

BOOK REVIEW:

“Total onslaught: war and revolution in southern Africa since 1945

by Paul Moorcraft

Pen & Sword Military; Barnsley, South Yorkshire; 2018; 478 pp; ISBN 9781526704887 (hardcover); RRP \$65; Ursula Davidson Library call number 550 MOOR 2018.



This book is about the conflicts in southern Africa which followed World War II and which have continued to a greater or lesser extent in different countries up to the present. I found it daunting initially, as I could not see how the author could draw a thread between the range of wars in southern Africa that were fought over a 70-year period – from 1945 to 2015, but this perception changed as I delved further into the book.

As a war correspondent in southern Africa from the 1960s to the end of apartheid, Moorcraft came to the view that ‘... generally, Africa was full of great people but Appalling governance has emasculated the Continent’ (p. xi). The ruling white National Party in South Africa insisted that a ‘total onslaught’ was being waged against the white dominated republic. The core of the struggles was centred on Afrikaner resistance to black rule. He says that ‘*The whites, however, like their black successors, were history’s slow learners*’ (p. xiii). He offers this study to provide contemporary lessons for all who decide to use force to resolve political challenges. Moorcraft’s conclusion is simple and profound: ‘*except for disaster relief under UN [United Nations] auspices, ... the more the West intervenes the worse things become... that should become the new total strategy for Africa*’ (p. 435).

Moorcraft, now director of the Centre for Foreign Policy Analysis, London, is a published author of both non-fiction and fiction books, including some six military history and concept books plus some seven works on crime and mathematics. His qualifications to write this book are undoubted. Not only did he serve in the region as a war correspondent for some 40 years, he also has been an instructor at the Royal Military College Sandhurst and the United Kingdom Joint Services Command and Staff College, he has worked for the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence and has been a visiting professor at Cardiff University.

The book is in four parts and is well-structured with photos and maps well-positioned. Part 1 covers the rise of South Africa to become the dominant power on the continent. Part II covers the colonial wars in Angola, Namibia, Mozambique and Rhodesia as the inhabitants fought for independence; Part III covers the civil wars and conflicts of the post-colonial period; and Part IV covers the end of white rule in South Africa.

Post-1945, the survival of the white buffer colonies was vital to South Africa’s defence strategy until the early 1970s. Cuba and Russia were involved in supporting Angola – with engagements costly to both sides. Namibia, previously a German colony and, after the

Great War, a South African mandated territory, was in a unique position as the final unresolved legacy of the Armistice in 1918. The Author explains why Namibia ‘became South Africa’s very own Vietnam’. Mozambique was a Portuguese colony brutally run from Portugal. Its independence was followed by the inheritance of power by a single nationalist movement, but the country fell into anarchy despite efforts by South Africa to prevent this.

The Rhodesian war saw the collapse of white power and diminished the defence perimeter so valued by South Africa. The war in Rhodesia lasted 14 years and would have been lost by the white Rhodesians had London not intervened. Moorcraft refers to the Rhodesian armed forces’ ‘tactical brilliance and strategic ineptitude’.

Part III covers the period after the ‘friendly (white) buffers’ became South Africa’s deadly enemies. In this, President Mugabe of Zimbabwe (ex-Rhodesia) was central. During this period, South Africa tried to destabilise her neighbours, having failed to stabilise colonial rule. There were major battles in Angola, Namibia, Mozambique and Rhodesia between 1976 and 1992.

Part IV details the way in which white rule in South Africa eventually ended. That story is relatively well known, being centred around the life of, and adulation for, Nelson Mandela.

Moorcraft concludes that, since 1960, there have been 240 African heads of state, but less than twenty ‘were good leaders’ (p. 435); the majority were corrupt, incompetent and often had to be removed with force.

An Appendix outlines the complex South African security system during President Botha’s dominance (1978 to 1989). Its role was basically to quell internal dissent and support neighbouring nations as buffers. The South African army comprised two mechanised divisions and a parachute brigade and its equipment included 250 centurion tanks, 1600 armoured combat vehicles, 1500 infantry combat vehicles, 1500 armoured personnel carriers and over 200 field and medium artillery pieces. The air force had 338 combat aircraft and 14 armed helicopters.

The book contains 22 maps, a list of abbreviations, a glossary, a timeline, endnotes, a bibliography and an index.

Total Onslaught should be essential reading for anyone who wants to understand southern Africa from the end of World War II to the present and what the future may hold for this rich and troubled continent.

Ken Broadhead