

Rumours of War: Fear, Violence and the Politics of Belonging in Late Apartheid South Africa

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This project focuses on the role of speech and emotion in violent conflict during the final decade of white minority rule in South Africa. At the centre of the project are the lived experiences of communities who were involved in the escalating violence between Charterist groups under the banner of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). Geographically, the project focuses on the Pretoria–Witwatersrand–Vereeniging (PWV) complex of present-day Gauteng, with particular attention being paid to the Vaal Triangle, the East Rand (Ekurhuleni), Alexandra and Soweto. While the PWV is at the centre of the project, the connections between this region and KwaZulu and Natal, which together with the PWV formed the epicentre of violence, are a key focus of this project. The project explores how networks of migration, communication and knowledge, and cross-regional allegiance (*ukhonzu*), rooted in systems of traditional authority and hierarchy, connected the two regions across time and space and served as a ‘vehicle for the transportation of conflict’.

Scholarship on the transition period in South Africa has produced rich analyses of the roots and causes of conflict. Violence, however, has often been treated as either epiphenomenal or as an instrument of power to achieve political hegemony and its affective, subjective, enunciative, performative, moral and embodied aspects have been demoted in analysis. Based on approximately sixty life history interviews with participants in the conflict and a wide range of archival records, this project examines the meanings and forms of violence and interrogates what mobilised people into violent action. Placing the relationships between speech, emotion and violence at the centre of analysis locates emerging violent subjectivities at the intersection of the everyday and spectacular moments of collective action. An analysis of propaganda, rumours and other forms of speech exposes the links between beliefs, prejudices and fears and the crystallisation of categories of insiders and outsiders. As this research demonstrates, the discourse of being ‘under attack’ significantly shaped the way people understood the conflict and the responses they deemed necessary and legitimate.

This approach allows for three key interventions. Firstly, by examining the complex interplay between speech (rumours, propaganda, myths, fake news, etc.) and emotion (anxiety, suspicion, fear, exhilaration, intimacy), the project takes seriously the subjectivity of violence and contributes towards an understanding of how violence became ‘thinkable’ and ‘doable’. It therefore complicates instrumentalist analyses that regard violence as purely physical and as a mere means to achieve political hegemony. Secondly, by examining the role of cultural memory in creating prejudices, fears and expectations of violence, the project situates the violence of the transition period within the longer *durée* of conflict and change. Thirdly, by considering violence as a ‘dynamic process’ that connected different regions across time and space, the project contributes towards an understanding of the geography of violence. It provides new insights into the rural-urban nexus and the way rural allegiance to Zulu traditional authorities, namely *iSilo* (the king), the *amakhosi* (chiefs) and the *izinduna* (headmen) played itself out in the urban areas.