

Book Review

HITMEN FOR HIRE – EXPOSING SOUTH AFRICA’S UNDERWORLD

Mark Shaw

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This book is based on research about criminal assassinations and organised crime in South Africa, conducted by Mark Shaw and his colleagues at the Centre of Criminology in the Faculty of Law at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

The title of the book is an accurate indication of its subject and its contents. It is written in a style that may be characterised as informal, conversational and engaging. The author clearly made an effort to render the narrative interesting. Amongst other things, he formulated chapter titles to make readers curious about the contents. Some of the titles are “It’s just a job: The hitman’s work” (Chapter 2), “Rank and file: Life and death in South Africa’s taxi industry” (Chapter 3) and “Twilight zone: The police as organised crime” (Chapter 8). This last title is almost guaranteed to make the reader first laugh and then start wondering about the contents. Readers may also note that each chapter begins with an interesting anecdote that illustrates some point in the subsequent narrative. The book itself starts off with an interesting anecdote – an interview with a female assassin. The first sentence of the book is “It was killing me,” she said.¹

Academic readers should not let themselves be fooled by the informal and engaging way in which the author presents his subject. If one looks carefully, one will notice the presence of at least some of the elements of a serious research report. The author uses the preface to provide some information about the research activities on which the book is based. In the appendix, graphs and a pie chart are used to provide information about some of the findings. Extensive source references are provided under the heading “Notes” near the end of the book. The Notes section is followed by an index.

In the Preface, Shaw mentions some of the reasons why the research project was necessary. Amongst other things, he mentions that research on organised crime and the underworld is underdeveloped, especially in South Africa. He further mentions a scarcity of reliable empirical data and a tendency amongst criminologists to explain things by relying on generalities. Amongst these generalities, he counts the standard explanation, “that transitional societies carried within them a series of factors that gave rise to criminal forms of governance”.²

Shaw provides an interesting example of dubious generalisation, as used by a South African minister of police:

South Africa’s violence was supposed to be more ‘social’, a product of people’s circumstances. At least that is what the then Minister of Police, Nkosinathi Nhleko, in the 2016 release of the crime statistics had claimed. The police, he argued, could do little about this form of killing.³

This statement was contradicted by what Shaw had experienced while working in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime:

And, after over a decade of asking questions of law enforcement officials in dingy offices, and civil-society people and journalists in places where the presence of mafia-style forms of control oozed from the walls of empty buildings, I found that South Africa bore some striking parallels with countries associated with mafia organisations. These types of killings smacked of mafia-style violence, murders carried out to achieve some purpose in the illicit economy (and sometimes the licit one).⁴

Shaw provides some details of the research project that informed the book. The project included the construction and analysis of a database with information about every hit or attempted hit over the 17-year period from 2000 to 2016 during which 1 146 incidents were recorded. The researchers considered this number to be high enough to formulate at least a set of initial conclusions about the linkages between targeted killings and criminal markets. In addition to the construction of the database, Shaw and his team conducted more than 100 interviews over a two-year period. The team experienced some difficulties in making contact with people who were both willing and able to provide information about the South African underworld.

Shaw reports that his superiors at the UN Office on Drugs and Crime had long maintained that such killings served as an indication of the strength of mafia-like organisations in a state. If Shaw’s former superiors were correct, the implication is that such organisations are very powerful in South Africa. It is worth quoting Shaw in this regard, “if assassination is a kind of indicator of the development of the underworld and the strength of organised crime, what does this say more broadly about South

Africa and its violent social and political economy?”

“Nothing good,” is the obvious reply to this rhetorical question.

In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, Shaw discusses the symbiosis between organised crime, the police, foreign criminal groups and political actors. The tangled web of associations, rewards, punishments and interdependent relationships that Shaw discusses in these chapters is so complex that it is hard to obtain an overview. It is worth quoting Shaw in this regard, “South African crime intelligence is now widely regarded as dysfunctional ... It is almost impossible to determine clearly the degree to which the state is protecting and sustaining criminal networks under the guise of information collection.”⁵

Shaw makes a number of highly significant points during the course of the narrative in Chapters 6 to 8. One of the most unsettling points is the observation, “since the advent of democracy, no police commissioner since the officer appointed by President Mandela, George Fivaz, has left office without being suspended on charges of corruption or misconduct”.⁶

Shaw’s most worrying observations (in the opinion of this reviewer) can be found in the concluding chapter. In this chapter, Shaw argues, amongst other things, that the responses of the South African state to organised crime have been inadequate. It is his opinion that “today, the South African state is weaker in its capacity to fight this complex criminal challenge than perhaps at any point in its history”. To this he adds, “without a more strategic response the consolidation of the criminal economy will continue, strengthening those political figures who cross easily between the upper and underworlds. The cost for ordinary people will be great.”

If Shaw is correct, democracy in South Africa is currently facing one of the greatest threats yet to its continued existence – government by gangsters. That would, incidentally, mean that Shaw’s book must rank amongst the most significant ever published in the history of the ‘new’ South Africa.

Endnotes

ⁱ See Shaw, M. *Hitmen for hire: Exposing South Africa’s underworld*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball. 2017. ix.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. xix. Readers should note that Shaw’s statements could be regarded as a hypothesis, which he tested by doing empirical research. His findings enjoy a validity much higher than that of a mere generalisation. A generalisation, if unsupported by empirical research, enjoys the status of an untested hypotheses at best.

^v Shaw *op cit.*, p. 198.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 172.