

Book Reviews

Warfare and Tracking in Africa, 1952-1990. By Timothy J. Stapleton. London & New York: Routledge, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-84893-558-7. Hardback, 204 pages.

Tracking is defined as “the ability to pursue and close with an animal or human subject by following signs ... left behind in the environment” (page 1). The post-1945 wars of decolonization in Africa were largely characterised by guerrilla campaigns fought by nationalist movements bent on expelling or overthrowing European colonial rulers or white minority settler regimes. The security forces which operated against the nationalist insurgencies, employed a number of counterinsurgency methods to find the elusive guerrillas who often had their staging areas in remote, uninhabited, areas. Tracking was one of the methods used during these counterinsurgency operations to locate and engage insurgents. The use of tracking in counterinsurgency warfare is, furthermore, largely determined by the local geography, technology and colonial culture of each specific military operating environment (pages 2, 137).

Timothy Stapleton, a professor of history at the University of Calgary in the province of Alberta, Canada, provide a fresh perspective on the role that trackers and tracking played in the African battlespace during the second half of the twentieth century. His 2015 publication, ‘Warfare and Tracking in Africa, 1952-1990’, utilises the decolonization conflicts in the previously settler-dominated areas of Kenya, Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South West Africa (Namibia), as a lens through which to study the use of trackers in these conflicts. His book offers five key chapters which sequentially deals with various aspects of warfare and tracking in Africa. Three of the chapters also serve as case studies, where the influence of tracking on warfare is critically discussed.

The first chapter of the book deals with tracking and identity. Stapleton argues that Europeans employed ethnic stereotypes to African communities during the colonial era based on certain superior tracking and hunting skills such as the Bushmen of the Kalahari and the Shangaan of the Zimbabwe/Mozambique/South Africa border regions. These colonial

stereotypes, though racial in outlook, initially focused the recruitment efforts of the security forces to these marginalised minorities, which were well known for their tracking prowess through their association with white hunters. The mainstay of the chapter tackle these stereotypes. The focus of the second chapter is on tracking and colonial warfare. Stapleton states that during the first half of the twentieth-century colonial forces mainly used trackers to pursue hit-and-run African and Boer fighters. During this period special colonial military units were created in an attempt to mobilise local tracking and scouting skills. According to Stapleton, tracking in colonial warfare was used in conjunction with other factors, such as superior firepower, to suppress indigenous resistance. The three core chapters of the book have a sterner military focus and are constructed as case studies where the influence of tracking on warfare is discussed in depth. The three case studies focus on: Kenya (1952-1956), Rhodesia (1965-1980) and South West Africa (1966-1990). The primary focus of the three chapters is on the use of tracking by security forces during the counterinsurgency operations in these distinct operational environments. In each of the three chapters, Stapleton provides valuable insights into the selection, training and deployment of both military and paramilitary trackers during these conflicts. He also alludes to how tracking, and anti-tracking, was used by the insurgents in each of these areas to evade detection and capture by security forces. The book has a detailed conclusion in which Stapleton summarises his findings.

The book is very well researched and is underpinned by a myriad of archival and secondary sources, including a number of published personal memoirs of security force veterans and insurgents from the aforementioned conflicts. Stapleton was able to gain access to valuable archival material at the National Archives in London, United Kingdom, as well as at the Department of Defence (DOD) Documentation Centre (DOD Archives) in Pretoria, South Africa. He was, however, unable to access the Rhodesian Army Association Archives which for some time was held at the now defunct British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol, England. The current location of these archives also remains unknown. Stapleton also comments that most of the South African documentation related to the military operations in South West Africa remains classified. This is only partly true, but since the promulgation of the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) in 2002, I find such a statement in part problematic. Access to former classified documentation has indeed become easier, though it remains a time-consuming process. According to the DOD

PAIA Manual, a researcher can only obtain access to post-1969 archival material, after making recourse to the relevant PAIA legislation. A PAIA application can often take several months from the first visit to the archives to identify the material, to the point where one may view the documents. This lengthy time frame, often hampered by military bureaucracy, is, however, a great hindrance to researchers travelling from abroad on a tight budget and schedule. This is disconcerting indeed, and one can only hope that the DOD, and the Rhodesian Army Association Archives through inference, will address the issues relating to the access of information to documents relating to the military conflicts in southern Africa.

In the conclusion of his book, Stapleton postulates as to what contemporary military forces could learn from the history of counterinsurgency tracking in Africa. I believe that tracking will play an ever increasing role in the current internal and external deployments of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) in the twenty-first century. This is particularly the case for the current deployments of the defence force within South Africa as part of Operation CORONA. Stapleton's book provide a unique perspective on warfare in Africa during the second half of the twentieth century. It addresses several areas which have previously received little or no academic attention. I can highly recommend this excellent book to all those interested in warfare in Africa, in particular, those interested on the war in southern Africa. As such, it is a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature on the war in southern Africa and can be considered for possible inclusion into course material for university courses focussing on aspects of war and society in southern Africa.

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