

BOOK REVIEW

Stephen R. Davis. *The ANC's War against Apartheid: Umkhonto we Sizwe and the Liberation of South Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. xliv + 268 pp. Photographs. Appendices. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-253-03229-4.


The ANC's War against Apartheid: Umkhonto we Sizwe and the Liberation of South Africa is an innovative book that seeks to call into question dominant interpretations of the armed struggle waged by *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) against the apartheid state between the early 1960s and the end of the 1980s. Stephen R. Davis, an assistant professor at the University of Kentucky, aims to do this through a disavowal of narrative-driven history in favor of an exploration of selected "episodes." He presents his text as "an assemblage of archival and historiographical knots that provide new ways of looking at the armed struggle and liberation struggle at large." The intention is not that the author will "untie them," but rather that he will "explore old evidence in new ways, introduce new evidence to old narratives" and "apply a different set of critical lenses to all this material" (xxxii). Undoubtedly, given the ambitious scope of this project, some aspects are bound to work and others not.

What works? First, the historical approach used by Davis is immensely promising, and exposes, indeed focuses, on the ambivalences and silences researchers often find easier to smooth over in their attempt to impose a certain argument or narrative. Davis provides a string of moments in the history of MK that, as he so effectively demonstrates, are exceedingly difficult to interpret. His chapters are structured around these selected episodes: debates around the nature and significance of an MK training camp at Mamre outside Cape Town (Chapter Two), the details of the Wankie campaign (Chapter Three), intrigues and allegations of espionage at the Novo Catengue MK base in Angola, debates around the efficacy of the MK underground in Cape Town in the 1980s, and finally, a critical examination of the museum complex commemorating the armed struggle, Freedom Park, in Pretoria (conclusion). In each of these chapters, Davis' intention is to show competing interpretations, ambivalences, and silences and to track the changing meanings of historical "events." This all makes for some fascinating reading, and one is left perhaps with what Davis intended, the sense of a struggle that proceeded in fits and starts, a complication of binaries, and the

sense of a decidedly ambiguous legacy that intuitively feels closer to “reality.” He also offers a salutary challenge to the government attempts to fit the armed struggle to South Africa’s post-apartheid nation building, as is done at Freedom Park. In this sense, Davis takes on the role of the traditional historian.

What does not work? First of all, it is difficult to understand the choice of episodes that Davis presents; why are these the focus and not others? The decision itself by the African National Congress to turn to violence is an episode, while well-trodden, that is a glaring omission in a history of MK and was surely deserving of a chapter. In comparison, the discussion of the MK training camp at Mamre reads as comparatively prosaic. Furthermore, and this may only reinforce Davis’ broader point, the destabilization of historical narrative that Davis embarks on, without the proposal for a substitute, makes for frankly dissatisfying reading. To compound the open-endedness, the conclusion reads as an additional chapter, and there was a sense that the book needed to bring the strands together, although Davis did promise they would be left untied. The overall impression is worsened by a poor editorial eye, with small errors appearing with disappointing frequency. Finally, the confidence of Davis’ title conveys a misleading sense of what the parameters of the book in fact are, and his title should have perhaps addressed the intentions and approach of the book more openly.

That said, this is a thoroughly original work. The historiographical lens Davis uses is a broad one, bringing South African history into conversation with fields such as microhistory and demonstrating the utility of literary theory for the study of history. In this sense, the imprint of the “linguistic turn” is firmly evident. This is both a strength and a weakness; on the one hand, the book is an advanced contribution to struggle literature, but on the other hand, the text is inaccessible for the general reader. In this regard, the book will be a good inclusion for graduate classes for the discussion of historiography but is of more limited use at an undergraduate level. Although it can be tempting to regard the book as an exercise in literary critique rather than as solid history, this is belied by the extensive endnotes, archival, and oral history research that can be found in the bibliography. The endnotes are detailed and highly informative.

Ian Macqueen 

University of Pretoria
Pretoria, South Africa

ian.macqueen@up.ac.za

doi:[10.1017/asr.2020.40](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.40)

For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Hadfield, Leslie Anne. 2015. “Can We Believe the Stories about Biko? Oral Sources, Meaning, and Emotion in South African Struggle History.” *History in Africa* 42: 239–63. doi: [10.1017/hia.2015.24](https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2015.24).

Niehaus, Isak A. 1998. “The ANC’s Dilemma: The Symbolic Politics of Three Witch-Hunts in the South African Lowveld, 1990–1995.” *African Studies Review* 41 (3): 93–118. doi: [10.2307/525355](https://doi.org/10.2307/525355).