

Crucial for women and for peace

COLONELS AND CADRES: WAR AND GENDER IN SOUTH AFRICA by Jacklyn Cock, Oxford University Press, 1992.

By DEIRDRE MOYLE

A war resister went away from the first meeting between members of the South African Defence Force and umKhonto weSizwe in Lusaka in 1990 with an interesting anecdote.

At the start of the Idasa-sponsored talks, the war resisters – due to one of the many ironies of South African political life – took on the role of facilitators between the two “enemy” parties in order to get the meeting going. Later during informal discussions out of session, and much to their horror, the war resisters found themselves excluded as the “men of war” on both sides relaxed and got down to the pleasurable task of debating the merits of different rocket systems and armaments.

“Colonels and Cadres” is about the opening of that kind of space for discussion and debate on the subject of gender.

In a country marked by great divides, the identities that come into play first in South Africa are usually along the often monolithic axis of race and class.

But the issues are certainly not as clear as black and white. Between and behind those two obvious identities lurk a myriad of others that play out in a complex discourse of interest and experience.

Cock, a Wits university sociologist, has chosen to take gender identity within the context of the militarisation of South African society. This militarisation, she argues, has a profound effect on gender identity and relations as it constructs a powerful and contradictory discourse around women. It allows women to participate in the military, but rarely fight. It allows women to be set up as the noble reason for waging war, but at the same time conquering weakness (as seen as the eternal internal feminine) is the inner battle of every soldier.

To get into this debate, Cock starts with, sadly, the weakest chapter in the book. Her detailed argument to state the case that South Africa is in a “twilight state of war” reads rather like heads of legal argument.

From there she separates the discussion across the enemy lines through a series of interviews that look at the so-called “protectors” – the SADF – and then whom they are protecting – white women. Across the divide are the opponents of apartheid – the resisters

and MK. The experiences of women in both the SADF and MK have remarkable parallels, which give powerful weight to Cock’s argument that the military constructs gender relations in a profound way that cuts across the ideological terrain. From there it is a short distance to argue that gender relations need to be changed away from the “protector” and the “protected” in order to avoid the risk of war.

Her interviews with the women in the SADF are particularly interesting. On one level they give some insight into an area that hasn’t been given that much coverage, but also the colonels come across as very open. While this does raise the question of one’s own assumptions (and perhaps prejudices), obviously Cock was also taken by it. In one of the rare personal descriptions of an informant Cock refers to the first woman brigadier as “an extremely likable, articulate and honest woman”. On the other hand, the interviews with the women in MK are less interesting and generally more ideologically rote. Their criticisms and difficulties in MK are guarded and hastily justified.

The technique of using informants as the basis of the book gives good descriptive and, in many cases, new detail. But I found two aspects of it irritating. The informants were not identified except for some basic bio-

graphic information. But in many cases they were identifiable. For example, how many 75-year-old women are there on the President’s Council? Making the reader work out the informant’s name distracts from the book and becomes a sub-plot of trivial pursuit.

This raises my second point. Cock does not give any account of her methodology so one doesn’t know the criteria she used in selecting her subjects. For purely descriptive information this is not problematic, but Cock runs into problems on the few occasions that she does generalise from her informants.

Part of the avoidance of the issues around methodology could have been that the book wasn’t targeted clearly in terms of its market and so slips between a sociological text and a more popular overview. While this makes the book read a bit unevenly, it certainly does not detract from it and the very real issues it raises.

For women these issues are urgent as they are caught in a splintered and contradictory image of themselves...as “damned whores and God’s police”. For South Africa, these issues are crucial if we want to find a way of settling differences without immediately raising guns.

Deirdre Moyle is the chief sub-editor on the *Cape Times*

Letters

A little patience needed?

I wonder whether Dr Karel Roskam (author of “Racist Parties – what fate? in your last issue) is aware that for most of its 80 years the ANC has been a racially defined organisation?

He writes, rather loosely, that “over the years the ANC held the view that racist organisations should be prohibited in a democratic South Africa”.

In 1959, while living in East London, I applied to join the ANC through its Port Elizabeth office. They replied that it was not their policy to enrol “European” members and referred me to the Congress of Democrats, their partners in the multi-racial Congress Alliance.

My information is that not until 1985, at

its Kabwe Conference, was ANC membership opened to others than blacks.

Does this suggest that, while not encouraging them, we should have a measure of patience with other organisations which are trapped in a racial mould – rather than banning them.

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HSRC close

With regard to your paragraph, “so much for statistics” in the column *Ja-Nee*, please note that a comparison of the HSRC survey results and the referendum results reveals that the HSRC results are, with three exceptions only, within 5 per cent of the actual referendum results.

Robbert van der Kooy
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