

REVIEW ARTICLE

HOW UNIQUE IS SOUTH AFRICAN MILITARY INTEGRATION?

Roy Licklider
Rutgers University

The study of civil war since the end of the Cold War has uncovered several interesting, counter-intuitive facts. The first is that civil wars do end. Depending on how one counts, there have been 100–200 such wars since 1945.¹ There are now fewer than ten, and some of them are new rather than old. Of course, some of these may break out again (a gentleman on a flight to Atlanta once explained to the author that the American Civil War was not yet over), but it is not likely that most will, let alone all. Indeed, every major power has had one or more civil wars which have ended: the French, Russians and Chinese after their revolutions; Germany, after the wars of unification (or the Thirty Years War, if you want to go back that far); the British, after the War of the Roses and its Civil War. The United States has done it twice: after the American Revolution and after the American Civil War. But it is fair to say that we do not really understand how large numbers of people who have been killing one another with considerable skill and enthusiasm are somehow able to create working political communities.

The second important fact is that civil wars now end differently from what they used to do. Traditionally, civil wars ended with a military victory; indeed, Fred Iklé's classic study *Every war must end* (1971) suggests that the stakes in civil war are so great and indivisible that this kind of ending is practically inevitable.² However, since 1989, most civil wars that have ended have done so through some sort of negotiated settlement. This phenomenon is variously attributed to the nature of the current international system, the military dominance of the United States, and the peace industry, the combination of intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and intermittently some governments. Again, however, the notion that people on different sides of a civil war can agree on a

Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies, Vol 43, No. 1, 2015, pp. 149 – 155.
doi : 10.5787/42-1-1113

common set of rules to live together seems strange.

These two facts are well known. A less-known third fact is that about a third of the

settlements of civil wars since 1989 have included provisions for integrating members of rival groups into a single military force.³ There is also evidence that such settlements are less likely to break down in renewed warfare than settlements without such provisions,⁴ although tracing the causal processes involved has proved challenging.⁵ But bringing together the people who have been killing one another and giving them guns sounds more likely to start a civil war than to end one. How does this work?

South Africa has a strong case to be the poster child of military integration after civil violence.⁶ In a few years, South Africa integrated members of eight separate groups: the South African Defence Force, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the forces of the four ‘homelands’ (Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei), the Azanian People’s Liberation Army (APLA), the military arm of the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), and the Kwa-Zulu Self-Protection Force (KZSPF) of the Inkatha Freedom Party. The military cultures of these groups varied from the hierarchical ones of a modern army to the individualistic ones of guerrilla fighters. Education levels varied widely; there was not even a common language. And this was done without much of a model, as Gavin Cawthra said, “the term Security Sector Reform (SSR) had not yet been invented when South Africa embarked on it”.⁷

But while doing research, it was striking how some South Africans themselves insisted that it would be a mistake to draw conclusions from their experience, that it really was unique and could not be a model for other countries.⁸ A new collection of eleven country cases of military integration presented an opportunity to appreciate the unique look of the South African military intervention.⁹ The cases are not a random sample, but they represent a substantial proportion of military integration agreements during this period, and they vary widely. Some had intensive international involvement, like Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sierra Leone, while others were more autonomous, like South Africa and Lebanon. They include negotiated settlements (Burundi and Sudan) and military victories (Rwanda and Sierra Leone). Some cases had substantial local political support (such as South Africa and Mozambique), and some did not (such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC] and Bosnia-Herzegovina).

We can compare the cases in terms of several different qualities. How were they integrated? In South Africa, members of the various groups were integrated as individuals. This was the general pattern. Only two of the eleven, Sudan and Bosnia-Herzegovina, allowed formations based on wartime loyalties. There is an argument that individual integration helps promote post-war peace,¹⁰ and these two cases are generally seen as less successful than others. It is however not clear whether

individual integration would have improved things or whether collective integration was necessary because these were such difficult cases.

As might have been expected, integration produced major demographic changes in the militaries in most cases. Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Burundi, Lebanon, and Mozambique changed a great deal, while the Philippines, the DRC, and Sudan 1972 were less affected. Rwanda is an interesting case since the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) is now a Hutu-majority army because of its integration of members of the former government army and militias, although high-level control remains in Tutsi hands. Integration also produced major demographic changes in the South African military. The percentage of Africans in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) went from about 40% to almost 70% between 1994 and 2009 while the white figures dropped from 47% to 18%,¹¹ which would seem to put South Africa in the majority camp.

In terms of high-ranking military officers, incoming groups became dominant in Rwanda, Zimbabwe and South Africa, although more slowly in South Africa than in the other countries. They reached roughly equal status in Bosnia, Burundi, Mozambique and Sierra Leone but had less success in the DRC, Lebanon, the Philippines and Sudan. Again, South Africa does not seem to be an outlier.

Despite rhetoric about creating new militaries, these individuals were usually integrated into existing government armies; the only exceptions were Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, which were based on fighting organisations developed during the civil war. However, it is also true that these armies sometimes changed a good deal as a result of the process. Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Mozambique changed a lot; South Africa, Burundi, and Lebanon changed somewhat; the Philippines, Lebanon, the DRC and Sudan remained essentially the same.

None of these integrations of former enemies saw substantial violence among recruits. This was surprising since some of these civil wars were extraordinarily intense and vicious (Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, the DRC and Burundi among them). But, in fact, this proved not to be a problem anywhere. In many instances, there was intermittent, low-level violence, and some cases were close calls, but the overall record is quite positive. Why is this true? Almost all of the individuals volunteered for this duty, knowing that they were going to have to live with their former enemies. This self-selection process probably made a big difference (as shown by the large numbers of individuals on all sides who declined to integrate in most cases). It also seems likely that they were wary of reigniting the war that had just ended. Gaub found similar behaviour in her cases and attributes it to the military culture which emphasises cooperation and hierarchy.¹² There is an

argument that militaries in developing countries may develop an identity so strong that it is equivalent to a separate ethnicity.¹³ Something like this seems to have happened in some of these cases. This unity was particularly striking when the new armies were tasked with fighting members of their own identity groups, as they did successfully in Rwanda, Burundi, Sierra Leone and the Philippines.

Informal negotiation about military integration often occurred early in the integration process, and it was quite common for the military leaders of both sides to work out the terms of integration with relatively little involvement by the political leadership. Again, South Africa seems to be typical rather than exceptional.

The actual process of integration was also fairly common. Individuals who wanted to join would be brought together, and decisions would be made on who would be accepted and which ranks they would hold. They would then be given some training and be integrated into the new military. In most cases, this training was exclusively military; Rwanda was a conspicuous exception.¹⁴

The level of international involvement varied, but again South Africa does not seem to be an outlier. The deepest involvement was certainly in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sierra Leone, but outsiders were major players in the DRC, Burundi and Zimbabwe. They had lesser roles in South Africa, Burundi and Mozambique and almost no involvement in Lebanon, the Philippines and Rwanda.

What sort of militaries were produced by this process? In general, they were more humane, smaller and less effective militarily than their predecessors. This may be in part because their post-war missions were unclear since there was often no obvious military threat. As a result, they found themselves under pressure to downsize and reduce spending precisely at the point where they were integrating new personnel. Most (including South Africa) had no obvious outside threat to justify their existence. Lebanon did have such a threat, but no one had any illusions that the Lebanese Army should be prepared to fight Syria, Israel or even Hezbollah. The DRC had the problem that several of its neighbours were occupying some of its territory, but the army had deliberately been kept so weak that it was ineffectual. The Philippines is still involved in conflict, and Rwanda first responded to a threat by Hutu militants in the DRC and then escalated to establishing control of parts of that unfortunate country, but they were the outliers. Like South Africa, several militaries adopted peacekeeping as one of their missions (Rwanda, Burundi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and even Bosnia to some extent), but it does not make much sense to have a military just for such activities.

One aspect of the South African response to this problem was unique: a Defence White Paper, which was subjected to unprecedented public debate. Civil

society organisations and the general public participated along with the military, the secretariat of the Ministry of Defence, and the new Joint Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence: “The breadth and depth of consultation exceeded any similar policy process in South African defence planning history and remained possibly the most consultative process on defence policy ever attempted by a modern democracy”.¹⁵ This undoubtedly improved the stature of the military, but the result was a large number of goals with no plans for achieving them.¹⁶

One concern about Security Sector Reform is that it strengthens the security forces within governments which are often fairly weak, allowing military leaders to dominate or control the state. The clearest cases of this were in Sudan where John Garang emerged as the southern Sudanese leader, and Zimbabwe where senior military officers have allied with civilian politicians to create a kleptocratic system. Somewhat similar tendencies can be seen in Rwanda (albeit much better managed), and even in South Africa the author heard the term ‘Zulu security sector’ a few times. There has also been some concern in Lebanon. On the other hand, there seems to be no sign of this in Bosnia or the Philippines. And in the DRC, the weakness of the national military allows local warlords to run rampant. Clearly, this is most likely to happen when other parts of the state organisation are weak, and here South Africa should have less risk than most.

So what was unique about the South African experience? The SANDF is clearly a more modern military than the others, requiring substantially more technical and organisational skills. Indeed, one strikingly unique South African feature was the decision by MK to send substantial numbers abroad to get training in preparation for integration. This need for skills may also explain why white officers and non-commissioned officers dominated those positions for a decade or two, although that is now changing.¹⁷ However, it is not clear that this difference actually affected the integration process itself or its direct outcomes.

But the whole thing probably seemed unique at the time. It did in fact occur before many (but not all) of the other cases. More importantly, South Africans at the time did not seem to have perceived any relevant examples to follow. There seems to have been little serious discussion of predecessors, although Zimbabwe, Namibia and Germany after reunification were mentioned in interviews.¹⁸ However, ironically, South Africa became less unique because it was so widely emulated. Some of this was because South Africans acted as advisers in some of these processes, particularly in Burundi. But the image of a successful military integration reached further. When Maoist leaders in Nepal were debating military integration, they asked to consult MK leaders who had been involved as rebels in the South

African integration, and this was done. The price of the perceived success of South African military integration seems to have been the loss of its uniqueness.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁸ Cawthra, Personal interview *op. cit.*; Cilliers *op. cit.*