [civil servant] had the attitude: The Ovambo's can't do the job, I'd rather do it myself. There was no dedication to training people. But there were reasons why they gave up trying. They were confronted with a lack of ability, work ethic and management capabilities. So when the budget had to be submitted, he'd just draw it up himself, and let the minister sign.<sup>86</sup>

White civil servants were not only thought to have been indifferent to their task in preparing Namibia for independence, they were also thought to have lacked an understanding of the importance of providing good governance to the population in insurgencies; in the words of Maj

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<sup>84</sup> Author's interview with Col A.W. (Rusty) van Rooyen (ret.), 30 March 2010, Parow.

<sup>85</sup> Author's correspondence with Gen Constand Viljoen (ret.), 24 May 2010, Ohrigstad.

<sup>86</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen Gert J.C. van Niekerk SM (ret.), 23 May 2010, Potchefstroom.

Gen Gert Opperman: 'they lacked a sense of urgency.'<sup>87</sup> Several of the interviewees also observed that the personnel that was sent to rural regions was not always 'good quality'. Brig Gen Wim van der Waals said: 'In the departments [*in South Africa*] it was said, you have reached your top, but if you are willing to go to Ovamboland you'll get a promotion. You don't get the best people that way.'<sup>88</sup>

As a consequence of these factors, whether lack of dedication, ability or understanding, the SADF became extensively involved in providing public services to the population in the operational zone. It was diplomatically stated that the local authorities that were responsible for community services could not meet the demand, and that as a result the Namibian government departments approached the SADF for help (Visser 1984:2). Additional factors were that, especially in Ovamboland, conditions were not always safe for administrative personnel to work in, and that civil servants were not trained to extract information from the population, thus necessitating military involvement in any case.<sup>89</sup>

Although the fledgling administration was often happy with the SADF's assistance<sup>90</sup>, these efforts were not unanimously well received, and at times this became a source of tension, since according to Gen Georg Meiring, the SADF demonstrated the administration's incompetence.<sup>91</sup> In addition, administrative personnel felt that the SADF trespassed on their terrain:

They [the civil servants] were mainly white South Africans and they felt threatened, because the military moved in and had the wherewithal to do the job. We could spread these goodies, whereas they were struggling.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Gert Opperman (ret.), 18 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>88</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 26 May 2010, Centurion.

<sup>89</sup> Author's email correspondence with Col Johann A. Engelbrecht, 28 May 2010, Port Elizabeth.

<sup>90</sup> Author's interviews with Brig Gen As Kleynhans (ret.) 20 May 2010, Pretoria; Maj Gen Chris van Zyl, 4 May 2010, Silverton; Maj R.B. du Preez (ret.), 14 May 2010, Hartbeespoort.

<sup>91</sup> Author's interview with Gen Georg Meiring (ret.), 12 May 2010, Silverton.

<sup>92</sup> Author's interview with Lt Gen Ian Gleeson (ret.), 9 March 2010, Pringle Bay.

An SADF memorandum shows an awareness of this problem. Under discussion were well-meaning, but misguided reports in *Paratus* magazine about successful SADF projects in the Kavango and Caprivi (SWS2(SA)/789: 1979). The communiqué requested that future publications should attribute success stories to the administration instead of the SADF, and that SADF involvement should be down-played. It pointed out that the SADF effort was meant to be a support to the civil administration and warned against creating antagonism by an approach of ‘see how good we are’.

The SADF was thus in a difficult position. Although doctrine prescribed that after stabilization the administration should take responsibility for the normalization process, in practice the administration was not up to the task. According to Rusty van Rooyen this created a vacuum: ‘If you do not start immediately, SWAPO will step into the void.’<sup>93</sup> The SADF therefore had little choice but to become involved. There were unintended side-effects. The first one was that it created a perception among the population that the civil authorities had no real aim of helping them. Even worse, according to Maj Gen Chris van Zyl:

We became so effective with delivering services, that in effect we did the administrative department a disservice, because everyone knew they were not delivering the service. Maybe it would have made a difference if our troops had not worked in uniform, so that they would look like the guys from administration. In a way we lost the plot by letting them work in uniform. It defeated the object. The stature of the SADF may have been high, but it undermined the stature of the chief minister and his department.<sup>94</sup>

This, according to Gen Georg Meiring, was in the end a serious problem. He posed the question that, since the population knew that it was the SADF, and not the administration, that delivered services, and since the SADF would be leaving upon independence, who were they to vote for?<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Author’s interview with Col A.W. (Rusty) van Rooyen (ret.), 30 March 2010, Parow.

<sup>94</sup> Author’s interview with Maj Gen Chris van Zyl, 4 May 2010, Silverton.

<sup>95</sup> Author’s interview with Gen Georg Meiring (ret.), 12 May 2010, Silverton.



### 7.3 The Police

The lack of unity that dogged the South African war effort in Namibia was nowhere more apparent than in the divisions between the South African Defence Force and the South African Police (SAP). This disjuncture stemmed in particular from their differing approaches to the population. While the SADF focus was on establishing good relationships leading to voluntary cooperation, the police focus was on extracting information in the most effective manner, which often turned out to be coercive.

In 1979 a police unit was formed that was modeled on the Rhodesian Selous Scouts and became known as Koevoet. Koevoet command was made up of white policemen. Some of the Koevoet members were captured SWAPO insurgents who had been 'turned' and were known as askaris. About ninety per cent of the unit was locally recruited. To the local population Koevoet policemen were known as *makakunya* (blood suckers), while SWAPO saw them as collaborators with the South African enemy. By 1982 SWAPO had executed two hundred Koevoet policemen (O'Brien 2001:43). Koevoet's original purpose was collecting intelligence for the military, but within five years it had developed into a search-and-destroy unit. It had also graduated from foot patrols to motorized transport by the CASSPIR, a landmine-protected armoured vehicle with great off-road mobility. Koevoet became a highly efficient elite unit that is estimated to have been responsible for seventy to eighty per cent of SWAPO 'kills' in the operational zone. Black Koevoet members received *kopgeld*<sup>96</sup> for each insurgent killed (Seegers 1996: 225-6).

Koevoet's ruthless tactics were well known to the local population. They included the destruction of crops, homes and sometimes a complete *kraal*, physical abuse and torture during interrogation. Particularly offensive was Koevoet's customary way of lashing killed insurgents to the mud guards of their CASSPIRs. According to the interviews, Koevoet brutality seriously

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<sup>96</sup> Literally: head money.

compromised the SADF's WHAM efforts: 'This is someone's child, someone's husband, someone's father [...] I saw Koevoet with a heap of dead bodies on the back of a tip truck, dumping them at a *kraal*.'<sup>97</sup>

Some soldiers were dismayed by Koevoet's coercive methods, 'I think their tactics were effective, but despicable'<sup>98</sup>, but more often young troops were in awe of their Rambo-like style:

You're just like lying there, waiting for the ... ambush and the next moment you just check these Casspirs going past, and you see this big black guy sitting there with these huge dark glasses, with his 12.7 gun [...] I always used to, like, admire them. Because they had absolutely no discipline, they were always drunk. They had absolutely no discipline. You're not supposed to sit on top of an armoured car. They do. They just sit and they're wearing vellies<sup>99</sup> and they're wearing shorts. And we were like just totally organised, we're supposed to be organised and highly trained and very disciplined, but we never got close to them. When it comes to contacts<sup>100</sup> and things like that.<sup>101</sup>

Conceivably, this may have undermined the SADF's efforts at educating their troops on the importance of WHAM and treating the local population with respect. At the very minimum troops were presented with the paradox that Army Head Quarters expected them to treat the population with respect and sympathy, so that the people would withhold support from SWAPO and freely give up information, while on the ground they found Koevoet extracting information by force.<sup>102</sup>

Although Koevoet tactics were counterproductive to the WHAM effort, they did produce the *koppe*, a fact that was acknowledged during the interviews: 'Koevoet did not get the population

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<sup>97</sup> Author's interview with Gen Chris Thirion, 13 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>98</sup> National Serviceman (name withheld), in an interview with M. Cadman, 10 September 2007, Missing Voices – Oral History Project 2004-2008, Historical Papers, WITS University, Johannesburg.

<sup>99</sup> Slang for *veldskoen*, handmade South African leather field boots.

<sup>100</sup> An engagement with SWAPO insurgents.

<sup>101</sup> Sarel Theron, in an interview with M. Cadman, 13 February 2008, Missing Voices – Oral History Project 2004-2008, Historical Papers, WITS University, Johannesburg.

<sup>102</sup> Author's interview with Maj Anton Bosman, 7 March 2010, Bloubergstrand.

on your side, but they did sort out the terrorists, they got the *koppe*. Although you did not always know whose *koppe* they were.<sup>103</sup> On the other hand, according to Gen Georg Meiring, former Head of the South African Defence Force, the intelligence collected by Koevoet was of poor quality.<sup>104</sup> He concluded that:

Their way of acting in this war lost us lots of points at the time. And the more I thought of what they were doing the more I came to the conclusion that we could have done better without them. But at the time we needed more troops deployed from South Africa to be able to do that and we didn't have them. So yes, they were a benefit to us, but they were also a nuisance to us.<sup>105</sup>

It was clear to military command that Koevoet was committing atrocities, and that the army was tainted with the same brush.<sup>106</sup> Even if the stories about Koevoet were exaggerated, as some of the interviewees said, it was the perception among the local population that mattered: 'a legend may be just a story, but you're stuck with it.'<sup>107</sup> The question is therefore why the problem was not addressed. Brig Gen As Kleynhans, Senior Staff Officer responsible for WHAM in Namibia from 1981 till the end of the war, relates that in the Ovamboland sector where Koevoet mainly operated, attempts by SADF commanders to have Koevoet removed were blocked by politicians.<sup>108</sup> Gen Georg Meiring concurs that the decision to tolerate Koevoet was a result of give and take at the top level, where the minister of Police and the minister of Defence were vying for influence and power.<sup>109</sup> In another interview, and in the same vein, the point was made that Gen Geldenhuys, former Head of the SADF, tolerated Koevoet in the expectation that their undisciplined behaviour would eventually discredit the police.<sup>110</sup> This may indeed have

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<sup>103</sup> Author's interview with Andre Kruger, 18 March 2010, Langebaan.

<sup>104</sup> Author's interview with Gen Georg Meiring (ret.), 12 May 2010, Silverton.

<sup>105</sup> In an interview with M. Cadman, 14 April 2008, Missing Voices – Oral History Project 2004-2008, Historical Papers, WITS University, Johannesburg.

<sup>106</sup> Author's interview with Gen Ian Gleeson (ret.), 9 March 2010, Pringle Bay.

<sup>107</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen Gert Nel, 5 March 2010, Centurion.

<sup>108</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen As Kleynhans (ret.) 20 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>109</sup> Author's interview with Gen Georg Meiring (ret.), 12 May 2010, Silverton.

<sup>110</sup> Author's interview with Gen Chris Thirion, 13 May 2010, Pretoria.

been the only option left, or according to the response of Gen Geldenhuys himself, not a bad policy under the circumstances, since the ministers had agreed to differ on the matter, and the status quo was maintained.<sup>111</sup>

The deep disjuncture between the police and the Defence Force was not seriously addressed and remained a problem right to the end of the war. Since the population viewed the police and the army as part of the same security forces, the actions of Koevoet would have affected the attitude of the population to the South African authorities as a whole<sup>112</sup>.

#### **7.4 Within the SADF**

In response to the Namibian war, the SADF had to convert from a military force designed for conventional warfare, to one that could fight an insurgency. Part of this was that it had to adopt the principle that the hearts and minds of the population was now the objective of a war that, according to doctrine, could not be won militarily. According to Lt Col Sarel Karsten, this represented a total change in culture, and one that was not easy to achieve. Lack of unity concerning WHAM can be partly ascribed to the difficulties this process of adaptation presented.<sup>113</sup>

At top command level, according to Gen Ian Gleeson 'there was a school: if you've got them by the balls and so forth. They were not worried about winning hearts and minds. They said: we are here to shoot, forget the rest.'<sup>114</sup> This 'blood and guts' attitude, as one of the interviewees termed it, pertained especially to commanders that were temporarily brought in for big operations, but also to some commanders that were stationed in the operational zone itself.<sup>115</sup>

In the words of Maj Andre Kruger, who served with the 61 Mechanised Battalion Group: 'there

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<sup>111</sup> Author's email correspondence with Gen Jannie Geldenhuys (ret.), 22 July 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>112</sup> Author's interview with Maj Anton Bosman, 7 March 2010, Bloubergstrand.

<sup>113</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col Sarel Karsten (ret.), 11 May 2010, Kimberley.

<sup>114</sup> Author's interview with Lt Gen Ian Gleeson (ret.), 9 March 2010, Pringle Bay.

<sup>115</sup> Author's interview with Maj R.B. du Preez (ret.), 14 May 2010, Hartbeespoort.

were guys who said, Geneva conventions and pitter-patter WHAM just don't work.'<sup>116</sup> One of the interviewees, dr. Ian Liebenberg, said that while his company commander made it clear that prisoners, including SWAPO prisoners, were to be treated well, another officer told him: 'Remember, SWAPOs are not prisoners of war.'<sup>117</sup> According to Brig Gen Wim van der Waals: 'I know at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, stories came out about people being dropped from airplanes. Being disappeared. But in my time I have no knowledge about such things. But I must admit that it is one of the more extreme options that were mentioned.'<sup>118</sup> Attitudes like these tended to trickle down the ranks, and according to Maj R.B. du Preez, its influence on the lower ranks was especially bad, since it was the corporals and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants who led the patrols and represented the most frequent point of contact with the local population.<sup>119</sup>

Also hard to shake was a preoccupation with kills, or *koppe*. According to Lt Col Francois Vreÿ, commanders demonstrated their competence foremost by their effectiveness against the enemy insurgent, and only in the second place by establishing good relationships between the troops and the population.<sup>120</sup> Maj Anton Bosman said: 'Any war is about score-board thinking. It is the focus of the fighting soldier. The guys who get the kills are also the guys who get the badges and the medals. You perpetuate the system.'<sup>121</sup> Prof. Deon Visser questions how accurate the body counts could have been. He referred to a recent article on a cross-border operation against SWAPO: 'It said that SWAPO insurgents could not be recognized, because they did not wear uniforms and mixed with civilians. But later in the article [the author] gave a body count. Now if you can't recognize them by their uniforms, how do you know if the dead are civilians or insurgents? But it was important to know for the success of the operation.'<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Author's interview with Andre Kruger, 18 March 2010, Langebaan.

<sup>117</sup> Author's interview with dr. Ian Liebenberg, 16 March 2010, SA Military Academy, Saldanha.

<sup>118</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 3 March 2010, Centurion.

<sup>119</sup> Author's interview with Maj R.B. du Preez (ret.), 14 May 2010, Hartbeespoort.

<sup>120</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col [dr.] Francois Vreÿ, 17 March 2010, SA Military Academy, Saldanha.

<sup>121</sup> Author's interview with Maj Anton Bosman, 7 March 2010, Bloubergstrand.

<sup>122</sup> Author's interview with prof. Deon Visser, 16 March 2010, SA Military Academy, Saldanha.

The interviews indicated that basic military training did not prepare the troops for their role as ambassadors of South Africa's good intentions. Initially, this focused on tactical training only and soldiers underwent two weeks additional training upon arrival in the operational zone, where the importance of good relations with the populations was taught. In later years, these principles were incorporated into the basic training programme.<sup>123</sup> Still, according to the interviewees, troops did not take it very seriously and, although strictly forbidden, offences were committed against the population: 'When we used intimidation, it was important that it could not be proved, because it would get you court martialled. But often the situation was, the enemy is here, you need the information now, and you've got to make him talk.'<sup>124</sup> Lt Col Karsten added: 'When he [*the soldier*] is out on patrol, and he's scared, how much WHAM has he got left in him?'<sup>125</sup>

Punishment for transgressions was usually mild in order not to damage the morale of the troops. A memorandum by Gen Constand Viljoen deals with two cases where members of the SADF were tried for murder. In the first case, a patrol found four men in the forbidden zone. After questioning the men, the soldiers asked their (unnamed) commander for instructions and were told to "write them off", after which the soldiers released the men across the border into Angola, where they shot and killed them. The soldiers were sentenced to detention, which was then suspended. The second case concerned a soldier out on patrol, who told his fellow soldiers: "I feel like shooting myself a *kaffertjie*",<sup>126</sup> and then shot and killed a local teenage boy. He was sentenced to two years detention. Gen Viljoen writes that these cases may lead the soldier to conclude that he may be prosecuted for carrying out his task, which will damage morale. He writes that the soldier should not have to constantly doubt whether he should kill the enemy, but should consider whether immediate circumstances necessitate or justify taking possibly innocent lives (H SAW 1980:3).

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<sup>123</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col Sarel Karsten (ret.), 11 May 2010, Kimberley.

<sup>124</sup> Author's interview with dr. J.C. Kriek van der Merwe (Cmdt ret.), 26 May 2010, Centurion.

<sup>125</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col Sarel Karsten (ret.), 11 May 2010, Kimberley.

<sup>126</sup> A little kaffer. Kaffer is a derogative word for a black person.

The interviewees agreed, that although the punishment was not very strict, it did put the message across that you had to be respectful of the local population. An anecdote by Ian Liebenberg illustrates the point:

A lieutenant in my company wrongly shot at what he thought was a SWAPO, and he wounded a civilian. The guy wasn't seriously wounded, but needed to be hospitalized. Now, he wasn't stripped of his rank or anything, but our company commander forced him to march back with that guy on a stretcher. To be taken to the hospital. We laughed very much, because this soldier was very gung-ho, and this wounded civilian saw through the situation and when they would stop for a break, he would get up from his stretcher and take a walk and a leak and come back and lie down again.<sup>127</sup>

A point on which the interviewees differed, is on the question whether the SADF should have become involved in WHAM activities at all. For instance, Lt Col Freÿ thought it was unreasonable to hold basically untrained troops responsible for the implementation of WHAM, while the non-military departments should have been more visible.<sup>128</sup> Maj Gen Thirion likewise remains steadfast in his opinion that the SADF were involved in tasks that did not fall under their responsibility.<sup>129</sup> Maj Anton Bosman, who saw active duty in the operational zone, shared their opinion:

Senior command had no feeling for what was playing on the ground, but they issued the directives ... Head Quarter types, who have no tactical experience. Directives were written for WHAM, and the reports that came back were just 'feel good' feedback. But on the ground, between the population, it was not possible ... Many of their planned actions never took place.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Author's interview with dr. Ian Liebenberg, 16 March 2010, SA Military Academy, Saldanha.

<sup>128</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col [dr.] Francois Vreÿ, 17 March 2010, SA Military Academy, Saldanha.

<sup>129</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Chris Thirion (ret.), 13 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>130</sup> Author's interview with Maj Anton Bosman, 7 March 2010, Bloubergstrand.

As has been shown, the SADF was not without its internal divisions, which ranged from top level all the way down. Arising from the imperative that the SADF must convert from a conventional military force to a counterinsurgency force, contested issues were the role of the SADF in WHAM, and how much priority WHAM should have in relation to military efforts.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

We can now relate the problems that confronted the WHAM effort to the dimensions of legitimacy. These problems were threefold: the administration was unequal to the task of implementing WHAM, Koevoet's actions undermined WHAM, within the SADF dedication to WHAM was uneven. Although Mao's dictum 'the Party commands the gun' pertains equally to authorities that are confronted with an insurgency, the SADF could not rely on adequate political direction. The lack of a credible cause must be seen in comparison with SWAPO's cause, that is its promise of self-rule. Fundamentally, the South African authorities lacked identity-based legitimacy, which is concerned with who rules, rather than how they rule.

The SADF contributed to the pragmatic legitimacy of the South African authorities by offering benefits in exchange for cooperation. At the same time however, they undermined the legitimacy of the administration that was meant to govern the country after the military left, by showing up their lack of ability in providing services to the population. Koevoet's coercive style undermined the moral legitimacy of the South African authorities, which we have seen rests on an evaluation of the treatment received at the hands of the authorities. This also pertains to incidents of coercion by SADF members.

Overall the lack of unity can be said to have detracted from the perceived legitimacy of the South African authorities. The lack of a clear political cause is seen to be at the root of this, since it precluded a unified purpose and effort and facilitated a disjuncture between the SADF and the administration and police. Having linked the lack of political direction to identity-based legitimacy, the next chapter takes a closer look at aspects of identity that played a role in the conflict.



## Chapter 8 Ethnicity, culture and race

Many of the interviewees ascribed the limited success of WHAM to factors like ethnicity, culture and race. This chapter examines how preconceptions related to these factors can be understood to have played a role in the conflict, as well as its eventual outcome at the 1989 elections.

### 8.1 Ethnicity

Ethnicity was often mentioned as a reason why Kaokoveld and the Kavango and Caprivi regions were successfully pacified, while in Ovamboland, where the people had close ties with SWAPO, security was never established. The differences the interviewees identified between the peoples inhabiting the different regions, were seen to play a role in the relationships between the Ovambo people, and hence SWAPO on one side, and the people of the Kavango, Caprivi and Kaokoveld regions on the other. For instance, in Kaokoveld cooperation with the South African authorities was virtually complete, so that the SADF knew immediately when a SWAPO insurgent had been spotted<sup>131</sup>, and likewise Ovambo strangers were immediately recognized among the Caprivian population<sup>132</sup>. According to the interviews, both the Caprivian and Kavango people were distrustful of the Ovambo people, and hence SWAPO<sup>133</sup>. This was ascribed to the fact that the Ovambo people were late-comers to northern Namibia.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, many of them had migrated there from southern Angola as late as the 1920s (Kreike 2010:29). Thus, ethnic identities were seen to have had an effect on the population's willingness to cooperate with the South Africans: 'The Caprivians were more developed, they did not want to put their life on the line, because they did not trust SWAPO. There WHAM worked well, it had a much greater effect. The same in the Kavango.'<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen As Kleynhans (ret.) 20 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>132</sup> Author's interview with Cmdt Dirk du Toit (ret.), 18 March 2010, Dwarskersbos.

<sup>133</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 26 May 2010, Centurion.

<sup>134</sup> Author's interview with dr. J.C. Kriek van der Merwe (Cmdt ret.), 26 May 2010, Centurion.

<sup>135</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen As Kleynhans (ret.) 20 May 2010, Pretoria.

## 8.2 Culture

The interviewees identified lack of cultural knowledge as a factor that was underlying WHAM problems. Lt Col Karsten, a Namibian ethnologist, said: 'Enormous cultural differences had to be bridged. A question that should be asked is: Did the Ovambo people see the South Africans as the enemy, or were the South Africans just too foreign, so that cultural differences could not be overcome?'<sup>136</sup> Maj Gen Chris Thirion observed: 'There were good efforts, good people involved, good intentions, but there was also naiveté. WHAM was done by white people who were literally in a foreign land. Ethnologists were involved, but they did not understand the black culture well enough to do it properly.'<sup>137</sup> And according to Gen Georg Meiring: 'We tried to teach them Christian values, but that did not always go down well ... The whole WHAM was done from a western point of view.'<sup>138</sup> An example from the Kavango region was provided by Brig Gen Gert Nel:

An agricultural college was built, with teachers and all, but we did not get any students ... Later on we realized that it is not the man who is the farmer, but the woman. Men would not do that type of work, he ploughs the land, the woman does the rest. You cannot change that traditional culture. We did get some women, but the college was not a success, after all the millions that had been invested.<sup>139</sup>

The SADF was well aware that it was working among a population that was culturally strange to them, and that in Ovamboland had close ties with the insurgents. Ethnographers were therefore employed to provide information about the population that would help the SADF to better understand, but also control, the population. Lt Col Sarel Karsten said that commanders would ask him for knowledge they could use to 'play with their heads'.<sup>140</sup> The South African side

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<sup>136</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col Sarel Karsten (ret.), 11 May 2010, Kimberley.

<sup>137</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Chris Thirion (ret.), 13 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>138</sup> Author's interview with Gen Georg Meiring (ret.), 12 May 2010, Silverton.

<sup>139</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen Gert Nel (ret.), 5 March 2010, Centurion.

<sup>140</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col Sarel Karsten (ret.), 11 May 2010, Kimberley.

indeed exploited the cultural knowledge they had, as an example provided by Col Rusty van Rooyen illustrates:

We were interrogating a guy, he did not want to talk. We took two lengths of ordinary flex, taped one to his hand, the other to his head, and the ends to a printer. On the other side of the tent flap sits a guy with a teletypewriter, he knows the questions we're going to ask, and he knows the answers. We ask: Where are you from? And the answer comes up on the printer. Who are you? And his name appears. After the third question he was singing like a canary. He believes these wires, they can read what is in his head. You could not do this to a western guy. Superstition.<sup>141</sup>

### 8.3 Race

According to the interviewees racial attitudes played a role as well. Ethnographic knowledge that was available at the time has to be seen against the background of the highly racialized society South African soldiers grew up and lived in. Brig Gen Wim van der Waals said: 'The apartheid mentality made WHAM difficult, but on the other hand, the Afrikaner knew the black man.'<sup>142</sup> Prof. Deon Fourie amended this to: 'They believed that they knew the black man,' and said: 'Some thought that black people are not exactly the same people like themselves.'<sup>143</sup> How differences between white and black were understood is illustrated by a series of quotations from an SADF publication (Burgersake Agtergrondreeks no.6 1977:ii-iv):

Strength is the only factor that the Bantoe<sup>144</sup> really respects.

The Bantoe states the case as he thinks you would like to hear it, or as it suits him best and he regards it as very clever to deceive someone.

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<sup>141</sup> Author's interview with Col A.W. (Rusty) van Rooyen (ret.), 30 March 2010, Parow.

<sup>142</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen [dr.] Wim van der Waals (ret.), 3 March 2010, Centurion.

<sup>143</sup> Author's interview with Prof. Deon Fourie, retired Professor of Strategic Studies at the University of South Africa (UNISA), 6 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>144</sup> Related to the word Bantu, plural of the word Ntu. Bantu is a general term referring to people from middle and southern Africa who are speakers of the Bantu language group. South Africans used the word Bantoe as a general term to refer to a black person, regardless of ethnicity.

Higher norms like empathy do not exist ... he does not accept qualities like reliability, loyalty and responsibility.

Although notions like these are seldom heard in modern-day South Africa, they were prevalent at the time. Conditions in the operational zone may however have facilitated a departure from ingrained racial attitudes. After all, black and white troops were often required to live and fight in close proximity. Gen Constand Viljoen identified a positive effect of WHAM as having exposed young white troops to the culture of racially different people, and having contributed to a mutual respect and appreciation.<sup>145</sup> Prof. Annette Seegers pointed out that the following statement, taken from a handbook for soldiers on the customs and traditions of the Ovambo people, could therefore be regarded as an implicitly progressive act, since it indicates a subtle departure from the earlier quotations<sup>146</sup>:

We will achieve [our purpose] by getting the population on our side. This is a difficult task, because the population's culture differs from ours and they are constantly intimidated by the terrorists. But we have to remember that they are people just like us.<sup>147</sup>

During the interviews two preconceptions about race were especially noticeable. The first one centred on the belief that black people follow strong leaders. The second was a lack of discernment of cross-cutting divisions in the Namibian population.

### *Strong men*

The belief that black people follow strong leaders was at the root of the SADF alliances with local leaders. According to Gen Jannie Geldenhuys: 'In semi-primitive societies violence is a big

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<sup>145</sup> Author's correspondence with Gen Constand Viljoen (ret.), 24 May 2010, Ohrigstad.

<sup>146</sup> Author's interview with prof. Annette Seegers, University of Cape Town, 23 March 2010, Cape Town.

<sup>147</sup> Source: '*Sektor 10 - Die Soldaat se Handboek oor Owambo*' (Sector 10 – The Soldier's Hand Book on Ovamboland), a photocopied document distributed among soldiers in the operational area. Copy in author's possession. According to Sarel Karsten (interviewed by author, 11 May 2010, Kimberley) the document is probably based on work by ethnologists who worked for the SADF: Sarel Karsten, Basjan van Niekerk, Salome Visser.

factor: the strongest man wins. If you want a good life, you have to support the strongest man. It is the way it works in Africa. In other parts of the world the behaviour of such leaders might be considered criminal.<sup>148</sup> As was previously noted, many local headmen had been appointed by the South African authorities. They were often unpopular among the population because of their dictatorial style and brutal repression of dissent. For instance, in Ovamboland and the Kavango the tribal authorities used corporal punishment, including public floggings, against SWAPO supporters (Toase 1985:204). Maj Gen Opperman described the headmen as unsophisticated and out to protect their own interests. He tells that they would sentence people to floggings for minor transgressions: 'and I was dumbfounded, because I discovered that the person who administered the lashes could not count. The sentence was ten lashes, and he would give them twenty-five.'<sup>149</sup>

Apart from indirect rule through strong leaders, the SADF itself also needed to project a strong man image. The effort to gain the cooperation of the people was seen not just as a competition between the SADF and SWAPO for the hearts and minds of the population, but also who could put up the most convincing show of strength. Accordingly, the SADF show-cased their military strength at public events by demonstrations of modern weapons. The message that the South Africans would bring prosperity was thus underpinned by a show of force: 'opposition to the SADF was fought with underlying fear.'<sup>150</sup> Maj Gen Gert Opperman provided an example of an instance where South Africa's strong man image was damaged:

WHAM can only work when you have a strong man image. When you lose it, you don't have the same effect. It happened when Moshake came back<sup>151</sup>. The population could not understand why the SADF first fought CANU, when they were still with SWAPO, and then let them return. Why didn't they shoot them?<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Author's interview with Gen Jannie Geldenhuys (ret.), 24 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>149</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Gert Opperman (ret.), 18 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>150</sup> Author's email correspondence with Japie van der Westhuizen, 31 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>151</sup> Moshake Muyongu, leader of the Caprivi African National Union (CANU). CANU merged with SWAPO in 1964, but split again in 1980, after which CANU became part of the South African initiated Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (Leys and Saul 1995:32;63).

<sup>152</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Gert Opperman (ret.), 18 May 2010, Pretoria.

### *Cross-cutting divisions*

The return of CANU shows up a second problem of South African views of the black population of Namibia, in that it was essentially seen as made up of leaders with an undifferentiated mass of followers. Opperman went on to say:

Internal politics came into play. The returning [CANU] leaders challenged the traditional authorities ... The intellectuals could no longer accept the arbitrary, dictatorial style of the leaders. The educated people offered a new perspective ... In the bigger picture it was good that SWAPO and CANU split, so you let CANU return, it made sense, but suddenly it was harder to keep the peace than to win the war.

According to the interviewees, these cross-cutting cleavages had their effect right through the operational zone. Local nurses, teachers and religious leaders, who were well respected by the population, were politically more sophisticated and rejected traditional forms of leadership. Similarly, as more schools were built and young people became better educated, they increasingly challenged the authority of their leaders.<sup>153</sup> In this respect, Louis du Plessis identified an unintended effect of modernization by means of WHAM: 'When you have a highly developed force operating in a less developed society, some influence will flow from the more to the less developed. Eventually the less developed want to have democracy, and will also become better equipped to mobilize the population and run an insurgency.'<sup>154</sup> Indeed, the better educated among the population tended to be SWAPO supporters, a fact that was widely known among the SADF forces, but was not addressed: 'WHAM was not aimed at the elite groups ... Psychological action had absolutely no impact on the intelligentsia.'<sup>155</sup> Brig Gen van Niekerk was tasked with trying to improve relations with the local churches in Ovamboland, but made no headway: 'Bishop Auala<sup>156</sup> came right out and said: we don't want you here.'<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen Gert J.C. van Niekerk SM (ret.), 23 May 2010, Potchefstroom.

<sup>154</sup> Author's interview with Prof. Louis du Plessis (Col ret.), 8 March 2010, Goodwood.

<sup>155</sup> Author's interview with Maj Gen Chris Thirion (ret.), 13 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>156</sup> Bishop Leonard Auala (1908-1983), first Namibian bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN).

## 8.4 Elections

The ethnic, cultural and racial preconceptions of the South Africans that were outlined above, played a role in their expectations of the eventual election outcomes, as well as their explanations of why the actual results differed so widely from these expectations. Before the elections, the South Africans had predicted that SWAPO would have a majority in Ovamboland, but would not do well in the rest of Namibia.<sup>158</sup> This neglected cross-cutting divisions within the population, for instance the fact that people might vote for SWAPO because this offered an opportunity to rid themselves of unpopular traditional leaders. South African expectations about election outcomes were based on the belief that local headmen controlled the votes of the people: 'For the population voting was totally new, their vote was determined by what the headman dictated. People did not make an active choice.'<sup>159</sup> Illustrating this, Brig Gen Gert van Niekerk tells how at a local election in Ovamboland, the vice-headman arrived with a brown bag filled with identity cards and told the officials that he had come to vote on behalf of his people.<sup>160</sup> A series of assumptions followed from the belief that the headmen would tell people how to vote: that many headmen were sympathetic to the South African side; that they would choose to vote against SWAPO; that they would tell their people to do so; and that the majority of people would obey.

As it turned out, in the national elections of 1989, SWAPO won close to sixty per cent of the vote nationwide. The explanations offered for this unexpected success ranged widely. A first one was that South Africa wanted to be rid of the expensive and draining war in Namibia at any cost. Since a SWAPO defeat was expected to lead the movement to return to the armed struggle, the South Africans therefore orchestrated a SWAPO victory.<sup>161</sup> A second one was that SWAPO committed fraud by overstuffing and disappearing ballot boxes. SWAPO intimidation

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<sup>157</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen Gert J.C .van Niekerk SM (ret.), 23 May 2010, Potchefstroom.

<sup>158</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col Sarel Karsten (ret.), 11 May 2010, Kimberley.

<sup>159</sup> Author's interview with Col A.W. (Rusty) van Rooyen (ret.), 30 March 2010, Parow.

<sup>160</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen Gert J.C .van Niekerk SM (ret.), 23 May 2010, Potchefstroom.

<sup>161</sup> Author's interview with Helmoed-Römer Heitman, 1 April 2010, Cape Town.

was a third explanation offered, and here the theme returned to the strong man image. Especially the so-called Nine Days War<sup>162</sup> was seen to have consolidated SWAPO's position: 'In spite of the strong man image of the SADF, a large percentage voted for SWAPO out of fear. On that day SWAPO was the strong man.'<sup>163</sup> This was coupled to the fact that since the SADF had left Namibia, the population had no-one to protect them against SWAPO: 'Now you have general elections, who are you going to vote for? The *boere* have left, they cannot look after you anymore.'<sup>164</sup>

The explanation put forward most frequently for SWAPO's election success was related to ethnicity, 'blood is thicker than water'<sup>165</sup>, and demographics, 'the Ovambo's were dominant, sooner or later they would have political power.'<sup>166</sup> The role of race as a polarizing cleavage was acknowledged as well: 'Development aid by SADF units will not detract the average black man from his preference, in case of elections, to vote for black leaders.'<sup>167</sup>

## 8.5 Conclusion

From the interviews it was seen that ethnic divisions among the population, especially as they related to fear of the dominant Ovambo people, were perceived to have contributed to the success of WHAM among minority groups. On the other hand, the interviewees identified lack of cultural knowledge as a factor that hampered these efforts. Underlying racial preconceptions relating to group homogeneity and the importance of a strong-man image underpinned SADF approaches to the Namibia population.

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<sup>162</sup>On 1 April 1989, after an agreement had been reached that elections would be held in Namibia and the joint SADF and South West African forces accordingly had been largely demobilized, a force of armed SWAPO insurgents crossed the Angolan border into Namibia. With UN permission, a specified number of South African forces and Koevoet units were re-deployed. When nine days later the fighting ended, more than three hundred SWAPO insurgents and thirty police and soldiers had been killed. While the South Africans and the UN believed that the incursion constituted a threat to the overall transition process that necessitated intervention, SWAPO maintained that the insurgents were reporting to UN checkpoints for confinement to base under UN supervision (Atwood 1990:23-25).

<sup>163</sup> Author's interview with Lt Col Sarel Karsten (ret.), 11 May 2010, Kimberley.

<sup>164</sup> Author's interview with Gen Georg Meiring (ret.), 12 May 2010, Silverton.

<sup>165</sup> Author's interview with Brig Gen As Kleynhans (ret.) 20 May 2010, Pretoria.

<sup>166</sup> Author's interview with Prof. Louis du Plessis (Col ret.), 8 March 2010, Goodwood..

<sup>167</sup> Author's email correspondence with Prof. Louis du Plessis (Col ret.), 29 July 2010, Goodwood.



In the previous chapter it was shown that the South African authorities' lack of legitimacy was rooted in the population's perception that the South Africans were foreign occupiers. This chapter has shown that to the SADF the population among whom they had to work were equally alien. Trying to make sense of SWAPO's election victory, the interviewees offered explanations that point to the salience of identity-based legitimacy, which may be summed up in the words of prof. Annette Seegers: 'Self-determination is very powerful. You prefer your own people, warts and all.'<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Author's interview with prof. Annette Seegers, University of Cape Town, 23 March 2010, Cape Town.

## Chapter 9 Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that different dimensions of legitimacy are addressed by counterinsurgency theories and WHAM doctrine. For instance, offering socio-economic benefits in exchange for cooperation was seen to increase pragmatic legitimacy, while reforms and respectful treatment of the population increase moral legitimacy. However, in the Namibian conflict, two forms of legitimacy were identified that are not addressed by COIN and WHAM doctrine. First, South Africa lacked legal legitimacy in the international arena as a result of its refusal to leave Namibia after its mandate was terminated. Second, within Namibia, South Africa lacked identity-based legitimacy through its very presence as a foreign occupying or colonial power. These last two factors were seen to strengthen each other and constituted SWAPO's basis for international support and its cause of self-determination, by which it aimed to establish its own legitimacy among the Namibian population.

The struggle between SWAPO and the South Africans for the population's cooperation played out especially in Ovamboland, where neither of the two sides were able to establish full control. Moreover, the struggle was defined by the insurgents' use of selective violence against those who collaborated with the South African side. According to the earlier discussion on coercion, in a contested area people will cooperate with those they fear, instead of with those they prefer, especially when violence specifically targets individual collaborators. Differently put, in Ovamboland coercion trumped legitimacy. This raises the question whether legitimacy becomes irrelevant in contested areas.

This thesis argues that in Namibia this was not so, especially since the South African side steadily made progress in denying SWAPO access to the population. At a minimum the provision of socio-economic benefits would have afforded the South African authorities a measure of pragmatic legitimacy. However, as was seen, WHAM efforts were undermined in several aspects by counter-acting factors. A first and foremost problem was identified as the lack of political

direction. There was a lack of a credible alternative cause to compete with SWAPO's message of self-rule. The fact that the South Africans were perceived as a foreign occupying power constituted a lack in identity-based legitimacy. In the second place there was a lack of unity regarding the priority of WHAM within the SADF, as well as between the SADF and other security practitioners. Coercive practices, foremost by the police unit Koevoet, created fear and resentment. While this helped to clear Ovamboland of insurgents, it also effected a decrease in moral legitimacy. In the third place, the fact that the SADF was the main provider of services to the population had the unintended side-effect of demonstrating the lack of capabilities of the Namibian administration. This is an important consideration in a conflict where it is known that the foreign authorities and their military forces will eventually leave.

The final contest in Namibia came at election time and was, not between SWAPO and the South African authorities, but between SWAPO and the domestic authority structures that had been instituted by the South Africans. It was the legitimacy of the domestic authorities that was therefore the more salient. Since they were tainted by their close association with the South Africans, and were perceived to have collaborated with the foreign occupiers, the lack of legitimacy that dogged the South African authorities may have pertained to them in a large measure.

Counterinsurgency theory holds that insurgencies and civil wars are settled by political, and not military means. This means that they end at the negotiating table and increasingly in modern times, at the ballot box. Therefore, even in contested areas, where the behaviour of the people is shaped more by coercion than by preference, perceived legitimacy will play an important role in the long term outcome of the conflict. In conflicts where foreign powers are the main opponents of the insurgents, legitimacy is therefore of importance to both those powers and the domestic government that has been installed or supported by them.

Having examined the role legitimacy played in the Namibian war, a remaining question is whether it has lessons to teach regarding contemporary conflicts. This thesis argues that indeed it has, especially on the current conflict in Afghanistan. On the face of it there are great differences, since SWAPO enjoyed international support, while the Taliban has no support in

western circles. And vice versa, while the South Africans lacked international legitimacy, the coalition forces by their very nature represent an international venture. However, when examining Stanley McChrystal's assessment of the Afghan situation, dating from August 2009, we see the coalition forces confronted with similar problems the SADF had, such as a lack of resources, the conversion of a conventional force to a counterinsurgency force, as well as a lack of unity of effort and command (McChrystal 2009:2-1). Further parallels are the existence of historical grievances, an inability to protect the population from insurgent coercion, a domestic government suffering a 'crisis of confidence' and finally, opposition to foreign intervention (2009:2-4).

Apart from all these another parallel is detected in the opening paragraph of the Commander's Summary, where it says: "if the Afghan government falls to the Taliban – or has insufficient capability to counter transnational terrorists – Afghanistan could again become a base for terrorism" (2009: 1-1). This reminds one of the warning that if Namibia falls to SWAPO, the Russians will be on the Orange river. As we saw, the communist threat did not resonate with the Namibian population and largely served to bolster support of the home constituency. The parallel with the Afghan conflict is not hard to see.

A last parallel, the South African cause was the promise of self-governing ethnic regions. It was rejected, although not by the leaders the South African authorities had instituted. What is ISAF's cause? Perhaps the quote by Minister Wardak that ends the Commander's Summary offers a clue: "Afghans have never seen you as occupiers, ... you enabled us to write a democratic constitution and choose our own government" (2009: 1-4). A question is whether the majority of the Afghan people set much store by western democratic principles.

McChrystal concedes that both the Karzai government, due to its ineptness and corruption, and the ISAF forces, due to high numbers of civilian casualties and collateral damage, suffer from a lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the population (2009:2-8-10). The proposed solutions focus on better governance and improved relations between ISAF and the population (2009:2-15). In terms of legitimacy, they are thus seen to focus on pragmatic and moral legitimacy. This leaves an underlying dilemma unaddressed, that is that ISAF and the Karzai regime suffer from a lack of identity-based legitimacy, which is concerned with *who*

governs, and not with *how* the authorities govern. By association the Karzai government is regarded as a foreign installed regime. As we saw, when South Africa left, SWAPO took power. This does not bode well for the future. The assessment by McChrystal therefore seems overly optimistic in its expectation that better government and relations with the population will increase the legitimacy of ISAF, and maybe even the Karzai government, in their perception.

The conceptualization of insurgency conflicts in terms of legitimacy offers a greater understanding of the perplexities that confront counterinsurgent forces and, of vital importance in an insurgency, of underlying reasons why people may, or may not, respond to efforts at winning their hearts and minds. It thus allows insights into dimensions of conflicts that may previously have been overlooked, and this thesis has taken a first step in outlining some of these dimensions. While current counterinsurgency theories and WHAM doctrine already pay great attention to ways of increasing pragmatic and moral legitimacy, possible avenues of future research may shed more light on processes by which identity-based legitimacy is established and would concern questions such as whether different dimensions of legitimacy carry the same weight.

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