

POLICY DIALOGUE:

The Role of Ex-combatants in Memorialisation Processes in South  
Africa



CSV  
The Centre for the Study of  
Violence and Reconciliation

Workshop Report

15 NOVEMBER 2007

Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV)  
Transitional Justice Programme (TJP)

The TRC recommended in its final report that in order to help with the necessary work of nation healing South Africa had to embark on several symbolic reparations processes, with the aim of restoring the dignity of the previously marginalised. These would include, among others, activities such as renaming of streets and building of monuments to commemorate the struggle for freedom. Since then plethora of memorialisation projects and programmes have been implemented, emphasizing the foregrounding of the experiences of those who were in the past either excluded or marginalised in the production of history. Several initiatives – many emanating from government but also from civil society and NGOs – have taken up this challenge in many interesting ways. The many projects have, however, not succeeded in involving ex-combatants as major stakeholders, or as a focal subject.

## **Participants**

On 15 November 2007 CSVR hosted a workshop to examine the role ex-combatants play in memorialisation processes in post-TRC South Africa. Several key stake-holders were invited from government departments, Non-governmental organizations and Military Veterans Associations:

- Direct Action Centre for Peace and Memory
- the Freedom Park Trust
- the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA)
- Robben Island Museum's Heritage Department
- South African Historical Archives
- EmbaPM
- South African National Defence force – Directorate of Military Veterans Affairs
- Military Veterans Associations : Azanian People's Liberation Army Military Veterans Association (Apla) , Mkhonto weSizwe Military Veterans Association (MKMVA)

**(See attached lists of participants)**

The Department of Arts and Culture had confirmed attendance but unfortunately were not present on the day of the workshop.

## **Presentations:**

### **Morning Session – broad discussion on the field of memorialisation and the role of ex-combatants**

**Noor Nieftagodien**, a historian and lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand, chaired the morning session.

#### **Presentation by South African Heritage Resource Agency: Troy Phili**

**Troy Phili** laid a solid foundation for the discussion for the day, outlining a broad spectrum of projects and stakeholders ranging from the National Heritage Council, charged with channeling the funds to various heritage projects; the National Presidential Legacy Projects; the Department of Arts and Culture and the Department of Defense's Military Veterans Administration.

Phili pointed out how the various projects were not coordinated and were thus fragmented. In addition to this fragmentation, further lack of cohesion came as a result of overemphasis of organizational affiliation, which existed at the expense of thematic and inter-organisational frameworks along which they can be framed.

With respect to the role that can be played by ex-combatants Phili noted that many projects should ideally involve ex-combatants as primary sources to inform their content. He lamented the over-reliance on 'experts' and 'consultants' while ex-combatants, who bear first hand testimonies of these stories, are ignored. Phili suggested the following as recommendations to remedy the situation:

- Setting up sub-regional structures of veteran organizations to assist with the verification processes and identification of incidents that led to deaths
- Re-organisation according to detachments, generational and country groupings to verify lists and participate in the identification of graves
- Regional and local integration of deaths in exile to memorials
- Organizing communities around issues of reconciliation and inclusivity of memorials
- Provision of seed capital for memorial structures and facilitation of fundraising for sustainable symbolic reparation projects.
- Facilitation of participation and creation of awareness at different political and government levels

## **Heritage Department – Robben Island Museum: Richard Whiteing**

**Richard Whiteing**, head of the Heritage Department at Robben Island Museum (RIM), presented the work that has been going on at this World Heritage Site. From very early after the establishment of the site as a museum, RIM has been running projects focusing on ex-combatants. The Site Visits Focus Groups Project has been the most notable of these. The project involves the identification of individuals who shared specific experiences at the Island during their incarceration and grouping them into various Focus Groups. The group would then be invited to visit the Island to share these stories.

Whiteing pointed out the various levels at which this process works out. Firstly it provided an opportunity for former comrades who had not seen each other for a long time to touch base. Secondly, bringing together these people to one site at the same time had a strong evocative effect, allowing participants to remember details that would otherwise be lost had interviews taken place under different circumstances. Thirdly, these ex-combatants were being accorded respect playing a central role in the production of an important memorialisation project; at a site where they were subjected to dehumanising conditions in the past. Lastly, RIM provided jobs and skills training to some ex-combatants.

## **Freedom Park Trust: Ramzie Abrahams**

**Ramzie Abrahams** of the Freedom Park Trust discussed some of the issues concerning the institution, particularly with regard to the tension between facilitating national reconciliation on the one hand while guarding against 'bending over backwards' to accommodate groups that are not interested in reconciliation. Abrahams pointed out that the lack of policies often meant that initiatives cannot be carried through to the end.

A concern was raised about the perception that Freedom Park Trust was one of the culprits in failing to accommodate ex-combatants in projects. It was said that the institution is elitist and therefore alienates ex-combatants even as it is dedicated to recognising the role they played in the conflicts that were deemed significant in South Africa's history.

## **Brown Maaba : Project Manager at Ifalethu and author of a book on the ANC school in Tanzania: Somafco**

**Brown Maaba** reflected on the literature documenting the ex-combatants' lives. He narrated how the ANC archives that were delivered to Fort Hare University in Alice in the Eastern Cape in 1996 prompted the idea of writing a book on life in exile. Years later he, together with colleagues Sean Morrow and Loyiso Pulumani published a book titled: "Education in Exile: SOMAFSCO, the ANC School in

Tanzania, 1978 to 1992". Maaba noted that the literature on ex-combatants has opened up space for blacks to write books. It has influenced our curriculum development and also helped bring about healing. He pointed out that there are opportunities to train ex-combatants on history production/writing.

### **South African Historical Archives: Judy Seidman**

**Judy Seidman** noted that there should be a component in the training of ex-combatants on issues such as intellectual and copy rights in order to protect them (ex-combatants).

Challenges in this sphere include things such as subjectivity in the narration of stories, particularly in stories of first hand testimony.

### **Jacqui Thompson: Author**

**Jacqui Thompson** reflected on her book which chronicles the military experiences of young SADF conscripts. The book is a good example of telling different accounts from different veterans speaking from their own perspectives. She mentioned that her aim was to popularise the often silenced narratives of ex-SADF members, in order to shed light into that aspect of South Africa's history.

A question was raised as to whether Thompson had plans to write a similar book with ex-liberation combatants as subjects, to which she responded by saying she would be working on such a project in future. The discussion touched on the possibilities that are out there for telling different stories through literature.

### **Direct Action Centre for Peace and Memory: Yazir Henry**

**Yazir Henry**, head of the Direct Action Centre for Peace and Memory, an initiative by ex-combatants in the Western Cape, pointed out that it was highly problematic to insert ex-SADF and apartheid-era police into ex-combatant memorialisation projects, such as the wall at Freedom Park in which names of those who died fighting for liberation are inscribed. He gave some reflections on the challenges faced by ex-combatants with respect to recognition (of ex-combatants for their role in the liberation struggle) and unemployment. Henry said that often communities themselves need to have a better understanding of ex-combatant issues and concerns.

Henry highlighted the day-to-day experience of living with the trauma of being an ex-combatant in a hostile environment, where the communities are struggling

with accepting and understanding them. This highlighted the issue of trauma which is often not spoken enough of when it comes to ex-combatants.

He said it was a challenge also for some who found themselves returning to a society that does not resemble the kind of society they fought for.

Henry pointed out that in Cape Town, where there are marks of victory against the native dotting the cultural landscape, there are no marks of victory against colonialism and apartheid. There is a gap in recognising those who fought apartheid in the city's cultural landscape.

The second part of Henry's presentation reflected on the origins of what is now known as the Direct Action Centre for Peace and Memory, which now gives cultural tours of Cape Town's townships, highlighting the flashpoints in the struggle against apartheid in that city. He highlighted the challenges founding members dealt with and some of the successes they were able to achieve.

### **Mkhonto weSizwe Military Veterans Association: Sobhuza Dlamini**

**Sobhuza Dlamini**, the National Programmes Officer of MKMVA, mentioned that at the core of these memorialisation projects was the need to capture the history, protect the heritage and promote the dignity of those who fought against apartheid. He said 60% of the ex-MK members were unemployed and the majority lived in informal settlements. Many were homeless and destitute. Sobhuza stressed the need for advocacy to establish a ministry of veterans that would co-ordinate efforts aimed at supporting veterans.

Dlamini outlined some of the challenges MKMVA faces when it comes to coordinating the work done by its members. The main challenge is the absence of comprehensive records, particularly registers of members. During its operation the MK eschewed the practice of compiling lists of its membership, as a means to circumvent infiltration by apartheid security agents.

### **Themes for the way forward**

All participants recognised the need for developing a database as an urgent one. Such a database would inform the scale of interventions that might be considered.

### **Stigmatisation of ex-combatants**

It was agreed that the stigmatisation of ex-combatants was a major problem. This was particularly problematic since the communities to which ex-combatants belong were struggling accommodating their return. The media was noted as one

of the culprits. Despite lack of scientific evidence, the media has been presenting ex-combatants as key instigators in violent crime such as cash-in-transit heists.

### **Definitions/categories of ex-combatants**

The lack of clarity when it comes to defining who it is that is an ex-combatant was tied to many critical issues. This affects such objectives as the development of a database that will list ex-combatants and therefore impacts on the development of appropriate guidelines to identify appropriate remedial processes when it comes to ex-combatants. This lack of clarity on who is and who is not an ex-combatant also impacts on memorialisation processes, which further exacerbates their contestation. Furthermore, whole groups of ex-combatants could be excluded where there are no guidelines to help determine the status of individuals, notably those who were rank and file members of structures such as Self Defense Units (SDU).

A question was posed as to the legitimacy of excluding black veterans who fought to defend apartheid such as 32-Battalion, TBVC veterans etc., while recognising the other formations that did the same, such as the casualties of the various conflicts commemorated at the Freedom Park Trust.

### **Heritage-policy around sites**

Participants felt that a heritage policy around sites needed to be developed and used as guidelines with respect to the construction of sites memorializing ex-combatants.

### **Facilitating ownership of consultative processes**

Participants urged strongly the involvement of veterans associations in the consultative processes that involved ex-combatants work.

### **Actioning concepts**

There was a call for role-players, particularly government, to turn the concepts discussed around memorialisation of ex-combatants into action. Veterans associations were urged to encourage their members to be active in initiatives, be proactive along the lines of the Direct Action Centre for Peace and Memory in the Western Cape.

### **Resources**

It was agreed that government has the bulk of resources needed to carry out various projects. The ex-combatants associations, because of their socio-

economic status, were not in a position to sustain projects. It was suggested that government needed to work in partnership with ex-combatant groups to assist in the various initiatives.

### **Establish a ‘veterans’ office urgently**

Different veterans associations were in agreement that as disparate politically aligned associations, ex-combatants are not able to form a strong lobbying presence. It was agreed that there is a need to establish a broad umbrella structure. This structure need not threaten the autonomy of the various veterans associations, but should work on an ad-hoc basis to present issues of concern to an office/Ministry in government that is dedicated to dealing with ex-combatant/veterans matters.

One participant noted that there is Veterans Act of 1999, that has not been properly workshopped with the veterans, and that there is a need to facilitate such workshops so that veterans have an opportunity to engage with the Act.



# The role of ex-combatants in Memorialisation Processes in South Africa:

## Workshop Programme

**15 November 2007**  
**CSV Boardroom**

- 08h45 – 09h00 : Registration and tea
- 09h00 – 09h15 : Welcome and Introductions  
*Chairperson*
- 09h15 – 09h45 : Policy overview – national government policy with respect  
to ex-combatants and memorialisation  
*t.b.c.*
- 09h45 – 10h15 : Legacy Projects – their engagement with ex-combatants:  
opportunities and challenges  
*Troy Phili – SAHRA*
- 10h15 – 10h45 : Robben Island memory projects – A case study  
*Richard Whiteing*
- 10h45 – 11h15 : How can veterans contribute to reconciliation through  
national memorialisation processes?  
*Ramzie Abrahams*
- 11h15 – 11h30 : TEA**
- 11h30 – 12h00 Reflections on ex-combatant initiatives in memorialisation  
*Yazir Henry*

- 12h00 – 12h30: Documenting the lives of ex-combatants – reflections on the literature  
*Brown Maaba & Sean Morrow*
- 12h30 – 13h00 Documenting the lives of military veterans – the gaps in the historical narrative  
*Jacqui Thompson*
- 13h00 – 14h00 LUNCH**
- 14h00 – 1500 : Presentations by representatives of Veteran-Associations  
15 minutes each presentation:  
APLA; AZANLA; COMVA; MKMVA; SDU
- 15h00 – 15h15 : TEA**
- 15h15h 16h00 : Policy proposals and way forward
- 16h00 : Closure

**Ex-combatants:**

**What role can they play in Memorialisation**

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