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# CHAPTER FIVE

## ‘Somewhere on the Border – of Credibility’: The Cultural Construction and Contestation of ‘the Border’ in White South African Society

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*Daniel Conway*

South Africa’s Border War had profound implications for the social and political organisation of white society. Indeed, maintaining the credibility of South Africa’s presence in Namibia and the prosecution of the Border War was an important political project for the National Party (NP) government. The discourse of ‘the border’ became a powerful cultural sign in white society and underpinned a mythology<sup>2</sup> that sustained and intensified South Africa’s militarisation. As a cultural mythology, ‘the border’ was not a complete fabrication of reality (there was indeed a war conducted on and close to the Namibian border), but white society attached political and social meanings to ‘the border’ that appeared to be ‘common sense’ and self-evident and yet were partial and contingent on the existence of a number of socially constructed discourses. It seemed, however, self-evident to the majority of white people that the border between Namibia and Angola had to be militarily defended if the Republic and all that was familiar were to survive. It is, therefore, unsurprising that dissent or criticism of the Border War emanating from within the community was met with rhetorical vitriol from NP and military leaders and punitive legal sanctions.<sup>3</sup> This chapter will focus on the cultural construction of ‘the border’ and its contestation by a small group of white men who refused to serve as conscripts and their supporters in the End Conscription Campaign (ECC). The analysis reveals that gender norms were central to the operation of ‘the border’ as a cultural sign in white society and the most effective means for critiquing ‘the border’ were also gendered. Changing political and military circumstances, the realities of the effects (both psychological and physical) on white men returning from ‘the border’ and the discursive spaces opened by anti-conscription activists in South Africa, all challenged the credibility of the Border War and helped to hasten the end of the conflict in 1988.

The South African state defined the Border War in terms that made its prosecution seem natural and essential. As such, the discourse of 'the border' underpinned the militarisation of white society. White people's perceptions of the security situation, particularly on 'the border', could be manipulated by the state. Seventy per cent of white South Africans relied on electronic media for news. The state-controlled South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) therefore had a monopoly on the majority of white South Africans' access to news and information.<sup>4</sup> Philip Frankel wrote in 1984:

Most whites hold the Defence Force in high esteem for its role in upholding the state in the face of internal revolution, in protecting the national frontiers against the apparent southwards march of international communism. Most, to use the metaphor employed by white parliamentarians, see it as a necessary 'shield' for the Republic behind which order is upheld and possible constitutional reform can take place. The majority of whites, if not the majority of South Africa's population, also wax enthusiastic about Defence Force actions conducted over national borders.<sup>5</sup>

The metaphor of the SADF as 'a shield' at 'the border', protecting the Republic against communist incursion, was frequently invoked and this aided the perception of maintaining the integrity of and defending 'the border' as essential to the continuation of the South African state. Existing opinion poll evidence suggests that the majority of the white population accepted the basic tenets of the government's security paradigm.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one white opinion survey, conducted in 1982, found overwhelming support for the Border War: 72.3% of the white population believed South Africa could defeat the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) in the long term and 60% opposed any attempt to negotiate over Namibian independence; 79.9% felt the threat of communism was not over-exaggerated by the government, and 81.1% endorsed the SADF's policy of attacking 'terrorist' bases in neighbouring states.<sup>7</sup> Such was the hard-line attitude of the white public that the author of the report believed the South African government's political manoeuvrability regarding 'the border' conflict was severely restrained: any attempt to negotiate or compromise with SWAPO could provoke a severe backlash from the white electorate.<sup>8</sup> As the following discussion will elucidate, white opinion shifted with the changing circumstances of the apartheid state and the bullish attitude towards defending 'the border' waned as the 1980s progressed.

The geographical distance of 'the border' from white South African society helped create a romanticised ideal of military service on 'the border'. The state relied on maintaining a considerable degree of secrecy and subterfuge regarding SADF activities on 'the border' (particularly when they were taking place in Angola) and South African popular culture aided the perception of 'the border' as a distant yet heroic place. Patricia Kerr, host of the popular SABC radio programme *Forces Favourites*, regularly dedicated messages from white families

to their conscript relatives ‘somewhere on the Border’, emphasising ‘the border’ as a self-evident yet mysterious entity.<sup>9</sup> ‘Military operations’ at ‘the border’ also helped to rally the white nation and were a symbol of South Africa’s prowess and defiance of United Nations sanctions. Successful military operations on ‘the border’ (and, of course, in Angola) were celebrated in the white social realm. The symbolism of the SADF’s ‘victories’ in the Border War was regularly invoked by the SABC. For example, in 1981, the SABC commented:

As over the weekend, South Africans rejoiced at the splendid victory of the Springboks in New Zealand, other of the country’s representatives were returning from the battlefield in Angola. Their mission, too, was splendidly accomplished . . . There is good cause for pride in the performance of our men in New Zealand and Angola.<sup>10</sup>

The Border War was geographically distant from urban white South Africa, yet psychologically much closer. It was an arena in which national identity could be affirmed and celebrated in much the same way as competitive sport. Furthermore, defending ‘the border’ symbolised the maintenance of the white status quo and the continued existence of capitalism, Christianity and ‘civilisation’.

### ‘The border’ and white men

An essential factor in South Africa’s waging of the Border War was the institution of compulsory conscription for all white men. By the 1980s, white men were obliged to serve an initial period of two years continuous service in the SADF (at least six months of which would be in, or near, the ‘Operational Zone’ on ‘the border’). This would be followed by 15 years of periodic ‘camp duty’ (which frequently involved active service on ‘the border’). The existence of such onerous responsibilities required the militarisation of white society and in particular, the militarisation of white gender identities. Cynthia Enloe notes that ‘[g]endering and militarisation are inseparable’:<sup>11</sup> governments waging military conflicts must ensure that men consider military service as an essential duty as *men* and women must believe that it is their duty to support men as soldiers. Cultural discourses of white masculinity and femininity were therefore militarised in an effort to make conscription appear a natural and essential facet of every white man’s life-course. Conscription was constructed as a performance that was a ‘rite of passage’ that positively changed the attitude, capabilities and prospects of the man who undertook it. Essentially, military service was a rite of passage that turned boys into men. Linda Price, commented that serving as a conscript in the SADF was, symbolic of the transition from youth to adulthood. Within the context of a social world, which reinforces the importance of the army both as protector and as a vehicle for the attainment of manhood, it is possible that the individual would perceive it as a pivotal point in his life. In addition, young men preparing themselves for armed combat and the defence of their country reinforce the status quo.<sup>12</sup>

The state designed the white education system to prepare boys for their impending 'duty' as conscripts and a considerable proportion of white civil society, the media and the business community aided the legitimisation of military service.<sup>13</sup> The legitimacy of conscription was heavily vested in the credibility of the Border War. However, the militarisation of gender identities made this interlinked social and political project appear both inevitable and sensible, yet vulnerable to individual dissent.

For white men, serving as troops on 'the border', constituted the ultimate marker of hegemonic masculinity<sup>14</sup> in white South Africa. Indeed, the image of the *grensvegter* (border fighter) became common currency in social discourse. The iconic image of the South African soldier resonated throughout South African culture and encouraged many men and their families to relish the prospect of sharing in an esteemed masculine endeavour where they would be transformed from boys into men. Conscripts were popularly acclaimed as 'troopies', 'Our Boys': the collective sons of South Africa. It was possible to purchase troopie cuddly toys (labelled with the epithet – 'I'm a winner'). The 'Ride Safe' campaign for national servicemen wishing to travel across the country was publicised on radio with the following song which reinforced the troopie construct:

He is just a troopie, standing near the road.  
 He's got a weekend pass and he wants to go home.  
 Pick him up, take him with.  
 He's still got a long way to go,  
 That troopie who stands by the 'Ride Safe' sign,  
 His hair is short, his shoulders broad and strong,  
 And his arms are tanned brown,  
 With pride he does his national service,  
 Respected wherever he goes, he's more than just a number,  
 He's a man's man . . .<sup>15</sup>

The troopie was admirable and masculine, a 'man's man'. It was active service on 'the border' that provided the ultimate symbol of militarised masculinity in white culture, however. It was the *grensvegter* who, in the words of *Paratus*, the SADF's official magazine, was '[s]hrouded in myth and legend, a Rambo-type figure. Essentially one who has been in the Operational Area'.<sup>16</sup> The *grensvegter* had supposedly been at the heart of the action, had participated in dangerous guerrilla warfare and proved his mettle. The symbolism of 'combat' as the ultimate performance of military hegemonic masculinity infused the *grensvegter* myth. *Grensvegter* was a popular picture book hero in Afrikaans culture.<sup>17</sup> A number of South African films were made focusing on *grensvegters* on 'the border', the most popular of which were the *Boetie Gaan Border Toe* (Little Brother goes to the Border) series of films.<sup>18</sup> The *grensvegter* image also drew from contemporary global discourses of militarised masculinity, namely Rambo, the

famed anti-communist military hero in a series of Hollywood movies. White anti-apartheid activists noted the sexualised and hyper-masculinist basis of the *grensvegter* identity: ‘The *Boetie gaan border toe* mentality is aimed at male sexuality and encourages a feeling of inadequacy amongst national servicemen who do not serve on the Border’.<sup>19</sup> The *grensvegter* imagery served to create and police a hierarchy of masculinities within the SADF and even when troops were stationed on ‘the border’, an internal politics of masculinity developed: troops kept at the SADF bases on ‘the border’ were derided as ‘base *moffies* (gays/effeminate men)’ by troops deployed in active combat on the frontline.<sup>20</sup> The images of serving soldiers created cultural icons by which white men were judged by others in society. Troopies were the affectionately regarded sons and protectors of white South Africa and *grensvegters* were the revered warriors defending the Republic’s borders against Communist takeover. The latter image also helped create an internal sexualised hierarchy within the SADF pressuring men to be seen to be involved in combat at ‘the border’.

### ‘The border’ and white women

White women also played an active role in constructing and sustaining ‘the border’ myth. A 1978 NP pamphlet declared that white women ‘are indispensable “soldiers” within our country’s borders and their spiritual power is South Africa’s secret weapon’.<sup>21</sup> SABC actress, Monica Breed encapsulated the state’s attitude towards white women and militarisation when she said:

You can’t separate the man from the woman as far as safety is concerned. The one cannot be safe without the other . . . She mustn’t think she’s in ‘paradise’ just because her husband or her relatives are fighting in the Operational Area, keeping her safe.<sup>22</sup>

Essentially, white women in society were addressed as ‘mothers, sweethearts, wives and friends’ of conscripts and were encouraged to actively identify and support ‘their men’ as *grensvegters*.<sup>23</sup> Enloe recognises that militarisation relies on ‘surrogate militarized motherhood’: women, who are far removed from the theatre of conflict, but contribute to morale and gain prestige by their support and encouragement of soldiers from the confines of femininity.<sup>24</sup> The South African example of ‘surrogate militarised motherhood’ was undoubtedly the Southern Cross Fund (SCF). The SCF was a women’s group that boasted over 15 000 members and had over 250 branches. Above all else, the women of the SCF focussed on the importance of supporting the troops on ‘the border’. The SCF gave a gift pack to all servicemen (which was inscribed with ‘The Southern Cross Fund Thanks Our Men at the Border’) and raised funds for recreational equipment for SADF troops stationed in Namibia. The Fund’s motto was ‘They Are Our Security’, and the women’s ‘Dial and Ride’ scheme, which gave soldiers free car rides, used the slogan, ‘They keep us safe in our homes. Let’s give them a safe ride to theirs’. The

slogans underlined the women's clear identification with their position as the 'protected' and the necessity of a large-scale military protector.<sup>25</sup> Founder and President of the SCF, Elizabeth Albrecht, described the Fund as 'the channel between the people and the forces, who receive in this way not only recreational equipment, but also the assurance of the gratitude and moral support of the people at home . . . As a nation we must all stand together in this conflict'.<sup>26</sup> An SCF tee-shirt, depicting a map of Namibia and an arrow pointing to its border with Angola, was regularly given to all financial donors to the Fund. The slogan 'He is There', beneath the arrow on the tee-shirt, underlined the SCF's role in defining 'the border' as a self-evident, common sense line of defence for South Africa and military service as a vital and admirable duty for all white South African men. Popular culture also helped to emphasise the importance of white women supporting men on 'the border'. Popular Afrikaans songs such as '*Daar's 'n Man op die Grens*' (There's a Man on the Border) and the aforementioned radio programme *Forces Favourites* (and also the Afrikaans medium SABC programme *Springbok Rendezvous*) helped to further celebrate the role of sons and husbands in the army and encouraged women to support and admire them.<sup>27</sup> 'The border' myth helped to create and sustain militarised gender identities by white society.

## Conscription and white society

The performance of conscription in any society is a disciplinary mechanism that aims to engender conformity and obedience. It is unsurprising that in such a highly militarised environment as white South Africa, the majority of white men 'complied' with military service.<sup>28</sup> However, despite the considerable energy spent on militarising white identities, compliance with national service should not be misinterpreted as widespread enthusiasm for duty. Indeed, even the then Prime Minister, P. W. Botha, estimated that only 20 to 30% of conscripts were positively enthusiastic soldiers and disciplinary problems amongst troops rose considerably during the 1980s.<sup>29</sup> Challenging militarisation in apartheid South Africa was possible. As Enloe notes, 'militarisation is a potent set of processes. But it is not the well-oiled, unstoppable development that it is frequently portrayed as being'.<sup>30</sup> Conscription may have served to engender discipline and widespread compliance to militarisation in white society, but it also exposed the South African regime and made Nationalist rule vulnerable to political and social shifts in white society. The South African government's political manoeuvrability was limited by white social reaction to the state's changing military fortunes, as was demonstrated by the rapid end of the Namibian conflict after an increase in conscript casualties in 1987–1988. ECC activists Sue Britton and Paul Graham wrote in 1989:

Conscription appears to have had the following effects – entirely unintended and subversive of the rationale of those who govern. It confronts all white South Africans with a moral dilemma and a choice, ensuring that there can be no apathetic acceptance of reality; it provides white South Africans with an opportunity to demonstrate their



commitment to the oppressed majority without paternalism – conscription is the “cross” they alone bear; it forces the government to be sensitive to the public.<sup>31</sup>

The existence of conscription confronted white South Africans with the realities of apartheid as in no other context. While conscription represented the pinnacle of South Africa’s militarisation, it could also be seen as introducing a fundamental weakness in apartheid governance. Merran Phillips concludes:

Racially based conscription was . . . ultimately a self-limiting strategy, creating continuous manpower problems as well as fracturing white political consensus by the extent and nature of SADF deployment . . . as the burden of conscription grew it was increasingly difficult for the National Party to demonstrate sufficient benefits to offset the costs of its conscription demands on whites.<sup>32</sup>

The deepening political and security crisis of the apartheid state and the concomitant changing use of conscripts exacerbated these inherent tensions and also destabilised the acceptance of waging the Border War in white society.

Although the majority of white men were conscripted, a minority chose to ‘challenge’ and conscientiously object.<sup>33</sup> A combination of factors: the advent of P. W. Botha as Prime Minister, South Africa’s deteriorating regional security situation and the advancement of militarisation, made the issue of conscription politically prescient after 1978. A small number of politically motivated political conscientious objectors (COs) began to be tried from the late 1970s onwards. These public and highly politicised stances reflected a burgeoning trend of conscripts failing to report for duty. Estimates suggested that between 1975 and 1978 an average of 10% of the call-up failed to report; this rose to 50% by 1985 (over 7 000 people).<sup>34</sup> This in itself was symptomatic of a rapidly increasing number of men who avoided conscription by emigration, deferment or by simply not providing the SADF with their current address.<sup>35</sup> Even white political support for the extension of conscription to white immigrants, political calls for conscription to be widened to the Coloured and Indian population groups and evidence that there was public support for white women to be conscripted, suggested the white population felt conscription was a burden that should be shared by others and not by white men alone.<sup>36</sup> Conscription was an accepted part of white South African life, but was not necessarily enthusiastically embraced. Eventually resentment grew.

In 1983, the conference of the Black Sash (a white women’s anti-apartheid organisation that had been in existence since the 1950s), passed a motion that stated:

South Africa is illegally occupying Namibia and this is cause for many in conscience to refuse military service. When South Africa withdraws from Namibia there would be

no need for a massive military establishment unless there has been a political failure to respond to the desires of the citizens, and that army will be engaged in civil war, which is a good cause for many to refuse military service. In such a civil war, if the state has to rely on conscription to man its army, the war is already lost . . . We maintain there is no total onslaught against the people of South Africa and that the total strategy demanded of us is not the military defence of a minority government but the total all out effort of all South Africa's people to bring about democratic government.<sup>37</sup>

White liberal groups in civil society began to debate how to respond to the call. The decision was taken to form the ECC, an umbrella organisation that incorporated a number of smaller white anti-apartheid and church organisations. The ECC was particularly active on white English-speaking university campuses. Although the ECC never became a mass-political movement, it did succeed in creating considerable press interest and in generating a cultural movement focused on the opposition to conscription and apartheid. Individual COs were also a mobilising catalyst for ECC activists, a good vehicle for creating press interest and allowed the ECC to develop themes of its campaign. Contesting the Border War was a central theme of ECC campaigning. Demanding an end to the Border War was one of the first ECC national campaigns, yet it had little impact beyond English-speaking university campuses precisely because of the power of 'the border' imagery. The ECC's later campaigns, focusing on the effects of militarisation on white masculinity, had greater impact (particularly in the English-speaking press) and reflected the wider social destabilisation of militarised gender norms.

The changing nature of South Africa's militarisation gave the ECC and the CO movement its impetus and also signified profound changes in white society. The ECC had an increasingly broad set of issues which it could use to highlight its case, issues which struck at the heart of white society and were of concern to white people who had never had reason to question apartheid before. Senior ECC activist, Janet Cherry, recognised the opportunity apartheid's crisis offered the ECC:

There is an incredible difference between South Africa and Rhodesia before independence. There you had an almost homogenous white population, with very few voices of dissent. The whites were prepared to just fight unquestioningly until the end, not actually knowing at any stage what was really happening and what the black community thought. Here it is different because we have got that room to move and to change white people's attitudes.<sup>38</sup>

As Phillips notes, 'the oppositional force of the ECC did not lie in its ability to mobilise large sections of the white community to oppose conscription, but in its publicising the essential divisive issue of conscription': conscription was an issue for white people whether they were

aware or supportive of the ECC or not and the ECC was able to use white self-interest as an oppositional tool.<sup>39</sup> CO trials in the late 1980s served as forums to highlight these issues: the imprisonment of professionals such as Dr Ivan Toms, Saul Batzofin and David Bruce appeared reckless and inexplicable in the face of emigration and an escalating war. However, the depth and efficacy of militarisation also served to isolate and stigmatise COs and the ECC, restricting their manoeuvrability and strength.

## Contesting ‘the border’

There were a number of social factors that destabilised white social consent for the Border War and enabled the ECC to contest service on ‘the border’ as an essential rite of passage for white men. The actual experience of men serving on ‘the border’ introduced dissonance for many white men and wider white society and the ECC was quick to highlight this. ‘Most people with call-ups aren’t into going,’ claimed the ECC, ‘two years, in some camp up north, getting bored out our skulls, is not our idea of fun.’<sup>40</sup> Whilst the claim that ‘most’ white South Africans were not ‘into going’ to ‘the border’ was difficult to assess the claim that service on ‘the border’ was ‘boring’ was an insightful strategy for the ECC, because it reflected emerging anecdotal evidence of conscripts finding border duty boring and not the *grensvegter* arena of macho excitement the SADF claimed it would be.<sup>41</sup> Annette Seegers cites compulsory conscription as the ‘worst thing’ a pro-militarist could institute, because it ‘ruins the entire scheme’ of militarisation by exposing young men to the reality of war and the military, a reality that would not correspond with the positive cultural myths in society.<sup>42</sup> Whilst this is a contestable claim, it is certainly true that a number of COs in South Africa became politically conscientised and radicalised because they had served as conscripts on ‘the border’. For example, Batzofin, who was imprisoned for refusing to serve ‘camp duty’ in 1989, explained that whilst stationed in Namibia:

Going on the patrols you realised that you drive into a village and every person hated you and everyone feared you and the soldiers, the trained infantry that were with us, they would go into these villages and just kick everyone on the pretext of ‘Where’s SWAPO?’ and you realised that whatever we were being told back at the camp, we weren’t there for these people, we were there for some reason, I didn’t know what, but it certainly wasn’t to protect these people, they were dead scared of us.<sup>43</sup>

CO Toms was also struck by the hostility and fear his presence evoked from the Namibian population (even though he was an unarmed SADF medic).<sup>44</sup> Experiencing the Border War at first hand exposed conscripts to the reality of apartheid’s war and for some, this turned them into political radicals who were willing to oppose South Africa’s militarisation. Furthermore, COs and the ECC consistently ensured that the trials of men refusing the call-up were used to

describe atrocities committed by the SADF in the Namibian/Angolan conflict (either through the direct testimony of objectors who had served on 'the border' or other former conscripts who had returned).

The heroic *grensvegter* image of the SADF soldier at 'the border' also began to be questioned by mainstream white society and the ECC capitalised on this. The main impetus for this questioning was the experiences of individual white men and the discernable effects military service was having on them. A number of disturbing trends began to emerge as 'veterans' of 'the border' conflict returned home. By the mid- to late-1980s there was increasing comment in the press and academia on the rise of white male suicide rates, instances of interpersonal violence and the phenomenon of 'family murder' whereby white men would inexplicably murder their families and then commit suicide (Pretoria, in fact, had the highest number of 'family murders' anywhere in the world).<sup>45</sup> In 1987, General Malan told parliament (in response to a parliamentary question) that 326 national servicemen had attempted suicide during the previous year and that 18 killed themselves, as opposed to 116 who died in operations over the same period.<sup>46</sup> The reality of these developments began to influence white popular culture. The slang word *bosbefok* (bush fucked/bush mad) entered common currency as a term of abuse, yet actually its origins were influenced by the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) exhibited by troops who had served on 'the border'.<sup>47</sup> The metaphor of 'bush fucked' itself contested the army as a masculinising experience and 'the border' as an exciting and heroic landscape: men were 'fucked' by the experience, demeaned and driven 'mad' as a result. The realities of the negative effects of conscription (particularly when serving on 'the border') became increasingly difficult for the government to hide and the ECC exploited this. ECC leader Laurie Nathan explained to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that he believed conscripts were 'both victims and perpetrators' and this influenced much of ECC campaigns.<sup>48</sup> CO Charles Bester told a student audience at the University of Cape Town:

I believe that, in as much as discrimination and injustice harm the oppressed, so, in the same measure, is the oppressor spiritually and mentally damaged. There is abundant proof of this in the astonishing escalation of murder, family killings, child abuse, alcoholism, drug addiction and unwarranted aggression amongst White South Africans in recent years – all manifestations of a society in stress. In addition, the danger to young white conscripts lies not only in physical maiming or death during National Service, but in spiritual scarring due to their experiences.<sup>49</sup>

The ECC was highly creative and artistic in many of its campaigns and posters were a common means for disseminating its message on university campuses and student areas. ECC imagery frequently represented white masculinity as restrained and restricted by the SADF – with white conscripts being depicted as tied up, gagged or slumped and dejected. The discourse that men

were not only restrained by conscription but warped and perverted by it was incorporated into the ECC's visual images. One ECC cartoon depicted a white man being warped into a brutal sadistic killer by the SADF. The poster showed a naked white man in darkness and then being thrust into an SADF uniform. The conscript stood on a South African flag holding the legs of a dead baby and the caption read, 'Please I am terrified of what I will be forced to become for our country'. Animalistic images were also frequently used by the ECC in newsletters and pamphlets and emphasised the damaging effects military service on 'the border' was having on white men: one such image that was used numerous times contained a series of pictures of conscripts slowly metamorphosing into pigs. Men were turned into animals by the SADF: their rationality, free will and agency was replaced by base instincts of survival, brutality and effectively, of inhumanity. The *grensvegter* image of white men as troops on 'the border' began to disintegrate as the evidence of the real physical and psychological effects of military service on white men became apparent.

The ECC not only contested conscription as a beneficial rite of passage, using visual images and cartoons. It also did so with written discourse in mainstream public forums such as newspaper letters pages. The letters sent by ECC activists were an effective means of contesting directly the claims made by those supportive of military national service on 'the border'. The following example comes from letters to the *Natal Witness* that centre on the claims of one correspondent that juvenile delinquents would benefit from military conscription. ECC activists and those sympathetic to objectors were quick to respond. Fidelia Fouché wrote:

Is it not fairly well known that persons returning from their spell of compulsory military service tend to be psychologically disturbed, violent, anti-social, that many are depressed and that there is a high rate of alcoholism among them? . . . Military camps are sterile and unutterably boring places (everyone complains of the boredom); they are also places of fear in which bullies are peculiarly at home. Conscripts yearn for release from the army and no doubt idealise the real world . . . Are unemployed ex-army misfits not more likely to be delinquents than are young persons who have been establishing themselves in careers and forming normal relationships?<sup>50</sup>

Contained in this extract are multiple criticisms of the military as a rite of passage. Indeed, Fouché defines conscription as a transformative process that is entirely negative for the men who perform it. Men are warped and 'disturbed' by military service, a process which is 'boring' and unpleasant. Finally, conscripts graduate as 'misfits' who are 'unemployed' and at a disadvantage to those who were pursuing careers instead of serving in the military. Fouché also attacked the concept of army discipline, which she branded, pseudo-discipline . . . obey senseless rules senselessly . . . Army "discipline" relies on fear and not on rational choice, is not only worthless but harmful . . . should we really deplore the fact that protest comes mostly from

young people – at our universities and in our townships? Is it bad that people should protest and indeed rebel against what they perceive as unjust?<sup>51</sup>

ECC activist S. Spanier-Marsden wrote on the same page that, 'conscriptio evokes emotions such as fear, irrational patriotism and resigned acceptance. These emotions are hardly noble . . . to defend conscription in this country is to defend mindless social convention at the expense of human dignity and wasted life'.<sup>52</sup> In letters such as these, ECC activists contested some of the tenets of militarised masculinity and citizenship: portraying the performance of conscription as the antithesis of a beneficial rite of passage.

The worsening circumstances of the apartheid state required the more extensive use of conscripts across the Republic and an increased level of conflict on 'the border' area (and in Angola). The use of SADF troops to control unrest in the townships, particularly during and after the State of Emergency in 1985, undermined the image of the SADF acting as a shield against outside aggressors posted at a distant perimeter and introduced doubt about the legitimacy of SADF activities in the minds of some conscripts and their families. Furthermore, the heroism of the *grensvegter* was simply not transferable to township duty. In a widely quoted statement in the press, given during the trial of CO Philip Wilkinson, one former conscript described the rationale behind the random acts of violence committed by his former colleagues in the townships as the antithesis of heroism: 'There is a tremendous sense of power in beating someone up: even if you are the most put upon, dumb son of a bitch, you are still better than a *kaffir* (offensive term for black person) and can beat him up to prove it.'<sup>53</sup> The deployment of the SADF in townships allowed the ECC to appeal to conscripts directly. ECC activist Cherry explained, 'We [the ECC] do not condemn the individual soldier who is forced into a situation in which he has no choice. But in this situation, all conscriptees should consider the moral implications of their actions' by serving in the townships.<sup>54</sup> Nathan claimed that support for the ECC by conscripts had dramatically increased during the State of Emergency and that some of supporters did not necessarily come from an 'anti-apartheid position'. Nathan believed that:

The thought of going into a township and taking up guns against the people has been terrible for many people . . . conscription is one aspect that is an imposition on all white South Africans. They realise there is a difference between enjoying privileges and propping up the system with a gun. People are asking whether it is worth it and many are concluding it is not.<sup>55</sup>

The ECC recognised that the use of conscripts in the townships destabilised one of the fundamental premises of the cultural portrayal of the justifications for South African conscription; that of the SADF defending society from an outside aggressor on the Namibian border. National ECC leader Alistair Teeling-Smith said:

Potential conscripts never had much problem with the idea of going to the border to fight the unknown enemy. But now they are fighting in townships where their maids and gardeners live, and for many it has become a personal and emotional issue . . . for a young white South African the choices are stark; serve, go to prison, go underground or flee overseas.<sup>56</sup>

The use of troops in the townships allowed the ECC to interrogate the use of ‘the border’ as an unquestioned discursive sign in white society. The distant, tightly controlled environment of ‘the border’, classed into ‘Operational Zones’ controlled by military discipline and power, evaporated in the noisy, chaotic and unruly townships. *Waar is die grens nou?* (Where is the Border now?) asked an ECC leaflet distributed in Stellenbosh. The ECC subverted the *Boetie Gaan Border Toe* cultural symbol by producing posters, stickers and tee-shirts emblazoned with *Boetie gaan Athlone Toe* (Little brother goes to Athlone). As an ECC sponsored collection of short stories noted, ‘Now the border goes all over the place. Sometimes straight through the middle of families which is, I suppose, what civil war is all about.’<sup>57</sup> A musical genre that appealed to white student and youth anti-conscription music started to flourish in the bars of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. This music also focussed on many of the gendered themes of ECC campaigning.<sup>58</sup> The State of Emergency and conscripts deployed in the townships gave the ECC a relevance and power that they would not have otherwise had and destabilised the myth of ‘the border’ in white society.

The ECC also addressed militarised constructs of white femininity and women’s role in supporting conscripts on ‘the border’. Appealing to white women as mothers who were harmed by apartheid rule was a theme present in progressive women’s activism stretching back to the 1950s. Indeed, the Black Sash had been established by a group of white mothers who sought to portray themselves as the true mothers and guardians of the South African nation.<sup>59</sup> In 1987, the exiled ANC National Executive Council stated, ‘these black and white mothers must reach across the divide created by the common enemy of our people and form a human chain to stop, now and forever, the murderous rampage of the apartheid system’.<sup>60</sup> The ECC sought to embody this appeal. The ECC organised a conference on ‘mothers’ perspectives’ of SADF conscripts deployed in the townships. White mothers of conscripts gathered with black mothers from townships. At the conference, ‘one [black] woman said she had to live with the fear that she might not find her two sons alive when she returned home from work each evening’ and a white mother said, ‘I know it may sound cowardly, but we just don’t want our son to go into these areas’.<sup>61</sup> The ECC cleverly played on white families’ fears of the township conflicts in particular (as opposed to ‘the border’ campaign that was much more readily accepted by the white community) and also tried to link it to wider themes of the damage apartheid was doing to families and the common fears mothers had about their sons, regardless of race.

The ECC also addressed the issue of how the manifestation of PTSD symptoms in conscripts returning from 'the border' might impact on friends and family. An ECC leaflet entitled 'Women and Conscription' sought to destabilise the image of the hegemonic male soldier and present the process of conscription as a direct threat to women as wives and mothers of conscripts. The leaflet explained that the army's culture of 'making a man' out of conscripts was premised on a type of masculinity that was 'authoritarian, violent and brutal. It is no accident that there are reports of increased crimes of rape and wife-beating from men who return from their military service'.<sup>62</sup> The leaflet also explained women's complicity with conscription, a complicity that made the militarisation of South Africa possible: white women were expected to keep the 'homefires burning' and groups such as the SCF existed to aid women's complicity in militarisation. Former CO and ECC activist Dr Ivan Toms recalls that in the ECC:

There would be an active way in which people would be talking about girlfriends, mothers, sisters, so they would be quite actively talked about as a political reason. Helen Zillé [a senior ECC activist] had got involved in ECC because she had a little son, four years old, and she didn't want him to go to the army and she often spoke on platforms about that, very effectively. It was quite obvious. She saw what was going on – she saw what [the] ECC was and she thought, 'I'm going to join this organisation that's going to protect my son from going to fight in this army that's defending apartheid'.<sup>63</sup>

The ECC produced literature aimed at white families and mothers, in particular, in the weeks leading up to bi-annual call-ups. The ECC addressed women as mothers and wives and particularly stressed the importance of family bonds and what conscription could do to damage this. The ECC focused on white mothers' fears of how military service could harm their sons, physically and psychologically and stressed white people's self-interest in not performing conscription.

## Unravelling 'the border' myth

The critical moment in 'the border's' cultural destabilisation was the Cuito Cuanavale offensive of 1987–1988. The loss of SADF air superiority and the concomitant rise in conscript deaths provoked a sharp backlash from white society and played a significant factor in the South African government's decision to call a ceasefire and negotiate. The revelation of the SADF's activities in Angola, as opposed to their presence in the 'Operational Area' in Namibia, was a particular source of opposition. The unravelling of 'the border' myth is remarkable, considering the widespread support for the military conflict in the early 1980s, yet it reflects the multiple stresses white society had become subject to. Michael Mann notes that although militarisation may appear all encompassing and unassailable; 'If the nation is called to real sacrifice, we see that its militarism is not rooted deep', if living standards in a militarised society begin to



fall, or should 'our boys' be perceived to be 'pointlessly sacrificed', militarism is profoundly threatened.<sup>64</sup> Influential groups in white society began to openly discuss whether conscript deaths in Angola were 'pointless' and this critically undermined the ability of the state to continue 'the border' conflict. Even the hitherto loyal Dutch Reformed Church questioned the presence of South African troops in a neighbouring country.<sup>65</sup> What was most significant in the backlash against 'the border' conflict following the increase in casualty rates was its gendered nature: women, as mothers of conscripts, were especially vocal in their hostility to the Border War. The white social response to the rising casualty rates from the Cuito Cuanavale operation removed the ability of the apartheid state to define 'the border' as a *carte blanche* for offensive military operations and critically threatened white support for conscription.

The concept of the patriotic, dutiful, militarised white mother began to be questioned in mainstream white popular culture. Women's magazines began to publish articles that were hostile to the SADF's activities in Angola. The mass-market women's magazine, *Fair Lady* published one such article in 1988. One mother, whose 19-year-old son had been killed in Angola, wrote:

Isn't it terrible that it should be my son? . . . Personally I feel that our children should not be fighting in that war. It is our duty to give our sons to the army – nobody really wants them to go, but it is our duty to send them. But . . . we are not told that our children are being sent into Angola. We think they are in South West Africa.<sup>66</sup>

What made this commentary so powerful was not the woman's rejection of South Africa's militarisation (indeed she endorses her 'duty' as a mother to 'give' her son to the army), but rather her opposition to 'the border' conflict in particular, prosecuted as it was on Angolan territory. General Malan reacted furiously to women's magazines criticisms of the SADF and pledged to ban any such publications in future. *Cosmopolitan* consequently dropped the testimony of a mother whose conscripted son had been killed in an accident shortly before the end of his tour of duty in Namibia. The article was, however, published by the magazine of the Black Sash. Although being published in this niche medium meant that its impact was much reduced, the article vividly demonstrated the process of how 'the border' myth had come to be questioned and eventually rejected by a previously compliant white woman. Margaret Biet's son had been conscripted shortly after the deaths of her husband, mother and brother. Biet's pleas to have her son posted in his home area of Cape Town were ignored by the SADF. After being posted to 'the border', Biet's son (Sean) returned for a weekend visit deeply traumatised by his experiences and talked of absconding from duty. However, he returned and was killed some weeks later. The SADF were uncooperative with Biet's requests to see the body of her son and were hostile to her questions as to why the military had no record of her numerous applications to have him transferred. Even the State President's wife, Elize Botha, became involved in the case. The article ended with Biet's words:

I accepted the death of my husband, my brother and my mother. I cannot accept his death. Elize Botha sent a printed card, 'Presented to the guardians of our borders'. She had added the words 'and one who gave his life. Sean Biet'. He didn't give his life. It was taken.<sup>67</sup>

The recognition that lives lost in the Border War were 'taken' and not heroically sacrificed was a radically destabilising one for the state and Biet's testimony represents an individual rejection of 'the border' myth. This rejection was a critical one, for the apartheid state was as dependent on white mothers embracing their militarised gender identities as much as it was reliant on men doing the same

## Conclusion

The SADF announced the halving of the period of duty required of conscripts in 1990 with the proclamation that 'We Won!'. In reality, however, SADF commanders had pressed NP leaders for a swift end to the Border War as the credibility of perpetuating the conflict began to be questioned. There had been widening concern about the levels of conscript casualties, the potential for further white social dissent and the prospect of SADF losses at the hands of superior Soviet weaponry. 'The border' had become a commonly accepted social myth in white South African society by the early 1980s. Yet changing political and social circumstances created political fractures in the white community and enabled individuals and groups to critique South Africa's militarisation and the blind acceptance of the legitimacy of the Border War. The ECC may not have become a mass political force in white society, nor did it successfully 'end conscription' before 1994, but it did manage to highlight and exacerbate growing white unease about the impact and rationale of conscription and the Border War. Without the willingness of white men to serve as conscripts and the complicity and support of white women in this process, the state would become dangerously vulnerable in both ideological and military terms. The ECC's effectiveness in highlighting conscription and the Border War as contentious political issues exposed this vulnerability. The state's ability to wage the Border War indefinitely and in relative secrecy was thus undermined by the ECC's activism and particularly the press interest that was generated thereby. Popular culture had effectively created and sustained the myth of 'the border' and was creatively garnered by the ECC to contest and destabilise it. Furthermore, the ECC accurately discerned the gendered nature of South Africa's militarisation and subverted hegemonic tropes of militarised gender identity in some of its most successful campaigns. The phrase 'somewhere on "the border"' that encapsulated a powerful social discourse of militarisation, and the acceptance of the ideological imperatives that lay behind it were an essential facet of apartheid rule, was challenged.

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## Notes to Chapter Five

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