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People's War: new light on the struggle for South Africa by
Anthea Jeffery (review)

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Review

Anthea Jeffery (2019) *People's War: new light on the struggle for South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball.

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Introduction

The publication of Anthea Jeffery's book, *People's War*, in 2009 was met with controversy and impassioned debate. Among those who took up the cudgels against the book were journalists such as Drew Forrest who characterised it as a 'tract masquerading as history' and accused Jeffery and the organisation she works for, the South African Institute of Race Relations, of 'dizzy romance' with Mangosuthu Buthelezi, the leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party. Also incensed by the book were ANC grandees such as Mac Maharaj and Pallo Jordan. In his column in the *Sunday Times*, Maharaj (2009) disputed strongly Jeffery's interpretation of the history of South Africa, especially the violent decade of 1980 to early 1990s. For her part, Jeffery responded to every criticism and slight directed at her and her book. In the case of Maharaj, for instance, she (2009) accused him of ignoring what she considered compelling evidence contained in the book, which supported her central thesis.

A decade after publishing the book, Jeffery has published a revised and abridged version of *People's War* (2019). The abridged version mirrors the original version in several important respects. She repeats the claim she made in the 2009 version, which is that during the Soviet Union instigated and funded visit to Vietnam by its delegation in 1978 the ANC learned of the people's war strategy, which it adopted and started implementing from the early 1980s. The people's war, Jeffery claims, is different from conventional war in that it combines political mobilisation and organisation with a programme of violence such as bomb attacks and other guerilla tactics. The crucial element of a people's war, she claims, is that it seeks

to draw ‘large numbers of people into a range of revolutionary structures – and communication: propaganda, in a nutshell’ (29). In people’s war, no distinction is drawn between combatants and civilians. Even children as old as ten are considered weapons of war, who are expendable in the same way weapons are in a conventional war (29). The key objective of a people’s war is to gain political power and hegemony by weakening and destroying political opponents (4). The Viet Cong successfully used the strategy against the Saigon government, which is the reason why the Soviet Union implored the ANC to visit Vietnam with a view of implementing a similar strategy in South Africa.

The ANC’s implementation of the people’s war strategy

The major outcome of the ANC delegation’s visit to Vietnam was the adoption of the people’s war strategy by its National Executive Committee (NEC). For a decade, beginning from the early 1980s right through the political negotiations that led to the first all-inclusive democratic elections in 1994, the ANC implemented the people’s war strategy. One of the major factors that drove the ANC to resort to people’s war was its declining political fortunes inside South Africa, which saw it lose political ground to new political formations such as Steve Biko’s Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and, most importantly, Mangosuthu Buthelezi’s Inkatha. Jeffery claims that from 1984 the ANC embarked on a ruthless programme of terror and violence, which included undermining and attacking institutions of the state and assassinating its representatives in black townships across the country. One of the gruesome methods of terror used was the necklacing in which those who were considered ‘collaborators’ with the apartheid state were doused with petrol and burned alive. The violent conflict the people’s war strategy brought about sowed so much fear in the affected communities to the extent that those who ordinarily would have opposed the ANC were cowed into submission.

Jeffery makes three controversial contentions in addition to the central thesis of the ANC’s people’s war strategy. The first, which she addresses in chapters four, five and six, is that the unbanning of the ANC in 1990 did not stop it from waging a people’s war. In fact, it intensified it, which resulted in more than 15,000 being killed between 1990 and 1995. Jeffery claims that the ANC used the political negotiations process cynically as partly a ploy to advance its people’s war in order to weaken and vanquish its opponents. Second, following the controversial contention she made in

the 2009 version of the book, she dismisses the role played by the apartheid state as well as the IFP in instigating the violence that engulfed South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s. She identifies the ANC as having been the principal aggressor and portrays Buthelezi and his Inkatha as having been both the main target and victim of the ANC's people's war. The evidence for this is thousands of Inkatha members and hundreds of its leaders who were killed during the violent conflict.

In cases where the Inkatha supporters were clearly involved in the violence as aggressors, such as in the notorious Boipatong massacre, Jeffery presents those incidents as IFP supporters either retaliating to prior ANC attacks or defending themselves (181). Significantly (and perhaps most controversially), she disputes existence and role of the 'third force', attributing the third force theory to the effective use of propaganda by the ANC. Jeffery dismisses the role played by well-known state assassins such as Eugene de Kock and the askaris such as Almond Nofomela as isolated incidents of rogue elements. In fact, Jeffery credits the apartheid state's covert activities such as 'extrajudicial executions' as having been 'effective in reducing unrest' of the 1980s (98). Selectively quoting Jeremy Seekings, she claims that the state's actions were 'not particularly brutal by comparison with undemocratic regimes elsewhere in the world' (98).

In the last chapter of the book, Jeffery discusses at length her contention that the ANC has used and continues to use the power of the state to implement the second phase of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR). The evidence she puts forward to support this argument includes what she describes as the systematic weakening of Parliament by the ANC; the inclusion of socio-economic rights in the Constitution; the ANC's policy of cadre deployment; black economic empowerment (BEE); the proposal for a National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme; and the proposed expropriation of land without compensation (EWC), to mention but a few (295-7). Every ANC president since 1994, including the incumbent, has been implementing the NDR, she claims. In the case of Ramaphosa, Jeffery lists a number of examples to support the claim that he too subscribes to the 'destructive' NDR agenda (303-4).

Assessment of the argument and the evidence

Perhaps reflecting the change in political circumstances in South Africa since the publication of *People's War* in 2009, the revised and abridged 2019 version reviewed here has not attracted the attention and negative

reviews that the original one received. This is despite the fact that Jeffery has doubled-down on her central thesis and pursues it with remarkable determination and single-mindedness. It is this simplicity and focus on one single argument, what Jeremy Gordin (2019) calls a hedgehog's view of the ANC, to explain a very complex period in South African history, that is the book's strength. Although there are many aspects of the book that are disagreeable (I discuss them in the remainder of the review), what Jeffery has achieved through this book is to present a different view and interpretation of a turbulent period of the country's history. The enormous evidence that she has evidently painstakingly assembled to support her main argument makes it difficult to dismiss summarily the book as a 'tract masquerading as history' (Forrest 2009). It is a controversial interpretation of history that is worthy of serious attention.

Having said that, the simplicity of the central argument and the dogged manner in which it is pursued, almost at all cost, is also the book's major weakness. In setting out to prove her case that the ANC's main focus over the past four decades has been singular pursuit of a destructive people's war, Jeffery either ignores or dismisses important historical facts that run counter to her point of view. For instance, her contention that the popular uprising that started in Sebokeng in the Vaal in 1984 and spread to other black townships in almost all the provinces was instigated by and directed by the exiled ANC through its internal surrogates and underground uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) operatives is not borne by the facts. Several scholars and writers who have had something to say about the period Jeffery covers in *People's War* suggest that the popular uprisings of the early 1980s, including the Sebokeng one, were not directed primarily by the ANC as part of its strategy of a people's war. At the time of the uprisings, the ANC was not significantly present in townships to instigate and direct the events. This is the point that Mac Maharaj, who was responsible for building political structures inside the country at the time made. His observation on this matter is worth quoting at length:

In Vietnam, armed units went into villages and addressed the people, but they left someone behind to do political work. This was my approach: armed propaganda was the detonator. There had to be hands-on political leadership to which the military was subordinate, not vice versa. Senior leadership was needed in the country to give order and direction to integrated structures on the ground. *The Vaal uprising in 1984, for example, took place in a power vacuum. We were not ready or able to exploit fully the potential unleashed by these uprisings.* (Maharaj in O'Malley 2008:226, emphasis added)

Maharaj's view on the matter is not an isolated one. Writing about the same uprising that began in the Vaal and spread to the Eastern Cape and various townships in the Transvaal, Lodge and Nasson reach a similar conclusion to Maharaj. While acknowledging the role played by the ANC's call to make the country ungovernable, they dispute that the ANC or the United Democratic Front (UDF) for that matter had any role in organising the uprising. In reality, they observe, 'the momentum for the struggle came from local institutions, although some regional UDF leaders were able to harness local energies and build organisations around township grievances' (1991:76). Lodge and Nasson point out that in most cases, the leadership of the UDF was 'often compelled to become followers' (1991:76) of the uprising that was organised from below. The question that Jeffery ignores to address in her dogged determination to prove that the ANC was directing the struggle in pursuit of a people's war is whether a banned and exiled political organisation such as the ANC would have been able to lead a rebellion that the UDF leaders were not able to direct.

Jeffery's dismissal of evidence that runs counter to her thesis is also evident in other parts of the book. The dismissal of the so-called third force theory of violence is a case in point. According to her, journalists who reported on the existence of the third force were either 'closet members of the ANC' or the SACP (10). Alternatively, they reported on existence of the third force even though there was little evidence to support their reports. Her tactic of questioning the bona fides of those who held different points of view is apparent in her treatment of various reports of the Goldstone Commission. She writes approvingly about cases in which the Goldstone Commission found no evidence of existence of the third force (6-7), but smears the commission for being 'increasingly partisan to the ANC over time' (7) for finding prima facie evidence of existence of the third force.

Related to Jeffery's dismissal of the third force theory of violence is her partiality to the Inkatha Freedom Party and its leader, Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Her version is that Buthelezi was the main victim of the ANC's people's war and his IFP bore the brunt of the violence that it (the ANC) unleashed. In cases where IFP members were proven to have instigated the violence, she explains such violence as having either been retaliatory or motivated by frustration arising from various acts of aggression by ANC supporters. Jeffery's writing on the infamous Boipatong massacre, which took place on the night of June 17, 1992, reflects this biased narrative. For her, the massacre was not an act of aggression, but a retaliatory

attack after countless provocations of the IFP-aligned KwaMadala hostel dwellers, who were constantly attacked and some murdered by ANC members, who lived at Boipatong. ‘Such attacks’, she points out, ‘bred a hatred which was then further fueled by the Crossroads and Zonkesizwe (*sic*) massacres in April 1992’ (181). The hostel dwellers were infuriated further when the ANC aligned youths ‘began moving through Boipatong in search of enemies’ (181). The youths killed perceived IFP members, which resulted in the “‘familiar barbecue smell of burning Inkatha sympathisers’” (Jeffery quoting an observer, 182). She mentions these gory details to, at best, give context to and, at worst, condone the random murder of 45 civilians, including women and children. It is important to add at this point that the two incidents of violence and murder of IFP members that she mentions as having fueled hatred that led to the Boipatong massacre, the Zonkizwe and Crossroads killings, did not take place in Boipatong, but in the East Rand township of Katlehong. Her linking of the two incidents to Boipatong appears to be intended to whitewash what was a gruesome and coldblooded massacre.

Finally, chapter 9 of the book deserves comment. In this chapter, Jeffery seeks to extend her argument of the ANC’s people’s war to cover the post-apartheid era. She opens the chapter by making a remarkable claim that the democracy that was ushered in from April 1994 was a ‘hollowed-out democracy, a shell without the substance’ (279). Predictably, she blames the ANC’s pursuit of the people’s war strategy for this. In her book, the democracy is hollowed because the ANC destroyed its political opponents, which has diminished any prospect of it losing political power. By defining a democratic system so narrowly, Jeffery ignores all other important elements such as an independent judiciary, the free press, the political and civil liberties that are enjoyed by citizens. Political opposition, she suggests, is effective only if it stands a chance to win political power, which is of course inaccurate.

Jeffery dedicates a substantial section of the last chapter trying to prove that the ANC has been pursuing a destructive NDR programme over the past quarter century, which has led to increasing poverty and joblessness in South Africa. While the ANC learned the people’s war strategy from the communist Vietnam, the NDR is taken from the evil empire itself, the former Soviet Union (282-4). As proof of the ANC’s pursuit of the NDR, she lists policies such as BEE, labour laws, social grants, socio-economic rights, and literally every legislation that has been passed over the past 25

years (see 295-7). Even Ramaphosa, she claims, is on the same destructive path. The proof is that he (Ramaphosa) has not implemented any reforms to reverse the NDR. Rather, he has doubled down on BEE, supports the National Health Insurance (NHI) and has not opposed the proposal for the expropriation of land without compensation (see 303-4). Painting different political figures such as Mandela, Mbeki, Zuma and Ramaphosa with the same brush of the NDR based on ANC conference resolutions is problematic. Furthermore, the selective use of examples to support her deprecation of the NDR is also disingenuous. It is instructive that on her long list of destructive ANC government policies, she leaves out a conservative macroeconomic strategy such as the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR). She opposes progressive sections of the Constitution such as the entrenchment of socio-economic rights, but keeps quiet about the protection of private property. The silence on certain policies and loud disapproval of others exposes Jeffery's book for what in many respects it really is, the sound and fury of a political ideologue. The volume of evidence she puts forward to prosecute her case is undone by her ideological passion and fever.

Conclusion

In the introduction of *People's War* reviewed here, Jeffery justifies why she has published another book on the same subject a decade after the first one. She complains that many books that have been on South Africa's political transition have not dealt adequately with the people's war. Her book tries to fill this gap despite the fact that she did exactly that a decade ago. She also promises to publish another book in the future on the same subject, focusing on the NDR. This relentlessness sums up the depth of her conviction about the people's war thesis and its destructiveness. Unfortunately, her mission to make South Africans and other readers of the book to appreciate the importance of the people's war, she overlooks, avoids and/or dismisses information and evidence that runs counter to her thesis. This is perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the book.

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