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Review Article

Silence in Context: Truth and/or Reconciliation in Namibia*

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‘Silence augmenteth grief, writing increaseth rage’
Sir Fulke Greville, Mustapha, 1609

‘The first thing that one has to do before one can write a useful history, a liberating history, is to clear away this whole clutter of false, hegemonic assumptions’. When Terence Ranger addressed these words to the scholars and activists gathered at a 1984 conference marking one hundred years of colonial occupation in Namibia, he was referring to the necessity of replacing the South African regime’s ‘manipulative’ version of Namibia’s history with one that would serve the needs of a people struggling for their independence. This theme was taken up by other participants, including Harold Wolpe, who concluded that in the context of a liberation struggle academic research should be determined primarily by political imperatives, ‘subject always to the critical role’. Gavin Williams, as conference rapporteur, was clearly not persuaded that history was inevitably ‘propaganda, for one side or another’.1 For the eighty or so contributors to the published proceedings, however, the conference represented a conscious effort to recover a past – and record a present – that would be ‘useable’ by the liberation movement. In practice this meant SWAPO,2 whose formal recognition by the UN in 1976 as the ‘sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people’ only confirmed its unquestionable (and unquestioned) primacy among Namibia’s nationalist forces. The imperatives of solidarity and publicity not only determined the research agenda for a host of individuals and organisations committed to a freed Namibia, but shaped a hegemonic ‘official’ history of the struggle.3 Like the colonial history it

* Review Editor’s Note: Siegfried Groth’s book was originally reviewed by Heribert Weiland in the Journal of Southern African Studies, 22, 3 (1996), pp. 501-503. The book has since sparked considerable controversy in Namibia. Lauren Dobell’s review article returns to the book in order to discuss its political repercussions in depth.

1 See Brian Wood (ed), Namibia 1884–1994: Readings on Namibia’s History and Society (London, 1988), pp. 43, 37, and 747, respectively.
2 The South West Africa People’s Organisation was known by its acronym, SWAPO, until independence, after which it adopted the proper name ‘Swapo’. Uppercase letters are used only when referring to the pre-independence period.
3 This is not to suggest that false information was deliberately promulgated by authors or organizations sympathetic to the liberation movement. For those outside Namibia, the exigencies of solidarity were compounded, in many cases, by lack of access to Namibia and the paucity of reliable data. Attempts to follow the movement in exile from inside Namibia were similarly hampered in their access to information. Much of what was written
supplanted, it contains its own share of contentious claims. The extent to which Namibians are now able openly to debate and thereby come to terms with their past will have important consequences for the nation’s future; those who assisted in the construction of a ‘resistance history’ for Namibia have a special responsibility to ensure that it is now thrown open for scrutiny.

Namibia’s collegial multi-party parliament, its exemplary national constitution and its regular, peaceful elections are a continuing source of pride to its citizens, and of satisfaction to local and international observers. As a measure of the degree to which democratic practice is embedded in a polity, however, a smoothly functioning electoral system is in itself insufficient, even if sustained. To be considered ‘consolidated’, as David Beetham has observed, a democracy must have proved itself ‘capable of withstanding pressures or shocks without abandoning the electoral process or the political freedoms on which it depends, including those of dissent or opposition’. Such a shock was administered to Namibia’s ruling party with the release of Siegfried Groth’s book, *Namibia – The Wall of Silence*, in 1996. This piece seeks to situate Groth’s book within the broader academic and political contexts, and argues that it is not so much what Groth said as when he said it, and what Groth himself represents, that generated such a remarkable response. It is the parameters of this debate, more than the specific content, that will be of critical and lasting importance.

At the heart of the crisis is the issue of former ‘detainees’. They accuse SWAPO’s exiled leadership of widespread mistreatment of suspected dissidents during the liberation struggle, and some have demanded a full confession and apology from the perpetrators, possibly by means of a process modelled on the South African Truth Commission. But the ramifications of their campaign reach far beyond the question of rehabilitation for those accused by their movement of having been spies and traitors, and restitution for the families of those who never returned from the ‘SWAPO dungeons’. At stake are the government’s policy of national reconciliation, the past and future role of the once-powerful Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) as well as other critical structures of Namibian civil society, the composition of the Swapo leadership and, ultimately, the character and resilience of Namibia’s democracy itself.

Swapo’s policy of national reconciliation, the essential contours of which were determined before independence, differs significantly from the ANC’s. In confronting similar legacies of suffering, of communities and families torn apart in the war against apartheid, the Namibian and South African governments came to opposite conclusions regarding the best way to put the past behind them. South Africa’s Government of National Unity established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, reasoning, in the words of Justice...
Minister Dullah Omar, that 'reconciliation is not simply a question of indemnity or amnesty or letting bygones be bygones. If the wounds of the past are to be healed, ... if future violations of human rights are to be avoided, if we are successfully to initiate the building of a human rights culture, disclosure of the truth and its acknowledgment is essential'. In reaching these conclusions South Africa’s ANC-led Government of National Unity benefitted from the experiences of other countries striving to knit shattered societies together in the wake of dismantled authoritarian regimes, including that of its immediate neighbour.

As Namibia’s ruling party, SWAPO adopted a more cautious approach to reconciliation. In the government’s considered opinion, resurrecting the past would serve no constructive purpose. A successful transition, it was argued, required cooperation among former enemies. Delving into past injustices would only incite a desire for vengeance and distract a still-fragile nation from the paramount tasks of reconstruction and development. Three facets of national reconciliation were tacitly bound together: ethnic or racial reconciliation (healing the wounds of apartheid), social reconciliation (healing the wounds of war); and economic reconciliation, naturally interpreted by the propertied classes as legitimating the status quo, and by the propertyless as requiring a significant redistribution of wealth. In this last respect especially, it seemed, the success of the policy of national reconciliation as the ideological underpinning of reconstruction and nation-building depended on the deliberate ambiguity of its provisions. Conversely, criticism of any aspect of the policy was deemed an unpatriotic attack on the whole. An unspoken but critical subtext for what detractors derided as a policy of national amnesia was the SWAPO leadership’s uncomfortable awareness of the skeletons in its own closet (or ‘cabinet’ – pun intended? – as Pekka Peltola put it). In contrast to the ANC, whose Skweyiya Inquiry and Motsuenyane Commission acknowledged violations of human rights in the ANC camps, Swapo never officially admitted to any wrongdoing. Having been quietly collecting dust for some years, these skeletons now appear set for a good rattling. And those who administer it will be shaking up institutional and individual consciences well beyond Namibia’s borders.

This is not the first time that Swapo has been confronted with the question of the maltreatment of perceived dissidents during the movement’s years in exile. It is widely recognised that the detainee issue made itself felt in Namibia’s independence elections, combining with other factors to deny Swapo a two-thirds majority in 1989. The issue has been largely dormant since then, however. Exhortations from the President to practice national reconciliation, the judicious incorporation of many former detainees into the public service, the marginalisation of others, fatigue and fear of social ostracism, have all contributed to quelling the few subsequent attempts by former detainees to revive the issue. In late 1994 parliament stifled a motion, proposed by opposition politician and former detainee Eric Biwa, requesting the release of a promised official list of some 2,100 persons still unaccounted for (the International Red Cross had put the figure at 1,600) so that formal death certificates could be issued, enabling legal guardianship to be established, marriages...
to take place, and inheritances to be settled.\textsuperscript{9} The issue appeared to be effectively squelched. That is, until the release of Siegfried Groth’s book provided a catalyst for the resurrection of the controversy.

The book was immediately attacked by President Sam Nujoma as ‘false history’ and its author as ‘never a friend to Swapo’ whose ‘agenda will only lead to bloodshed’.\textsuperscript{10} ‘Unpatriotic’ sponsors of a formal book launch were accused of having ‘declared war’ on national reconciliation, while many long-time Namibian residents were surprised to hear themselves described by Swapo party secretary General Moses Garoeb as ‘foreign remnants of fascism’.\textsuperscript{11} All the attention depicted the book itself as the issue, rather than highlighting its role as a lightning rod for legitimate discontent among many Namibians, a bellwether for Swapo’s tolerance of criticism and democratic dissent, and a decisive test for the resilience of the magic wand of national reconciliation as applied in Namibia.

Heribert Weiland’s review of Groth’s book in an earlier issue of this journal dealt specifically with the book’s contents, and only enough need be said here to place them in context. Groth’s account of the harassment, imprisonment, torture and outright disappearances of people branded as dissidents by SWAPO’s securocrats makes for a painful read; the emotional cost to the author of finally speaking out is very clear. Although he is at pains to situate the movement’s paranoia against the backdrop of the South African regime’s brutal repressiveness, the highly anecdotal narrative does little to explain the wider context in which the Namibian liberation struggle was fought, nor the inner dynamics which, from the late 1960s onward, repeatedly threatened to tear the movement apart. Without an adequate explanation of the daunting challenges faced by the movement, its excesses appear almost wholly arbitrary, while Groth’s profound Christian faith at times seems ill-suited to the task of explaining actions rooted in more terrestrial motivations – anti-intellectualism, ethnic rivalries, personal jealousies, ambition, logistical confusion, opportunism and political pragmatism – played out within a framework determined by complex regional and international manoeuvres. The role of communist ideology in informing the movement’s leadership is overplayed, and Marxism is conflated with its Stalinist distortions. At the same time, however, Groth’s account compassionately mirrors the victims’ incomprehension of their betrayal by a movement fighting for freedom from a common oppressor. This paralysing disbelief is important to understanding how so many of its members were caught up in the spiral of SWAPO crises – and, perhaps, why so many of the movement’s sponsors and allies refused at the time to acknowledge what was happening, despite the mounting evidence.\textsuperscript{12}

Groth does not, as Weiland notes (and outraged others point to as evidence of sympathy with the enemy) deal with the question of whether any of those convicted of treason were actually guilty. Weiland, who is conservative in his estimates of those imprisoned, observes on behalf of the defence that ‘many of the people Swapo sentenced will almost certainly have been mercenaries and spies in South Africa’s pay; not everyone was innocent’.\textsuperscript{13} It is not my intention to consider the likely degree of South Africa’s infiltration of Swapo, but merely to enter a plea for a careful examination of the role of certain received orthodoxies in the resistance history. Certainly the evidence from South Africa suggests that infiltration

\textsuperscript{10} Broadcast by the NBC on 6 March 1996. \textsuperscript{11} ‘Media statement by Swapo party on the so-called detainee issue’, delivered by Moses Garoeb on 12 March 1996. \textsuperscript{12} The brief description of these crises in Evenson and Herstein, The Devils are Among Us, p. 168, yields a glimpse of the awful choice confronting solidarity activists. See also David Lush, Last Steps to Uhuru (Windhoek, 1993), pp. 198–206, for a description of the impact at home of the 1989 release of former detainees, and the debate in The Namibian over whether or not to publish witness accounts and photographs of torture-scarred bodies. Some journalists feared that the paper would lose its credibility among a readership overwhelmingly loyal to Swapo. \textsuperscript{13} Weiland, Review of Namibia – The Wall of Silence, p. 503.
of the ANC and anti-apartheid organizations at home was significant, and the same strategies may have been applied to Swapo. It also suggests, however, that the sophistication of South Africa's military technology obviated the need for detailed intelligence concerning troop movements and the location of camps like Cassinga (which many of the 'spies' were accused of having betrayed), and that in any case the most sought-after informants would not normally have been ordinary cadres — although the value to the South Africans of simply feeding a myth of pervasive infiltration should of course not be over-looked. It must also be recalled that the Namibian struggle was fought primarily on the diplomatic and not the military front, and that advance warning of diplomatic manoeuvres was likely of greater utility to Pretoria. In any case, the absurdity of the 'evidence' used to substantiate the accusations made a mockery of the spy-catching process (in the absence of any kind of trial could the detainees be said to have been 'convicted' or 'sentenced'?), and the use of torture to extract confessions served to obscure whatever grains of truth, if any, the charges may have originally contained.\(^\text{14}\)

Underlying Groth's narrative runs a question that has long vexed students of SWAPO's liberation struggle: how much of what transpired was a product of difficult circumstances and the perceived exigencies of waging war, and how much a consequence of an engrained tendency toward authoritarianism? There is no mention in The Wall of Silence — nor in Weiland’s review — of the 'Kongwa crisis' of the late 1960s, many elements of which were reproduced in the mid-1970s, and again in the 1980s: its inclusion would have served to underline a discouraging consistency in the Swapo leadership's intolerance of criticism and open debate.\(^\text{15}\) Ultimately the question is left unresolved. While elements within the Swapo leadership are held directly responsible for the abuses which occurred, Groth is reluctant to pass judgement on the movement. For him the more pressing question is why Swapo's allies did not hold it accountable for its actions. It is the individual and collective complicity of the churches, inside Namibia and abroad, which shoulder the brunt of the blame in his account. Like himself, the churches remained silent about what they knew or suspected: a product of what Groth has come to see as a well-intentioned but in many ways harmful solidarity. To break down this 'wall of silence' is the challenge extended in his book.

Ironically, albeit perhaps inevitably, the author remains to some extent complicit in the very conspiracy of silence he condemns. He cites few sources, and in quoting his informants appears to give the gist rather than the verbatim content of their remarks. Most of the victims are given pseudonyms, and only a few of the best-known Swapo 'securocrats' are named.\(^\text{16}\) He does, however, break a longstanding taboo in holding Sam Nujoma, then (as now) Swapo president and Commander-in-Chief of the People's Liberation Army of

14 Detainees tell of being captured on suspicion of carrying transistor radios in their teeth or embedded in scar tissue, women tell of being accused of harbouring poisoned razor blades in their vaginas with which to assassinate amorous Swapo leaders; digital watches bought abroad were sometimes displayed as spying devices (see, for some examples, Groth, pp. 100–129). Prior to Groth's book, most detailed published accounts of the identification, arrests, torture and detention of alleged spies were compiled by rightist international organizations such as Jeanne Kirkpatrick's International Society for Human Rights and others overtly hostile to Swapo who provided the only hearings the detainees were able to obtain prior to independence. Of these, Nico Basson and Ben Motinga, Call Them Spies (Windhoek and Johannesburg, 1989) is the most useful, when read with due attention to the sources employed. Extensive and credible corroboration of such accounts is available from individual former detainees, Namibia's Legal Assistance Centre, The Namibian, and the National Society for Human Rights. A Project for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation opened an office in Namibia in late 1996, in order to collect sworn testimonials concerning human rights violations committed by both sides in the Namibian struggle, among other things.


16 Security chief Solomon Hawala, Moses Garoeb (p. 107) and Hidipo Hamutenya (p. 115) are named as directly complicit in the interrogation of detainees.
Namibia (PLAN), responsible for what was taking place in his organisation, whether or not he was fully apprised of what was happening.  

As noted above, however, it is not Groth's admittedly fragmentary contribution to the facts on record which has caused such a stir. Indeed there is little in the book that is not chronicled elsewhere, and with more thorough documentation. Weiland's description notwithstanding, this 'hidden aspect of Namibian history' was not so much hidden as ignored, neglected or rejected. From the Cold Warriors for whom the issue was irrelevant to broader strategic concerns, to diplomats who saw no other avenue to a free Namibia, to solidarity organisations and activists whose support for Swapo did not admit impediment, there was no place for inconvenient and potentially damaging revelations about the darker side of the liberation struggle. The occasionally bitter rejection of recent revisions of the received history, by those who adhered (or actively contributed) to a more romantic portrayal of Swapo, stems in part from the personal censure they infer from the more critical portraits now emerging.

Certainly the essential facts can no longer be dismissed as propagandist fabrications, although considerable lacunae remain, and a central explanatory thread continues to be elusive. Where Groth understandably exaggerates the role of Christianity in drawing battle lines within the movement, Pekka Peltola emphasizes trade union membership as putting Swapo cadres at special risk, while radical and idealistic Swapo Youth Leaguers are the protagonists in Erica Thiro-Beukes et al., Namibia: The Struggle Betrayed (Rehoboth, 1986). A combination of generation (including date of arrival in exile), educational attainment, and ethnic and regional background (Oshimbo-speakers from the South suffered disproportionately) were most salient according to others. Namibian political commentator Joe Diescho perhaps came closest to the truth in an interview with The Namibian: the majority were 'people who had the courage to ask questions and who, as a result, were branded enemy agents'.  

Perpetual anticipation of a threat from the ranks appears to have led certain leaders to react unfavourably to any signs of independent initiative, with lasting repercussions for state-civil society relations after independence. A similar conclusion is reached by the contributors to Namibia's Liberation Struggle: The Two Edged Sword, notably by Philip Steenkamp, whose critique of the role of the Namibian churches in the struggle presaged Groth's book, and editors Colin Leys and John Saul, who also co-authored an article on SWAPO's 1976 crisis. Sue Brown, Tove Dix, Somadoda Fikenhe, Chris Tapscoot and Ben Mulongeni have all published material from interviews with former detainees and other returnees in working papers for the then Namibian Institute for Social and Economic Research (NISER), which complements the treatment of the issue in recent books by David Lush and Lionel Cliffe et al., both reviewed in the September 1995 issue of this journal. While critical (to varying degrees) of the Swapo leadership, all the above remain sympathetic overall, recognizing the hardships of exile and the immense burden of leading and sustaining a liberation struggle for three

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17 Security Service head Solomon 'Jesus' Hawala, widely known as the Butcher of Lubango, was 'responsible to no one except Swapo President Sam Nujoma' (p. 100). A visit by Nujoma to one of the prisons is described on p. 125. Groth does observe, possibly in mitigation, that Hawala 'was feared by everyone, including the leadership', and that by the late 1980s not even those nearest to the Resident -- including his wife and brother-in-law -- were immune from questioning and arrest.


19 The Namibian, 15 March 1996. As Colin Leys notes, drawing attention to themselves by asking questions is 'precisely what any actual spies would not have done'. Personal communication, 17 December 1996.

20 See P. Steenkamp, "The Churches", in Leys and Saul (eds), Namibia's Liberation Struggle, pp. 94–114.


22 Lush, Last Steps to Uhuru, and L. Cliffe et al., The Transition to Independence in Namibia (Boulder, 1994).
decades. All, too, are generally optimistic about Swapo’s post-independence reincarnation. Neither the sympathy nor the optimism is shared by another set of writers, whose important contributions to the record have in the past been too easily dismissed, and often unfairly lumped together with the anti-Swapo diatribes of the more prolific far-right. With some significant exceptions, including Paul Trewhela’s articles ‘The Kissinger/Vorster/Kaunda detente: Genesis of the Swapo spy-drama’ and ‘A question of truthfulness’, the most important of these are co-authored by erstwhile Swapo members. Erica Thiro-Beukes et al., Namibia: The Struggle Betrayed may deserve characterization as more polemical than analytical, Sue Armstrong’s In Search of Freedom: The Andreas Shipanga Story (Gibraltar, 1989) is indisputably monophonic, and Nico Basson and Ben Motinga’s edited collection of documents pertaining to the ‘spy-drama’, Call Them Spies, requires close attention to the sources employed. Nevertheless, read with due care, these make a significant contribution to the historical record, from people who had cause to harbour hostile feelings for Swapo.

That, despite these and other works of local origin, a ‘wall of silence’ was maintained on the subject within Namibia has much to do with the intangibilities of truth. In common with other societies with a long history of repression, there continues to be a gulf in Namibia between what is widely known, but not acknowledged, and what is acknowledged, and thus officially ‘known’. The distinction often appears to be drawn instinctively and absolutely, to the point that many individuals cast aside what they know in favour of the official version. For the majority of Namibians too, questions of acceptable truths are closely interwoven with questions of loyalty to Swapo, or more precisely its leadership, which in turn is conflated with patriotism. Forged over decades of struggle against South African occupation, these do not yet admit of easy disaggregation. Such questions deserve more attention than space permits here. (They have, however, been touched upon elsewhere by Joseph Diescho, and in as yet unpublished papers by Timothy Dauth and Brian Harlech-Jones.)

Given, then, that there was nothing particularly new in Groth’s account, observers were left to wonder why the book had struck such a chord among certain sections of the Namibian population, and elicited such an extravagant response from within the top ranks of Swapo – especially as the ruling party would seem to have every reason to feel securely entrenched. Swapo commands a decisive majority in both houses of Parliament, the economy is stable; local business, international donors and foreign investors generally express confidence in and support for its oft-iterated commitments to democracy and good governance. Why risk Swapo’s post-independence reputation for political moderation and respect for human rights with such histrionics? The reasons are several, and must be seen from the perspective of that small segment of Swapo’s leadership that is leading the charge.

Timing was certainly key. While national reconciliation is working very well in forging ties among political and economic elites, it has yet to bring about the expected improvement in living standards for the majority. Unemployment remains high, discontent with the extravagant spending habits of government officials and their sluggish response to incidences of corruption within their ranks is increasingly pronounced in urban areas, and pockets of vocal criticism are beginning to surface. In late 1995 a serious crisis was narrowly averted after demonstrating ex-PLAN fighters took a deputy minister hostage to underline their demand for jobs. Many Namibians, frustrated with the slow pace of reform at home, look to South Africa to see how a similar legacy is being handled. And for some,

23 In Searchlight South Africa, 2, 1; 2, 2 and 2, 3 (1990)
the Truth and Reconciliation Commission now underway next door appeared to offer at least the promise of answers.\textsuperscript{26} It was into this milieu that Groth's book was released.

Partly, too, it is a question of authorship. The Swapo leadership has always been allergic to criticism of any kind - and has, historically, been devastatingly effective at marginalising and discrediting its critics, often with the well-intentioned assistance of the solidarity movement. The closer the source to the centre of power, and the greater its powers of moral suasion, the less easily it is dismissed, and the more immoderate the reaction. In contrast to previous accounts of the 'crisis of 1976' and the 'Swapo spy drama', \textit{The Wall of Silence} is, in effect, a critique from within the solidarity enclosure. Groth was (literally) a fellow-traveller, and a representative of the church bodies which provided Swapo with a moral backing enjoyed by few ostensibly Marxist-Leninist guerrilla movements. His defection hurt, although not nearly as much as others would. It was in an effort to pre-empt fissures extending deeper that certain senior Swapo leaders reacted as they did. The hierarchy of concerns that appeared to inform their manoeuvres in the weeks following the release of the book were as follows: (1) protecting themselves; (2) preserving the unity of the Swapo leadership's 'inner circle'; (3) maintaining the loyalty of the party membership; (4) assuaging any signs of international alarm; and (5) quieting the nation.

Certainly immediate developments suggested that there were reasons for concern (or optimism, depending on the perspective) all along the spectrum. The release of the book in the original German prompted some former detainees to present a petition to the Council of Churches of Namibia (CCN), requesting the organization to undertake a book launch and to thereby acknowledge the 'weighty responsibility' Groth imputes to the churches for initiating a healing process based on confession, restitution and forgiveness.\textsuperscript{27} The ensuing debate within the CCN executive threatened to split it along ethnic and religious lines, with the major northern churches initially rejecting any part in sponsoring a launch.\textsuperscript{28} The CCN eventually determined to hold a conference within the year to discuss the issue more generally.\textsuperscript{29} A Breaking the Wall of Silence (BWS) Committee was formed, comprising former detainees and their supporters, together with a number of CCN employees, to launch the book under its own auspices, and undertook to translate it from English into the more widely spoken Afrikaans and Oshivambo, the latter directly addressing Swapo's traditional support base.\textsuperscript{30} Theologian and long-time anti-apartheid activist Christo Lombard was appointed co-chair of the committee, becoming a target for Swapo leaders' most vituperative attacks.\textsuperscript{31} (Co-chair Samson Ndeikwila, the head of the CCN's Faith and Justice

\textsuperscript{26} Public discussion of, and published calls for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) or its equivalent became increasingly common as the detainees issue heated up, with explicit references found in press releases by the Breaking the Wall of Silence Committee (21 February and 20 March 1996), the National Society for Human Rights (14 March 1996), Swapo 'ex-detainees' (20 March 1996), and the Parents Committee (\textit{Die Republikein}, 14 March 1996). Almost every collection of letters to the editor in the daily papers contained letters arguing passionately for and against a Namibian TRC.

\textsuperscript{27} Letter addressed to Reverend Ngeno Nakamhela, General Secretary of the CCN and signed by 42 former detainees, 28 November 1995.

\textsuperscript{28} See Chris Coetzee, 'Groth's Book Shakes CCN', \textit{The Windhoek Advertiser}, 15 February 1996.

\textsuperscript{29} CCN press statement, 'CCN to Sponsor Conference on Ex-detainees', 19 February 1996. The conference, originally scheduled for May 1996, was subsequently postponed to the end of 1996, and then again to 1997. See below.

\textsuperscript{30} BWS media release, 'Breaking the Wall of Silence Committee', 21 February 1996.

\textsuperscript{31} President Nujoma's televised statement of 6 March 1996 referred to Lombard as an 'apostle of apartheid' whose present position at the University of Namibia was beholden to the policy of national reconciliation.

\textsuperscript{32} Ndeikwila was one of seven Swapo members based in Kongwa, Tanzania, whose dissatisfaction with the Swapo leadership's perceived tribalism, corruption and lack of strategy, expressed in a 'Statement of Resignation' dated 13 November 1968 (document in the author's possession), resulted in their being incarcerated by the Tanzanian authorities for over two years, before their escape to Kenya. Interviews with the author, 25 August 1991, 12 and 16 January 1995, 20 February and 8 March 1996. See also Leys and Saul, \textit{Namibia's Liberation Struggle}, pp. 43-45, and Dobell, 'New Lamps for Old?', pp. 31-35.
Department and one of the earliest detainees, was more difficult to scapegoat.) Concern in some quarters grew apace as the weekly meetings of the BWS swelled steadily in size, and its spokespersons gained confidence. Often lasting six or seven hours, these gatherings of former detainees and bereaved relatives were witness to powerful outbursts of pent-up emotion, and clearly served a cathartic function; the forum also served as a vehicle for channelling the anger into organised political activity.

The President was the first to respond, commandeering twenty minutes of air time on national television on 6 March 1996 to condemn the book. The next day bookstores reported brisk sales and the battle escalated. Press statements competed for journalists' attention. Letters to the editor flooded into Namibia's newspapers, and strongly-worded editorials flowed out; NBC radio's chat shows were abuzz with calls commending and condemning the efforts to resurrect the detainee issue. Other potential sources of support for the right to democratic dissent, including the university and the national media, were more circumspect. A 'Regional conference on human rights in Southern Africa' hosted by the University of Namibia in mid-March 1996 carefully steered clear of the issue, while a related televised panel discussion advised phone-in callers that questions pertaining specifically to Namibia were not encompassed by the topic.

More telling blows were still to land. A major coalition of progressive non-government organizations, NANGOF, and the branch of the national students' organization, NANSO, which remained affiliated to Swapo following a split in 1991, both declared their support for the proposed CCN conference, which quickly became emblematic, for both supporters and detractors, of a move towards a Truth Commission for Namibia. A noted human rights lawyer went further, and argued that people found guilty of serious abuses on either side should be disqualified from holding positions of authority in the government. Such public urgings from historical allies for Swapo to 'come clean' caused party Secretary General Moses Garoeb to 'go ballistic' as the headline in The Namibian of 14 March 1996 put it. He declared Swapo and its supporters ready to go back to war to defeat those 'evil forces' that were threatening Namibia's peace and stability. 'There could be a lot of blood shed in this country', he warned, in a statement that sent some diplomats hurrying to their telex machines: 'We are always reminded of the past and are being insulted and provoked and we have now reached a point where we can say "enough is enough" and can fight back'.

Garoeb's outburst concealed a more rational calculation on the part of those within the leadership who most fear the demands for full disclosure. These are, in fact, a small minority among Swapo's formerly exiled leaders, who have relied for years on a pact of mutual discretion and powerful disincentives to defection. Apart from some intemperate remarks directed towards the opposition by Deputy Minister Handino Hishongwa in

33 Meeting of 24 February and 9 March 1996 attended by the author.
34 Personal inquiries; The Namibian, 13 March 1996.
35 See, for example, The Namibian, 'Facing the truth', 3 March 1996; the 'Political perspective' columns of acting editor Jean Sutherland, 15 and 29 March 1996; and 'Walls of Silence', Parts 1 to 4 in The Windhoek Advertiser, 11–14 March 1996. The BWS movement later compiled pertinent press statements and clippings for its own use: the period from February to April 1996 alone fills 88 pages.
36 Press releases, 11 and 12 March 1996 respectively, the former published in full in The Observer, 16 March 1996. Both were incorporated into a news article in The Namibian, 12 March 1996.
37 For some the two were synonymous: see, for example, W. Ndjambula Kambokoto, 'Truth commission not the right solution', The Namibian, 15 March 1996; Theodora Tshilunga, 'Truth meeting now in question', New Era, 28 March to 3 April 1996.
38 David Smuts of the Legal Assistance Centre, quoted in Lucienne Fild, 'President's broadcast under fire', The Namibian, 8 March 1996.
39 Author interviews were held during this period with numerous ambassadors and diplomatic staff posted to Namibia. All acknowledged monitoring the situation closely but preferred not to comment except off-record on what most preferred officially to deem 'an internal matter'.
parliament a few days later,\footnote{The author was present during an exchange on 17 March 1996 in which the opposition was given to understand that they had more to lose than to gain from delving into the detainees issue. When, moments later, Minister of Information and Broadcasting Ben Amathila rose to say, ostensibly in relation to the Ministry of Defence's budget vote, that 'war destroyed nations' and was 'far too destructive to be contemplated by Namibians', some interpreted it as a double-entendre for the benefit of certain colleagues. See also \textit{The Namibian}, 18 March 1996. Hishongwa has historically been given to extreme statements in Parliament, not always faithfully recorded in the \textit{Debates of the National Assembly}. In introducing his 'missing persons' motion (see above), Eric Biwa observed that it had moved Hishongwa to propose the execution of certain opposition members, \textit{Debates of the National Assembly}, 41, 18 October 1994, p. 307.} nothing was heard publicly at this juncture from other former top Swapo 'securocrats'.\footnote{Other Swapo members were less restrained. Fiery octogenarian MP Nathaniel Maxuilili apparently provoked participants at a large Oshakati rally celebrating Namibian independence day to call for the banning and burning of \textit{The Wall of Silence}, \textit{The Namibian}, 26 March 1996.} Rumour had it, however, that an influential politician may have authored a pseudonymous op-ed piece in the government's \textit{New Era} scorning the 'smear campaign' orchestrated 'by those who seem to have taken it on themselves to become the extra-parliamentary opposition.... Their propaganda onslaught will be matched word for word'.\footnote{\textit{New Era}, 14–20 March 1996.} But if some remained defiant, there were indications that the unified front presented by the Swapo leadership (most of whom simultaneously hold government and Central Committee posts) was beginning to fracture. Particularly noticeable were growing tensions between erstwhile 'remainees' (Robben Islanders included) and formerly exiled leaders. There were also signs that those who had served in PLAN and in Swapo's 'diplomatic corps' were weary of collectivelyshouldering blame for the actions of a few senior individuals. Also weakening, though for many reasons, is the authority the government leadership wields over Swapo's party apparatus and wings, especially its youth league, as well as Swapo's historical allies among workers and students. The 'old guard' may be in for a rough ride at the Swapo Congress, scheduled for May 1997, and the strong-arm tactics are clearly intended to bring the more irreverent elements to heel before it is too late.\footnote{The contortions of the CCN over the timing, content and appropriate participants of its proposed conference on ex-detainees -- and indeed whether or not to hold it at all -- were agonising to behold, and resulted in its being postponed from May to November 1996, and subsequently (in the face of Swapo's call to party members to boycott the conference) to some indefinite time in the new year. The southern-based Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) and the northern-based Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) were, respectively, the most and least enthusiastic of the major churches, underlining regional and other divisions that continue to undermine the CCN's capacity for independent, united action as a focus for reconciliation and nation-building efforts.}

What then to make of all this? \textit{The Wall of Silence} has helped to unleash forces inside Namibia that give cause simultaneously for optimism and alarm. On the one hand there are exciting signs that 'civil society' in Namibia is finding its feet and finding a voice, binding together to create a political space for democratic dissent. The CCN in particular has the potential to recreate itself as an influential voice for social justice in an independent Namibia, and indeed this formerly powerful organisation must soon find its niche or face ignoble extinction. Since independence it has seen its staff and funding dwindle as foreign donors transfer their attention to government projects. It still has the potential, should it seize the moment, to encourage and exemplify a culture of open debate in Namibia.\footnote{The author was present during an exchange on 17 March 1996 in which the opposition was given to understand that they had more to lose than to gain from delving into the detainees issue. When, moments later, Minister of Information and Broadcasting Ben Amathila rose to say, ostensibly in relation to the Ministry of Defence's budget vote, that 'war destroyed nations' and was 'far too destructive to be contemplated by Namibians', some interpreted it as a double-entendre for the benefit of certain colleagues. See also \textit{The Namibian}, 18 March 1996. Hishongwa has historically been given to extreme statements in Parliament, not always faithfully recorded in the \textit{Debates of the National Assembly}. In introducing his 'missing persons' motion (see above), Eric Biwa observed that it had moved Hishongwa to propose the execution of certain opposition members, \textit{Debates of the National Assembly}, 41, 18 October 1994, p. 307.} There are signs too that progressive elements within Swapo may be building to a shake-up within Swapo's government and party ranks. On the other hand, Namibians have little experience of defying the party which retains, for the majority, so much of its liberation movement glamour, and some of its most powerful leaders have demonstrated that they are prepared to crack down hard on public criticism or calls for a Namibian Truth Commission. Meanwhile, however, more moderate diffusionary tactics have been deployed. In May it was announced that Netumbo Ndaitwah had been appointed Deputy Secretary-
General of Swapo, and would be giving up her post as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs to concentrate full-time on party matters. The often incendiary Swapo Secretary-General Moses Garoeb, meanwhile, would be relieved of his party duties, to allow him to devote himself wholly to his position as Minister of Labour.\textsuperscript{45} (Garoeb’s outgoing speech to 500 Swapo members gathered to commemorate Swapo’s 36th anniversary was in character. Listeners were urged to ‘unite afresh to defend the party, the policy of national reconciliation and the government against devils and dark forces’. He added, in apparent reference to those mobilized around Groth’s book, that ‘Swapo would make sure that they killed the snake and crushed its head’.\textsuperscript{46} At the same time a Cabinet shuffle moved Deputy Minister Hishongwa from Labour to Youth and Sport, in what was widely seen as a demotion, and rumours circulated that individual members of the BWS had been approached in a conciliatory vein by representatives of the ruling party.\textsuperscript{47}

Some observers, downplaying the significance of the issue, and scoffing at alarmist predictions of an impending crisis, dismissed the topic as never more than a preoccupation of the ‘salon crowd’, and further evidence of the tendency to conflate the issue of the day for the urban elite in Windhoek with the concerns of the nation as a whole.\textsuperscript{48} This attempt to reduce it to a matter of concern for whites, expatriates, local liberals, opposition politicians, some ex-detainees and their relatives, and assorted others who perceive supporting a Truth Commission to be politically correct at no cost to themselves, is inaccurate and patronising. More importantly it fails to grasp the broader significance of the current controversy for the Namibian polity as a whole. In a letter to the editor published in \textit{The Namibian} on 22 March 1996, respected activist Doufi Namalambo outlined what was and remained at stake:

This is a critical moment for Namibia. It is not up to the government to decide what should and should not be discussed by Namibians. We must not allow debate on public issues to be stamped out by the government because they are not prepared to deal with them. This is a democracy and in a democracy people must be free to speak up without fear. If we do not exercise this fundamental human right we will lose it.

\textbf{Epilogue}

Contrary to the expectations of many observers, the loose-knit movement mobilised around calls for a Namibian truth commission did not quickly fade away, and indeed was given renewed impetus with the BWS launch of \textit{The Wall of Silence} on March 30, 1996.\textsuperscript{49} Some weeks later, during a state visit to Bonn, President Nujoma was questioned by German

\textsuperscript{45} Lucienne Fild, ‘Netumbo in line to be Swapo chief’, \textit{The Namibian}, 17 April 1996.  
\textsuperscript{46} Absalom Shigwedha, ‘“Don’t mess with Swapo” warns Moses’, \textit{The Namibian}, 22 April 1996.  
\textsuperscript{47} In what was interpreted in some quarters as a further attempt by the Swapo leadership to put the matter behind them, and certainly as evidence of political interference in the management of the NBC, the station refused to release footage of Nujoma’s and Garoeb’s statements on the detainees issue to the German broadcaster ZDF. Media Institute of Southern Africa, ‘Action alert’, 2 April 1996; Tanya Nel, ‘NBC refuses to release Sam’s TV speech for use’, \textit{The Windhoek Advertiser}, 5 April 1996.  
\textsuperscript{48} This was the tenor of some, though interestingly not all, of the state-sponsored \textit{New Era}’s editorials on the subject, a distinct minority of letters to the editors of Namibia’s dailies, and the remarks of some parliamentarians on both sides of the National Assembly during the first two weeks of October 1996, when the issue was debated. It was also the view of a few, mostly expatriate, residents – all of whom, not surprisingly, belong to the chattering classes in question.  
\textsuperscript{49} It was estimated that some 200–300 people attended the launch, with the Kalahari Hotel hall unable to accommodate another 200–300 people waiting outside. The occasion was also used to allow a number of former detainees to relate their personal experiences. Some participants reported experiencing intimidation prior to the event, but no demonstrators were present at the launch. Interviews with Christo Lombard and Samson Ndeikwila, 2 April 1996. See also Lucienne Fild, ‘Detainee book sparks strong public interest’, \textit{The Namibian}, 1 April 1996; Yolande Nel, ‘Wounds reopened’, \textit{Tempo}, 31 March 1996; Chris Coetzee, ‘Walls movement wants to practise civil action’, \textit{The Windhoek Advertiser}, 1 April 1996 (Coetzee puts the numbers at 350 and 350); Media release, ‘BWS satisfied with book launch’, 11 April 1996.
reporters about Namibia’s emergent human rights movement. Possibly this indication of revived external interest, combined with growing domestic pressure on Swapo to ‘come clean’, contributed to the party’s decision to finally make public its own long-promised (but hurriedly compiled) list of Namibians who died or were killed while under Swapo’s care in exile. Released in Ongulumbashe on 26 August 1996, celebrated since independence as Heroes Day, *Their Blood Waters Our Freedom* contained 7,792 names, with putative causes of death provided in all but 126 cases. The list was welcomed by activists, who hailed it as a ‘positive development’ and an important conciliatory gesture, despite its many serious omissions and discrepancies. Many entries contradict earlier testimonies concerning the demise of persons formerly accused of being spies, including the famous case of Tauno Hatuiikulipi, while the names of some former detainees who failed to return at independence are still missing. The presence of senior PLAN commanders, preponderance of men, and absence of children among those listed as killed in the 1978 bombing of Cassinga will revive the old controversy about whether the camp was primarily a refugee settlement as asserted by Swapo, or a legitimate military target as the South Africans claimed. The overall number of people listed as killed at Cassinga, too, is a fifth of that given by Swapo sources at the time. Elsewhere some names are given more than once, and in a few instances names of persons still living have been accidentally included. A striking majority of those listed as having died of ‘natural causes’ apparently did so in 1988 and 1989, which may add fuel to the most upsetting and potentially damaging of the former detainees’ claims – to which little attention has yet been paid – that some hundreds of detainees may have been killed after the transition process was well underway. Finally, the total number is substantially short of the more than 11,000 Namibians that Swapo has traditionally averred died or were killed during the struggle.

The list requires, and is receiving, close scrutiny from a number of sources. Most important to former detainees and their supporters is that erstwhile ‘spies’ not be superficially rehabilitated through their inclusion in a book commemorating ‘martyrs and heroes’ without a formal clearing of their names. All Namibians, however, stand to benefit from a careful revision of the received history of their struggle, to which this list and its amended successors will make an important contribution. The conclusion of a growing number is clear: national reconciliation based on truth, repentance and forgiveness is preferable to reconciliation based on burying the past, and with it any lessons it contained.

53 Hatuiikulipi is now said to have succumbed to bronchitis. Depty to Swapo Secretary of Defence Peter Nanyemba, he was previously accused of being a ‘master spy’, and to have committed suicide after capture in early 1984 by swallowing a cyanide pill he always carried in his mouth. The story, related by Swapo leaders at the ‘100 spies conference’ held in London in 1986, is found in many accounts of the detainees crisis, including Groth (p. 103) and Evenson and Herbstein, *The Devils are Among Us*, p. 27, 168. The latter claim he was one of 16 shot in January 1984. Much suspicion remains among former subordinates and close associates about the death of Nanyemba himself, whom Swapo has always maintained died in a car accident in 1983. Highly popular among PLAN fighters, and singled out as a hero in *Their Blood Waters our Freedom*, Nanyemba is said to have been increasingly at odds with Politburo colleagues in the months before his death.
54 Eric Biwa mentioned the disappearance of detainees around January 1989 in his Parliamentary ‘motion on missing persons’ (see above). In his address to the Groth book launch on 30 March 1996, Samson Ndeikwila listed as an objective of the BWS, ‘that the fate and or the whereabouts of the detainees who were left behind in the dungeons of Lubango during April-May 1989 are disclosed to the Namibian people and to the world’. Although the objectives were reproduced in Fild, ‘Detainee book sparks strong public interest’, the potential explosiveness of this particular charge seems so far to have escaped the notice of the media.