Article

Faith in Conflict: Examining the Varied Available Chronicles of Churches' Responses to the South African Border War and Their Enduring Legacies

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Abstract

On 26 August 1966, the first skirmish between the South African Defence Force (SADF) and the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), known as Operation Blue Wildebeest, took place and the hostilities, which had been increasing for some time, were ignited. Thus, the South African Border War, otherwise known as the Namibian War of Independence, which would span the next two decades, began in earnest. This paper examines the conflict from the discipline of Church History in order to illuminate the nuanced development of the relationship between the church in South Africa and the concept of war, as well as the varied responses from different denominations to the conflict as it progressed. As the last conflict, which necessitated an active draft of South African men, the war's immediate effects were felt throughout society and persisted into the future. The churches' responses ranged from staunch support for the government's decision and involvement in the war to vocal opposition, thus reflecting diverse theological perspectives and ethical positions. The article sheds light on how different denominations responded publicly to the war, with the aim to highlight how these discussions were influenced by the circumstances of the time and how they changed in the following years leading up to the close of the war.

Keywords: South African Border War; Chaplains, Conscription; Military; South African Church; Conscientious objection; Denominational perspectives; South African Defence Force

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Introduction

The South African Border War, an extended conflict spanning Namibia, Zambia, and Angola from 26 August 1966 to 21 March 1990, serves as the focal point of this investigation into the nuanced responses of South African churches across various denominations. This study aims to investigate the interaction of faith and the South African military during this time, analysing the debates around the demilitarising of chaplains and conversations on conscientious objection and conscription which took place. With the goal of an examination of the intricate responses of South African churches of differing denominations during the South African Border War in mind, the lasting impact on both the nation and the religious institutions involved becomes a topic of importance for contemporary South African Historical studies. As a result of limited available information, to achieve this, two topics of debate which arose regarding the war that significantly influenced this ecclesiastical-military interface are examined: the validity of conscription and the demilitarisation of chaplains. Through this exploration of theological and ethical considerations relating to the Border War, the objective is to contribute scholarly insights into the complex interplay between different churches and their views on the war.

Background and Overview

The development and background of the conflict naturally played a central role in the subsequent debates which stemmed from it; therefore, the following section will provide a brief overview of the conflict as a whole. Namibia, known at the beginning of the conflict as German South West Africa, was governed as a colony of the German Empire until World War I, when it was invaded and occupied by the Allies. On 11 November 1918, the decision following the armistice was that a mandate system would be imposed by the League of Nations to govern the African and Asian areas which had previously been owned by Germany and the Ottoman Empire. This mandate was posed as a compromise between those who supported the annexation of these formally axis-governed territories and those who supported a shift to these territories being granted independence (Rajagopal 2003, 50–55).

Under this decision, South West Africa was classed as a Class "C" mandate. This meant that, due to the small size and geographical remoteness of the territory, it would be administered as an integral province of the country to which it was entrusted, in this case South Africa. In principle, these areas were only to be administered by the countries until they were ready for their own self-determination (Myers 1921, 75). Despite this intention, the then South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts made the statement at The League Of Nations Mandate Commission that South West Africa was to be fully incorporated into the Union of South Africa and thus should be regarded as a fifth province (Louis 2006, 251–255).

At the end of World War II, the United Nations Conference on International Organization was held, and it was decided that the League of Nations would be formally replaced by the United Nations (UN) and former League mandates by a trusteeship system (Gross 1948, 1). The National Party of South Africa refused this decision of trusteeship and rather pushed for a full annexation of the territory. Following the 1948 election, when the National Party was placed into power, Prime Minister Daniel Malan opted for an increasingly aggressive stance on the matter. This eventually resulted in the formation of a UN committee on South West Africa, whose reports became increasingly critical of the National Party, as well as its system of Apartheid (Crawford 2002, 165).

Tensions continued to mount, and following 1955, several nationalistic organisations were formed in South West Africa with the intention of campaigning for the area's independence, such as the Ovamboland People's Congress (OPO) and the South West African Progressive Association. These two groups would later unite and form the South West African National Union (SWANU) on 27 September 1959. In December of the same year, however, these tensions came to a head with the announcement by the South African government that, in accordance with Apartheid legislation, it would relocate the residents of Old Location, a predominantly black neighbourhood close to the city centre in Windhoek, to an outlying township named Katutura (translated as 'the place where people do not want to live'). SWANU, in response to this, organised mass demonstrations and a boycott on 10 December, which resulted in the South African police opening fire and killing eleven protestors (Müller 2012, 36–41). Following this, and some internal conflict regarding leadership, the OPO split off from SWANU and was later rebranded as the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) and opened its ranks to any who were sympathetic to its goals, as well as began campaigning for support internationally. SWAPO also formed the South West African Liberation Army (SWALA) in 1962, which was later replaced by the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). Recruits were sent from Dar es Salaam to Egypt and the Soviet Union, where they were trained. These soldiers also began training upon their return at a camp that had been established in Kongwa, Tanzania, to house South West African refugees (Williams 2015, 73–89).

During this time, the Soviet Union took an interest in independence movements across Africa as a result of their hopes that the creation of socialist client states would result in these resource-rich areas denying economic and strategic resources to the capitalist West. To this end, the Soviets, along with offering training, became the leading supplier of arms and funding to SWALA (Bertram 1980, 51–54).

The rise of global decolonisation and the resulting rise in prominence of the Soviet Union among several of the now-independent African states was viewed with wariness by South Africa. The National Party warned of the inevitability of a Soviet-controlled insurgency, and the SADF increased their border patrols and training exercises. Fortified police outposts along the Caprivi Strip were also established to deter any

attempts at insurgence. As these outposts began to spot SWALA members armed with Soviet weapons and training, the National Party saw this as confirmation of their fears (Kangumu 2011, 143–153).

In 1975, SWAPOS ally Angola gained independence, and supply lines were opened, which SWAPO was able to begin in earnest its plans for a guerrilla warfare campaign. In 1978, SWAPO had approximately 18000 combatants and was able to launch 800 raids into South West Africa against the South Africans. In retaliation, South Africa attacked rebel bases as well as launched a strike into Zambia, with the goal of dissuading support of SWAPO by the Zambian government. South Africa's raids into Angola drove the rebels back and caused significant damage. The fighting intensified, and in 1981, the first true battle between South African and Angolan soldiers took place. Two Angolan brigades, in addition to their Russian advisors, were casualties of the conflict, with approximately 10000 SWAPO affiliated and 800 South African troops losing their lives. Following the failure of direct conflict, SWAPO resorted to guerrilla tactics ("The Namibian struggle for independence" 2024). This resulted in the number of SWAPO combatants decreasing to around 8700 in 1988, of which less than 800 were on the border. The South African counter-insurgency preparations proved to be effective. The employment of fortified villages as a strategy also allowed for the control of food and intelligence supplies from reaching SWAPO or any other rebels. These villages, however, also resulted in 75000 refugees fleeing from them into Angola (Scholtz 2013, 7–8).

The tides changed in 1987 as the war efforts in Angola increased rapidly following South Africa's enforcement of the National Union for the Independence of Angola (UNITA) and sending troops to help in their battle. This resulted in combat igniting between the SADF and the Cuban artillery, which had been sent to Angola. The siege was abandoned in 1988 following the Cubans sending an additional 10000 troops in support of the communist government in Angola. Large numbers of these troops were moved to the border of South West Africa, resulting in South Africa being unwilling to cross the border to attack SWPO rebel bases and provoke the Cubans. SWAPO guerrillas were now once again able to attack South African bases in South West Africa due to the new safety offered close to the borders ("The Namibian struggle for independence" 2024).

Throughout the 1980s, the political pressure that was being placed on the area from external bodies was growing. The UN formed a contact group of Western powers, such as the United Kingdom and the United States of America, to convince South Africa to grant South West Africa independence. The USA viewed the issue of this independence as being linked to Cuban troops withdrawing from Angola. The Angolan government, however, believed that they would not survive the departure of the allied soldiers. The Russians, in response to these mounting tensions, also decided that it was time to withdraw support from Angola. As South Africa became further isolated by the

international community, a consensus was born that if they withdrew at this point, they would be able to partake in the settling of South West Africa's terms of independence.

On 8 August 1988, a ceasefire was announced in Geneva, Switzerland. The UN was appointed as a peacekeeping force to facilitate the fairness of South West Africa's elections, which were to be held in 1989. SWAPO won the election with 57% of the overall votes, Sam Nujoma was elected the president of the country, and in 1990, it was renamed Namibia (Bredenkamp and Wessels, The development of military chaplaincy, with special reference to South Africa 2009). Although the conflict had come to a close and Namibia was now an independent country, the impact of the war was still felt among the people of both nations for some time after that. One such impact came as a result of the new ways in which the church had to navigate the conflict and its relationship to the SADF within the growing tumultuous political climate of South Africa during the time. The following sections will examine the two biggest debates that arose on this topic, namely those that arose on the conscription itself and the role of chaplains in the greater military context. These two debates resulted in several persisting changes in the engagement between different churches in South Africa and the military and thus serve as ideal areas of focus.

The Church and the Conscription Debate

The active draft of South African men during the border war endured as the last instance of compulsory conscription in South Africa and naturally invoked several responses from the churches in the country. The debate turned to the validity of religious conscientious objection, as well as the necessity of a draft, and indeed the war as a whole. Notably, there seems to have been a language divide with regard to the stances taken, and for the most part, Afrikaans churches stood in support of conscription and military service, while English churches were against the draft, with some actively opposing their members from answering the call for conscription. The following will explore some of the differing responses that have been recorded from the various denominations.

Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Society of Friends (Quakers) were some of the first to speak out against the idea of conscription of their members. The compromise was that they would serve a term of three months up to three years in detention barracks instead of military service. These groups were referred to as "peace churches" and were not seen by the government as being a threat to the nation. These churches, despite their noted "non-political" stance, were often credited with having inspired far more politically driven shows of resistance to the draft. One particularly inspired individual was Richard Steele, a Baptist who protested the compulsory conscription (Richard Steele 2024). Steele, during his time at the University of Cape Town, began the End Conscription Campaign (ECC). In July 1979, he was instructed to report for duty, to which he responded with a letter in which he explained that he was a pacifist. His duty was delayed by a year; however, when he was called again, he was

unsuccessful with his argument and was arrested to spend 18 months in prison. During this time, he commented that the "peace churches" had inspired many objectors, such as himself, after having shown that one could choose not to be drafted, as well as survive the subsequent consequences ("Conscripts tell truth commission" 1997).

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) also took a stance against the mandatory military service. In 1974, a declaration was issued by the SACC, in which justifications for conscientious objection to military service from a theological standpoint were laid out. South Africa was accused of being "fundamentally unjust and discriminatory" (Jones 2013, 32), which had now called for a draft so that the status quo could be further upheld. The SACC urged their members to consider whether taking up the cross and following Christ was not a call to become conscientious objectors and objection to conscription both as an act of pacifism as well as on the grounds of it being a moral denunciation of the system of Apartheid (Jones 2013, 31–35).

The SACC taking such a strong stance on the matter of conscription resulted in many who were also considering objecting to take further action due to them now having a powerful ally in the SACC. Several churches followed suit; the Catholic Bishop Conference (1977), the Presbyterian Church (1979), the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church (both in 1982) all went on to make statements regarding their positions in favour of conscientious objection being made available as a legitimate religious option to their communities. To this end, the Anglican Synod also issued a statement which expressed clear "doubt about the legitimacy of a military system whose role is increasingly seen as the protector of a profoundly immoral and unjust social order." (Connors 2007, 64).

Major Afrikaans churches, many of whom provided theological justification for Apartheid, refused to act against conscription and took a stance of condemnation against conscientious objection. The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) declared any pacifism in response to it as being "unchristian". Their stance was that the state was an institution created by God, and thus, no individual had a right to contest it on grounds of religious doctrine (Seegers 1993, 130). This, however, solely began to shift as time went on, with more and more fringe publications and groups of Afrikaans citizens voiding their unease with conscription. One of the more notable of these published statements was the student newspaper of the Stellenbosch Theological Seminary, where future clergy of the NG Church were predominantly trained, which made statements in which they urged the church to recognise objectors (Call on NGK 1981). This stance was further supported by two professors of the Seminary, Professors Johan Heyns and Pieter Potgieter, who, in an article which appeared in the *Kerkbode*, the official NG newsletter, wrote that they were of the view that "when conscientious objections are a serious matter to a person, they cannot be dismissed as irrelevant." (Objectors: Kerkbode backs PFP 1982)

These groups eventually consolidated in 1980 to form the Conscientious Objector Support Group, which was formally constituted during a conference in Durban. The

group's main stance was that objectors should be recognised by the country's legal system and should be provided for (Connors 2007, 64). This group gained supporters as they would offer aid and comfort to those who had been imprisoned due to their refusal of the draft, as well as their families. The role of conscientious objectors also began to be seen not only as those who refused to fight but rather as those who were challenging the State and, by extension, the political systems it supported, such as Apartheid. As a result of this, the ANC began to look into using the debate around objection as a way in which they could gain supporters among the white youth of the country. In 1983, the ANC-linked youth publication *Forward* identified military issues as "an effective opposition tool to raise questions within the white community" and called for a shift in which they would "link the draft resistance struggle to all struggles" (Phillips 2002, 40) and, by extension, to defy the draft in support of the movement against Apartheid.

In 1981, as debates on military service were gaining further traction, a brochure was commissioned by the Bree Moderator and sent out by the *NG Kerkboekhandel* in Pretoria, which sought to answer questions regarding religious objections and alternatives to military service. This brochure, however, did present a disclaimer on its opening page, where it stated that the opinions in the book were not the official position of the Dutch Reformed Church with regard to the matter at hand. Despite this, several interesting stances are displayed in the brochure. For example, it is stated that prison time for conscientious objectors is a seriously questionable policy from the Government, as the purpose of war should be, in the writers' opinion, to achieve peace, and the imprisonment of one's citizens was not in line with this goal. The matter of selective pacifism is also addressed as a form of pacificism that perhaps may accept certain wars and military actions, depending on the surrounding circumstances. This, and Augustine's just war theory, are proposed to be applied to the border war by those considering the objection; however, contrary to the norm for other similar publications, they are cautioned against directly relating military service, in this case, to support of the surrounding social and economic systems of the Government, but rather as two separate matters (Froneman 1981, 9).

In 1982, a small piece appeared in the *Kerkbode* titled "Help the State in military struggle, asks reformed Synod" ("Help staat in militêre stryd" 1982, 3). Within this article, the author speaks against those who are using religious reasons to refuse military service for political reasons. It is stated that the Synod had come to a decision on the matter, which stipulated that it was seen as the duty of young men to recognise the competence and God-given nature of the government as an institution. The statement is made that Christians should submit to the authority who have been given the task of maintaining order and justice (Help staat in militêre stryd, vra Geref. Sinode 1982, 3). This article, however, is small and only appears on page three, perhaps a testament to the nature of the matter, as well as the DRC's hesitancy to speak too frequently on the matter.

Despite the growing momentum of the aforementioned groups, in 1983, it was recorded that 66 Jehovah's Witnesses had been sentenced to 36 months each in various detention barracks for refusing to undergo national service. In addition, more than 400 conscientious objectors were serving sentences of up to 3 years as of the beginning of the year (Objectors: 400 In Jail 1983).

During a Black Sash national conference in Cape Town in May 1983, Sheena Duncan, National President of the Black Sash at the time, made a statement commenting that rather than consider whether objection should be made provision for, they should be examining the need for conscription entirely. Her stance was that the presence of a draft was a sign of the injustice of the war itself due to her belief that, if it were not, then citizens of the country who were at war would choose to fight out of conviction rather than out of fear of imprisonment (Jones 2013, 130–138).

In 1984, the Government began to give signs that it was planning new legislation with regard to how objectors would be dealt with. In response, church leaders were invited to meet with the Naude Commission, which had been organised by military leaders to investigate alternatives for conscientious objectors. The commission was told to recommend to the Government that religious objectors (once verified to be genuine) be able to do non-military service under the Department of Manpower as an alternative. In contrast, political objectors would be jailed for up to eight years ("Military Objectors" 1983).

Many of the leaders in attendance spoke against this proposal. English-speaking churches expressed concern with regard to the presentation of an alternate means to be "supportive" of the Government for those who rejected the conscription and war on moral grounds (Churches hit at Service Proposals 1983). The Anglican Church commented that the distinction between a religious and political objector was not acceptable, as to them, the two issues were so closely intertwined that they were inseparable (SADF View On Objectors Deplored by SACC 1983). Rob Robertson, a spokesperson for the SACC, said that the proposal would only have the effect of driving young white South Africans out of the country. An issue of the Outlook, the SACC newsletter, was dedicated to the matter of this proposed legislation and spoke out against conscription. The case was made in the editorial that conscription had deliberately not been instated by the South African government during both world wars due to pressure from Afrikaner Nationalists (Outlook of the Month 1983). It was also stated that Afrikaner theologians were rejecting their tradition, which considered one's political choices to be defined by one's religious beliefs (De Gruchy 1983). In contrast, Afrikaans churches, for the most part, supported the proposals. They had concluded that a pacifist approach was alien to the Christian tradition (Church split On Moral Objectors 1983).

In March of the same year, at a meeting of the relevant parties, the Minister of Defence, General Magnus Malan, introduced an amendment to the Defence Act in Parliament, which was based on the proposal which had been presented to the church leaders. It

became clear that any religious criticism had been discarded. The bill was met with backlash from all sides, even that of Afrikaans churches. One such instance can be found in an article written by Dr Ettienne De Villiers, chairman of the NG Church's Western Cape Synod's sub-commission on war ethics and lecturer at the church's Huguenot College in Wellington. He commented that the beliefs of those who chose to object, whether for religious or political reasons, should be respected regardless of whether they were felt to be right or not (Church's Stand Illogical 1983). Eventually, in November, the End Conscription Committee (ECC) was inaugurated in Cape Town. Many groups attended the event, among them being NUSAS, the Black Sash, the Council of Churches, and other Christian student and women's organisations. The committees of the ECC continued to meet throughout the year. It eventually became apparent, however, that a need for a far more united front, free of the factionalism which was commonplace in South African political groups during this time, was required. It was decided that they would rather focus on one singular issue, that of conscription and conscientious objectors, and any who supported their cause on this issue were welcome to join (Jones 2013, 57).

In January 1985, the ECC held its first national conference at Botha's Hill close to Durban and continued to be active in their protest efforts through the following several years. In August 1886, 143 men announced that they would not be reporting to serve in the SADF going forward. In response, the Government banned the ECC, citing that it was a danger to public safety, making it the first white organisation to be banned in South Africa within the past 20 years leading up to this point (Jones 2013, 124). Although the ECC was banned from any public activity, a culture of resistance had been created among South Africans during its time of operation which persisted even after the ban.

In 1989, the period of conscription was halved to one year, and the community service required by religious objectors was also reduced by a year. In January of the following year, community service was reduced to three years, as was a prison sentence for future political objectors. This, however, did not affect those who were already serving their sentences. As the years followed, the ANC and its struggle slowly gained traction, and the Pretoria Minute was signed, thus bringing to an end the armed struggle. In the months following this, the sentences of the objectors who had been serving time came to an end, and those who had opted for exile were welcomed to return.

On 24 August 1993, the Minister of Defence, Gene Louw, announced that conscription was ended. Those who had already served, however, were still subject to be called to serve. The ECC, however, encouraged this as they called on conscripts to consider it to be used for the constructive purpose of facilitating a peaceful transition within the country's upcoming election (Jones 2013, 130–138).

The impact of debate on conscription had a lasting impact on how the church engaged during disagreements with governmental decisions as well as protests. Despite the

differences in stance and approach across denominations, this interaction between the church, military, and the Government resulted in an opening of dialogue, which persisted into the fight against Apartheid. The church, although always vocal, paved new ways to engage with governmental decisions with which they may not have agreed. From the other point of view, new methods of support were also enacted, and new views on the stance of Christians' role in society, so far as obedience to a ruling party, were formed within the South African church. The following section will more closely examine this interaction from a far more intertwined stance as it examines the different stances of churches in South Africa with regard to the role and level of involvement which chaplains had in the military during the period of the border war.

Military Chaplains in the Border War

Organised military chaplaincy originated in 742 as a result of the Council of Ratisbon in Southern Germany's resolution that chaplains be assigned to armies. These chaplains were, however, forbidden from bearing arms and were only to contribute to the military structure so far as their faith and spiritual duties to the troops allowed. Despite their stance as noncombatants, there remained some debate regarding chaplains officially being a part of the military at all, with differing denominations taking various stances on the matter. The following sections will examine the development of the conversation surrounding the demilitarisation of the chaplains.

As is interestingly commented on in an article by Izette Bredenkamp and André Wessels (Bredenkamp and Wessels 2009, 301–305), this development came in the form of a contradiction. Christian chaplains who were considered to preach on topics of love and reconciliation were now officially part of military structures, which, during times of war, were considered to be symbols of destruction and retaliation. These chaplains were not able to observe military structures and customs from a distance, and they became part of the overall system to minister to troops successfully. During the Border War, the question of military chaplaincy and what role they should take on became a topic of debate, with some denominations calling for their independence and others calling for a complete demilitarisation of chaplains. This discussion regarding the role of chaplains within the Border War and the SADF as a whole became a central part of the responses of the church regarding the conflict, and thus, the progression of the discussion warrants examination.

Following the implementation of compulsory military training and the resulting expansion of military systems and resources, the SADF created a new section on 1 July 1966 named the Division for Physical and Spiritual Wellness. Cpln (Rev.) JA van Zyl took responsibility for the organisation of chaplains and the systems surrounding them. However, he requested that the Minister of Defence separate the two sections and allow the section concerned with spiritual wellness to operate as its division due to the Calvinist principle stating that the church should never be subordinate to any division or section. This request was granted, and from 5 January 1968, the Corps of Chaplains

became an independent directorate with three operating branches, Army, Air Force and Navy (Bredenkamp and Wessels, A historical perspective on the influence of the military environment on chaplaincy, with special reference to the Namibian War of Independence 1966–1989 2009, 105–107). The main concept behind this, as stated by Cpln (Rev.) Van Zyl was that the church was now occupying its rightful place in that Christianity should (according to a Calvinist view) govern all aspects of life, including military service (Genl.-maj. (Ds.) J.A. van Zyl 1983).

Chaplains during this time needed to be South African citizens, medically fit, and ordained by their respective denominations, and in 1974, a training centre for South African chaplains was created. Chaplains, however, remained part of the denominational structures and were still required to attend synods. Anglican chaplains received licences from the bishop of the diocese, where they were eventually stationed. In the case of the DRC, it was decided that chaplains should remain required to minister in a local congregation in addition to their other military duties. Chaplains would also be required to wear the uniform of whichever branch they had been assigned to (Bredenkamp and Wessels, A historical perspective on the influence of the military environment on chaplaincy, with special reference to the Namibian War of Independence 1966–1989 2009, 107).

It was decided on 1 April 1968 that the ranks for chaplains should be abolished as it was seen to be contrary to the ideal when chaplaincy was integrated with the military, that ministry should be given to all members of the SADF regardless of status. All chaplains were from this point on seen to be equal to and deserving of the respect due to a Colonel and were equal to a Commanding Officer at all times (The Rank of the Chaplain 1971). Chaplains were also addressed by their clerical titles as opposed to the typical rank address of the military system. Even though each denomination would have its place of worship and gatherings, preference was given to individual ministry and pastoral care as opposed to group events. Often, if no single chaplain were available for deployed units, one chaplain would be considered able to minister and offer pastoral care to all denominations with their consent. In 1978, the responsibility of the SACHS was demarked as an official channel by which chaplains were able to exercise all religious activities and duties within the SADF (de Klerk 1987).

When the war began in 1966, ministers moved from an auxiliary position to one of indispensable status and an integral part of the deployment action of the SADF. During the later years of the war, it became seen as part of an African nation's struggle against colonialism and denouncement of South Africa's Apartheid system. Within this system, the SADF was seen as the upholders of the status quo and was declared an unwanted force in the areas of South West Africa (now Namibia) that it was occupying. Due to this, the SADF was seen as being upholders and defenders of Apartheid, and the chaplains were, by extension, seen as supporters who were sanctioning the system of Apartheid. The Methodist church became vocal on this topic, and Rev D Katane requested an answer to the question of what chaplains were defending, if not the hateful,

discriminatory laws of South Africa at the time (Jones 2013, 130–138). The RCC issued a statement commenting that the one who is paying the salary becomes the master. Thus, in the eyes of the National Catholic Federation of Students, the jurisdiction that the military had over chaplains was directly damaging the credibility of the church in the eyes of those who had experienced oppression or discrimination at the hands of the SADF. Newspapers also began to report on "troopie chaplains" who were allegedly trained by the army to both fight and kill if the situation, or orders, called for it (van der Linde 1989).

As these sentiments continued to grow, the Methodist church and the RCC suggested in the late 1970s that chaplains should be demilitarised and should shift to taking care of the spiritual and pastoral care needs of army personnel as civilian clergy rather than as members of the SADF themselves. It was further proposed that in the areas where the army was operating in the field, a pool of ministers be selected to work on a roster basis for limited periods of time, although their remuneration would remain the responsibility of the army. Over the following decade, as this topic became a frequent source of debate in both the press as well as in ecclesial meetings, the Anglican church became the main voice for the demilitarisation of chaplains, as well as to questions regarding the concepts of "just war". As a result of these discussions, a rift began to form between those in favour of and those who opposed the proposition.

In 1985, the Anglican church put forward a motion that chaplains required the permission of the Bishop of the Diocese within whose territory they were to minister. In response to this, however, Bishop James Kauluma, the Bishop of Namibia, made it clear that he would refuse to give consent as the SADF was a foreign army belonging to their oppressors. As this would mean that the Anglican troops who were deployed in the area would be without any pastoral care, the motion was overturned. During this time, the Presbyterian church requested a full investigation into the military chaplaincy, although they rejected the idea of demilitarisation. Their stance was that so long as the chaplaincy was not being abused and chaplains were not taking part in unnecessary instances of battle, it was important that they remained a part of the military (Jones 2013, 130–138).

In the English church, the question of the militarisation of chaplains also became a heated topic. English chaplains would also experience hostility from fellow members of the clergy due to their positions. English priests did not share the view that they were sanctioning Apartheid by supporting chaplains as a part of the SADF. Instead, they defended their position by stating that they were focused on their responsibility to minister to all members of their church without discrimination, regardless of the circumstances of the time. They also did not see the wearing of the uniform as identifying with the SADF and the organisation itself but rather as identifying with those whom they were there to serve. It was also their understanding that a demilitarisation of the chaplaincy would result in a hampering of their ministry among deployed troops (From the Chaplain 1986).

In the late 1980s, the role of SADF chaplains and their participation in the war was also debated by Afrikaans denominations. M Maree and L Erasmus, chaplains who had finished their service in the SADF, commented that chaplains being an official part of the SADF resulted in an erosion of the relationship with the soldiers and prevented any objectivity from the side of the chaplains themselves. In contrast to the ideas of unity found in the English churches' view on the wearing of the uniform, they rather saw the uniform as a symbol of autocratic power structures, which they viewed to be actively standing against any form of reconciliation in the country (Jones 2013, 130–138).

Despite these comments, a formal request for demilitarisation was never submitted to the Chaplain General's office, although a spokesperson did issue a statement regarding the logistics of such a situation should it have come to pass. The practicality of the mandate of military chaplaincy was seen to lie with the special demands that were partnered with ministering to an army which was at war. One such demand was operational mobility and life-threatening situations that may arise for those accompanying deployed divisions (Laufs 1992). The necessity of training for those who would enter the operational area was seen as paramount, even for chaplains, as untrained clergy were considered likely to endanger both themselves and the troops they were accompanying should a combat situation arise. Alongside this, members of the SADF who were in the field were not considered available to protect any civilian clergy, as it was viewed that all manpower would be required for operations themselves. Another important point was the comment that the carrying of weapons for clergy was seen as optional. To this end, Seventh Day Advantest chaplains had an agreement with the SACHS, which exempted them from weapons training (The Rank of the Chaplain 1971).

In 1988, Cpln (Rev.) Naude, the Chaplain General, commented in the *Kerkbode* that the sole concern of chaplains, and the church by extension, was to ensure that all soldiers were spiritually cared for. In the case of the question of "masters", Cpln (Rev.) CF Matthee, Director of Chaplaincy, commented that chaplains remained a part of their canonical structures and referred to the position of theological professors, commenting that, despite their salaries being paid by universities and church bodies, they were free of accusations of a change of "master" and lack of loyalty of the church as a result (Laufs 1992).

In light of the positions brought to the fore during the debate on the demilitarisation of the clergy, it becomes clear that the main concerns were not those centred on ecclesiastical concerns but rather on the socio-political reception of the SADF and its affiliations with the South African government, and systems which were being upheld by it. These concerns also permeated the church's response to not only the matter of chaplains but also the ethical and socio-political concerns of the war itself. As the war drew to a close and the UN stepped in to mediate Namibia's independence, the main concerns of South Africa's churches also saw a shift with regard to how their members

would live their faith while remaining active citizens within a nation during a time of war.

Discussion

As has been examined in the previous sections, the church's involvement in the border war reached beyond spiritual care. It encompassed an active engagement in socio-political issues, particularly regarding conscription and the role of military chaplains. The following explores the relationship between South African Churches, the Military, and the Government during the Border War in light of the information which has been discussed above. Four key areas have been identified for examination: the church's influence on government decisions concerning chaplain roles, its broader role in the war and peace efforts, the implications of its involvement for contemporary South Africa and Africa, and the limitations it faced during the conflict. Through an examination of these aspects, a nuanced reflection on the church's impact on military and socio-political landscapes during this period in South African history will be formed.

The Church's Influence on Government Policy Regarding Military Chaplains

The church's initial role during the South African Border War was, for the most part, shaped by its resistance against the trend of compulsory conscription and the integration of military chaplaincy. In 1984, the Naude Commission explored alternatives for conscientious objectors, a process heavily influenced by church leaders who opposed conscription on moral grounds ("Military Objectors" 1983). English-speaking churches, notably the Anglican Church, opposed the government's distinction between religious and political objectors, arguing that moral and political objections were inseparable. This resistance was further highlighted by the South African Council of Churches, which predicted that the proposal would drive young white South Africans out of the country, a result which was not viewed favourably by the Government and its nationalistic goals (Outlook of the Month 1983). The church's stance here presents an example of an intersection of moral and political advocacy, which works to display the church's influence in shaping public sentiment and policy during this time period.

The church's struggle to balance its spiritual mission with practical realities reflects broader ethical dilemmas faced by many religious institutions in political conflicts. Various denominations, including the Anglican Church, Roman Catholic Church, and Methodist Church, advocated for the demilitarisation of chaplains, arguing that they should operate as civilian clergy (Bredenkamp and Wessels 2009, 301–305). Despite the presence of strong ethical and theological arguments for demilitarisation, logistical challenges and concerns centred on operational efficiency prevented its formal implementation. In the face of these discussions, the Methodist Church and the Roman Catholic Church suggested a shift to providing spiritual and pastoral care as civilian clergy, with the Anglican Church later becoming the primary advocate for this cause (Genl.-maj. (Ds.) J.A. van Zyl 1983).

When examined, the subsequent establishment of the South African Chaplaincy Services and the development of military chaplaincy structures showcases the church's sway with regard to the military as well as its eventual integration into certain structures. Steps were taken to ensure that chaplains remained part of denominational structures and attended synods. This was done with the aim of maintaining a dual role for Chaplains in both the military and local congregations. Chaplains were seen as indispensable during deployment, swiftly moving from being seen as occupying auxiliary roles to becoming integral parts of military operations. The complex role of chaplains who were expected to provide spiritual support while being part of a military structure which was often seen as upholding Apartheid policies provides an interesting duality with regard to perceived duty. To this end, the church's integration into the military apparatus and the manner in which it was received reveals a tension between maintaining religious integrity and fulfilling operational demands.

The involvement of chaplains in the military was not without significant controversy. Some groups viewed the chaplains as complicit in sustaining the Apartheid regime, particularly as the Border War became perceived as a defence of Apartheid policies. This view was vocalised by Rev D Katane of the Methodist Church (From the Chaplain 1986). In response to these mounting concerns, the idea of demilitarising chaplains gained traction, although it was never fully realised due to practical issues which have been discussed here prior, such as the need for operational mobility and the inherent dangers of deploying untrained clergy in combat zones.

Despite the presence of these controversies, Chaplains continued to serve in the SADF and maintained their clerical duties while being integrated into the military structure. They were given the respect of a Colonel and addressed by their clerical titles, emphasising their dual role (Laufs 1992). The ethical and moral challenges faced by the church on this issue largely centred around questioning the extent to which it could claim a position of moral authority while still being intertwined to various extents with an oppressive regime. Thus, this debate over their militarisation highlights the church's complex relationship with the state and military, reflecting broader socio-political tensions in South Africa during the Border War, all of which culminated in the eventual ending of the Apartheid regime.

The Church's Role in the War and Peace Initiatives

Certain denominations (such as the Anglican Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Methodist Church) stance against conscription and apartheid served to align them ideologically with broader anti-apartheid movements, positioning the church as a critical voice in the struggle for social justice. The End Conscription Campaign, formed in 1985, unified various groups, such as church organisations, against conscription, which served to strengthen the church’s political influence and felt the need to advocate for peace (Richard Steele 2024). This combination highlighted the church's ability to rouse diverse factions around a common cause. Yet, it also served to expose underlying tensions within the church's own ranks regarding the extent and nature of its

involvement in political activism, especially when taking a stance opposed to the ruling Government.

Churches who were in opposition to conscription and the militarisation of chaplains advocated for the separation of religious duties from military operations, arguing that such a distinction was essential for maintaining the moral integrity of the Church. This advocacy resulted in the church needing to navigate a complex landscape in which its calls for peace and justice often clashed with governmental and military objectives, raising questions about the effectiveness and limits of religious intervention with regard to such affairs.

While some chaplains faced criticism for their perceived support of apartheid due to their roles within the SADF, they often focused on pastoral care for troops, emphasising their religious duties over military affiliation (de Klerk 1987). The wearing of military uniforms by chaplains thus shifted to be seen by some as a symbol of solidarity with soldiers rather than an endorsement of the SADF or its policies (From the Chaplain 1986). This nuanced position allowed chaplains to provide necessary spiritual support while attempting to distance themselves from the broader political implications of their roles. However, this attempt at balancing a dual role also led to significant internal conflict and public scrutiny, as chaplains struggled to balance their clerical responsibilities with the ethical dilemmas posed by their military affiliations.

As the war progressed, church-led dialogues played a significant role in the shifting of public perception and, eventually, government policies. For example, the Anglican Church's consistent push for the demilitarisation of chaplains and broader church criticisms of apartheid policies showcased the church's commitment to promoting peace and justice. However, this also revealed the limitations of ecclesiastical influence, as concerns about operational efficiency often resulted in hindering the practical implementation of demilitarisation.

Despite this challenge, Church advocacy did contribute to significant changes in conscription policies. The reduction in conscription periods in 1989 and the eventual end of conscription in 1993 were largely influenced by the sustained presence of church advocacy, as well as the broader anti-apartheid movement (Laufs 1992). These efforts demonstrated the Church's ability to influence socio-political issues and underscored its broader role in promoting ethical governance and human rights. However, the effectiveness of these efforts also depended on the broader political context and the willingness of the government to respond to such pressures.

Overall, the stance of certain churches against conscription and apartheid played a crucial role in shaping public discourse and government policy. By aligning with anti-apartheid movements and advocating for peace, the church displayed its commitment to justice and moral integrity despite the challenges and criticisms faced by Chaplains operating within the military framework. This involvement also served to raise

important questions about the limits of religious influence in political matters and the ethical complexities faced by religious leaders in times of conflict, which later came into play during the final stages of the struggle against Apartheid.

Contemporary Implications of the Church's Role in South Africa and Africa

The church's engagement with the two debates examined here reflects a legacy that continues to resonate in contemporary South Africa, as well as broader African contexts. The denominations which argued that chaplains should operate as civilian clergy, thus emphasising their pastoral duties over military affiliations, underscored the church's commitment to maintaining moral integrity while navigating the complex intersection of faith and military service. An intersection which can be seen carried through modern conflicts today.

The End Conscription Campaign, formed in 1985, illustrated the church's ability to unify various groups against conscription, thereby strengthening its political influence and advocacy for peace ("Conscripts tell truth commission" 1997). This coalition highlighted the church's capacity to bring together diverse groups and factions around a shared cause, reflecting its significant role in the broader anti-apartheid movement. However, the church's involvement also exposed internal tensions and criticisms, such as the aforementioned issue of chaplains being seen as complicit in supporting apartheid by means of their association with the SADF.

In contemporary South Africa, the church's historical engagement continues to inform its role in advocating for social justice, human rights, and socioeconomic development. The church's involvement in contemporary social issues, such as poverty alleviation and reconciliation efforts, suggests that it retains a vital space within civil society to influence both socioeconomic and socio-political landscapes. For instance, church-led initiatives in post-apartheid South Africa have focused on addressing economic disparities and promoting social cohesion, drawing on the church's moral authority and community mobilisation capabilities. Although the relevance of the church can be debated in the face of growing secularism and political corruption, its capacity to bring together communities and shape discourse on moral and ethical issues remains significant. The church's advocacy during the Border War established a precedent for its continued engagement in contemporary social and political issues. This ongoing involvement reflects a dynamic interaction between faith and societal needs, highlighting the church's enduring influence in shaping public discourse and policy.

The church's role is not without limitations. The ethical dilemmas and criticisms faced during the Border War, particularly regarding the issue of perceived support of Apartheid by Chaplains, illustrate the challenges of maintaining moral integrity while engaging in political advocacy. In contemporary contexts, the church navigates similar complexities, balancing its prophetic voice against the risk of political entanglement and co-option. The church's effectiveness in influencing socio-political issues also depends on its ability to adapt to changing societal norms and address internal divisions.

Thus, the Church's engagement during the Border War provides valuable insights into its potential to influence contemporary socio-political landscapes. By examining the successes and limitations of its past involvement, the church can continue to play a crucial role in advocating for justice and ethical governance in South Africa and beyond.

Limitations of the Church's Role During the Border War and Chaplaincy Controversy

Throughout the war, church-led dialogues and advocacy played a pivotal role in shifting public perceptions and influencing government policies. The Anglican Church's calls for demilitarisation and broader church criticisms of apartheid policies serve as an example of the Church's role in promoting peace. However, these efforts were often met with resistance from both the Government and within the Church itself. The logistical challenges of providing pastoral care to soldiers in conflict zones, where operational mobility and life-threatening situations were common, further complicated the church's position. Additionally, the practical necessity of training chaplains to accompany deployed divisions and the option for chaplains to carry weapons, as seen in the agreement with Seventh Day Adventist chaplains, highlighted the tensions between spiritual duties and military realities.

In contemporary South Africa, the Church's involvement in advocating for social justice, human rights, and socioeconomic development continues. The Church's concern and various projects with regard to contemporary social issues, such as poverty alleviation and reconciliation efforts, suggest that it retains a vital space within civil society to influence such landscapes. However, the relevance of the church can be debated in the face of growing secularism and political corruption. Despite this, the capacity to mobilise communities and shape discourse on moral and ethical issues remains significant. Yet, it must navigate similar ethical complexities as it did during the Border War, although on different scales.

While the church's advocacy during the Border War established a precedent for its continued engagement in contemporary social and political issues, its limitations highlight the complexities of balancing its spiritual mandate with societal responsibilities. The divided stance among denominations on policies underscores the challenges the church faces in promoting moral integrity and engaging in political advocacy, all while attempting to maintain unity within the Church.

By examining the successes and limitations of its past involvement, the Church can continue to play a crucial role in advocating for justice in South Africa and beyond. The ethical dilemmas and criticisms faced during the Border War, particularly regarding the perceived support of warfare and violence by Chaplains and, by extension, conscripts, illustrate the challenges of maintaining an ethical stance as an organisation existing in a complex world. This ongoing involvement reflects a dynamic interaction between faith and societal needs, highlighting the church's enduring influence in shaping public discourse and policy.

Conclusion

The preceding exploration into the historical relationship between the church and the South African military during the border war reveals an interesting series of varied stances in which the role of chaplains in the military, as well as the conversation and struggles around conscientious objection. The dynamics between these two matters and the varied responses of the different churches in South Africa have left a lasting impact on contemporary interactions between the church and SADF. The evolving perspective of war and the churches' role in government decisions during times of conflict have influenced the ethical considerations and theological stances adopted by different denominations. By further examining and understanding the roots of this relationship, valuable insight is gained into the nuanced ways in which the South African churches navigated their roles and responsibilities to their congregations within the broader context of the defence force today. This underscores the impact of historical intersections between faith and military, thus providing the building blocks of a foundation for ongoing dialogue and reflection within both the ecclesiastical and military spheres in South African Church history.

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