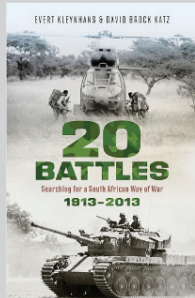


Reviewing an enigma: 100 years of South African defense doctrine

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20 Battles: Searching for a South African Way of War, 1913–2013

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Review Title:

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Far too often one hears the old maxim that we never learn from history, yet this seminal work offers such an opportunity. Kleynhans and Katz examine *20 Battles* over the evolution of one century and do so through the lens and concept of the three levels of war, namely the tactical, the operational and the strategic. The authors did not set out to make political statements, as is often detrimentally found in most post 1994 historical work. Instead, they applied their case studies through a cold military lens and disentangled their analysis from the political aspect, except where politics influenced the battles reviewed.

Each military organisation has its own unique organisational culture. Built up over time, trial and experience, this culture can become codified into the organisational DNA or not. Hence *20 Battles* focuses on an evolution of South African Warfare or Way of War and identifies what constitutes a unique South African military doctrine. The analysis includes military operational history, force design, structure, organisation, and importantly doctrine and how these components in turn constitute this unique Way of War, evolving over the time and space of a century.

Embedded in *20 Battles* is a criterion and rationale that the study opens with a ‘first battle’ and does, at Sandfontein, German South West Africa, in 1914. This first action tells a narrative that other battles don’t, such as the nonefficacy of the military’s doctrine, its training and preparedness for warfare. By doing so, this highlights the doctrine being followed in the authors’ analysis of a particular battle, throughout this review. Although redeemed by the 1915 Otavi victory, Sandfontein offers a warning, so too often ignored, for its ignominious ending.

The first deployment of the Union Defense Force was in the different campaigns in German South West and German South East Africa, France and Belgium. Thereafter follows the 1922 Rand Revolt and the Bondelswarts Rebellion, both seeing soldiers pitted against civilians. Certainly it was not the last occasion in 20th century South African history that soldiers operating in support of the police engaged civilians in armed revolt.

The 1916 Battle of Delville Wood in France and the East and North African campaigns during the Second World War highlights the doctrinal differences between the Union commanders and the British. Unsited to attritional warfare, which flew in the face of the manoeuvre warfare doctrine that was the Union military hallmark, South African forces suffered high casualties for little if no strategic, operational or tactical success.

This work covers the 1942 collapse of Tobruk in Libya during the Second World War. There a British led static garrison included a high number of South African forces, who, although grounded in manoeuvre warfare, were instead captured by rapidly moving German and Italian forces. This debacle highlights the point that South Africa’s Way of War was not capitalised on and instead frittered away. In an irony of war, they were outmanoeuvred by an opponent who understood manoeuvre warfare and taught them its lesson.

Did the lesson prevail and embed itself into South Africa’s emergent Way of War?

This is a point that the authors’ work opens up, one of the first to do so, post Second World War and more pertinently, in post 1994 South Africa. The battles examined during the Border War period, starting with Ongulumbashe in 1966 and ending with the Cuito Cuanavale campaign, show mixed results, muddled at most, with highlights of successes during this time frame. Ongulumbashe ensured that the conventional warfare doctrine learned during both World Wars

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required adaptation. Helicopters and aerial gunships offered potential for horizontal envelopment and were integrated, much like the aeroplane and tank during the First World War.

In the Angola theatre, Operation Savannah (1975–1976) revealed a woeful technological deficiency in the Defense Force's ground forces. Yet this was neither the first time, nor the last. As with the interwar years during 1918–1939, military decay and underinvestment prevailed, similar to the post 1945–1975 timeframe. Caught short during Operation Savannah, massive improvements unfolded, especially in long-range artillery and fighting vehicles. This investment in turn underwrote the tactical and operational successes of Operations Reindeer (1978), Protea (1981), Modular (1987) and Hooper (1988), and other operations, not covered by this work.

As the authors demonstrate, politics certainly influenced the course of these battles, in particular the 1988 operations at the operational and tactical levels around Cuito Cuanavale. Generals, based in Pretoria or Windhoek, attempted to micro-manage the flow of war, thus eliminating initiative or opportunities as these presented themselves on the battlefield. Overruling their battle group commanders, they exacerbated the fog of war while negating their force's doctrine and fundamental strength, that of manoeuvre warfare, using combined arms.

Politics should remain within the grand level of the strategic and not in the tactical or operational levels. In certain of the 20 case studies, such as Tobruk and the Italian campaigns in the Second World War, politics certainly interfered, as it did too in the 1988 Cuito Cuanavale campaign. In Italy during 1944, the 6th Armoured Division tanks were deployed into unsuitable terrain, as to in Angola near Cuito Cuanavale in 1988, demonstrating that the lessons of history passed by unlearned.

The initial potential for a strategic victory at Cuito Cuanavale evaporated during Operation Packer. Forces became bogged

down by conventional inflexibility resulting in stagnation and withdrawal, leaving behind a contested debate that thrives today – who won the Cuito Battle, if anyone?

Nevertheless, strategic successes remained elusive, for it required fundamental changes at the grand strategic level. Hence the ceasefire, negotiated independence for Namibia and subsequent multi-party settlements in South Africa, finally resulting in the 1994 transition. The amalgamation of forces that followed was similar to the formation of the Union Defense Force after 1910, which itself sought to incorporate both the Boer and British Ways of War, into a singular South African Way. Post 1994 found different doctrines being incorporated into the newly formed South African National Defense Force (SANDF), unsuccessfully so, as demonstrated by two of the final battles reviewed by Kleynhans and Katz.

The Lesotho intervention or Operation Boleas (1988) and the Battle of Bangui (2013) show a degree of doctrine muddle or lessons not learned, all resulting in limited or zero strategic results, despite impressive tactical or operational successes on the ground. Or worst still, a noncodified Way of War, which this work amply shows has existed for a century, namely that of a combined arms manoeuvre warfare doctrine.

20 BATTLES effectively traces the development of doctrine and structure, and its related historical continuity, while highlighting lessons from the past, too often ignored. One of these is that the 1914 Sandfontein action and the 2013 Battle of Bangui both fought against foreign forces, ended in defeat, despite the tactical brilliance of the latter. The other is that the historical trends of defense underinvestment and stagnation are not new, yet pose significant strategic risk.

In conclusion, this seminal work reveals that much research needs to follow around the pre-Union Era as this informed the formation of the South African military. So too with the Second World War and, in particular from 1966 onwards, to include the War for Southern Africa.